7-7-2013

“A great weight at my heart:” A Personal Reaction to Pickett’s Charge

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Abstract

“When our great victory was just over the exultation of victory was so great that one didn’t think of our fearful losses, but now I can’t help feeling a great weight at my heart. Poor Henry Ropes was one of the dearest friends I ever had or expect to have. He was one of the purest-minded, noblest, most generous men I ever knew. His loss is terrible. His men actually wept when they showed me his body, even under the tremendous cannonade, a time when most soldiers see their comrades dying around them with indifference.”

When twenty-one year old Henry Livermore Abbott penned these words on July 6, 1863, I highly doubt he expected his letter to be reconsidered by twenty-one year old Becky Oakes on July 6, 2013. Aside from being the same age, the Henry Abbott of 1863 and I have very little in common. He was a Harvard graduate from Massachusetts, and an officer in the Army of the Potomac. I am a graduate of Gettysburg College, originally from Ohio, and I study the Civil War. He wrote these words for his father, I type these words for a blog.

Keywords
The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, 150th Anniversary, Gettysburg, Pickett’s Charge, Civil War Memory

Disciplines
History | Military History | Social History | United States History

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This blog post originally appeared in The Gettysburg Compiler and was created by students at Gettysburg College.
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JULY 7, 2013

By Becky Oakes, ’13

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When twenty-one year old Henry Livermore Abbott penned these words on July 6, 1863, I highly doubt he expected his letter to be reconsidered by twenty-one year old Becky Oakes on July 6, 2013. Aside from being the same age, the Henry Abbott of 1863 and I have very little in common. He was a Harvard graduate from Massachusetts, and an officer in the Army of the Potomac. I am a graduate of Gettysburg College, originally from Ohio, and I study the Civil War. He wrote these words for his father, I type these words for a blog.

However, Henry Abbott and I happened to be standing at the exact same spot on July 3rd, one hundred and fifty years apart.
As I made my way to the Pickett’s Charge commemorative walk, my thoughts were filled with questions, mostly those concerning the “big picture.” I was wondering how many people would attend, and of those how many would make the charge and how many would watch? How would the National Park Service handle the crowds? What would happen when the Confederate line reached the wall, and how would they interact with those waiting along the Union position? How would this event be viewed one hundred and fifty years from now?

One question that did not occur to me was what my own emotional reaction to this event would be.

I chose to view the program from the 20th Massachusetts monument because I wrote my senior thesis based on Henry Abbott’s letters. This was my closest personal connection to Pickett’s Charge, and it seemed an appropriate way to honor a man who, through his letters, I felt I had gotten to know.
I expected the experience to be a powerful one, just as the entire anniversary had been. However, I could not have prepared for my overwhelming emotions as I watched the nine groups organized into Confederate “brigades” step out from the tree line of Seminary Ridge. The chills I felt as I listened to the cheers and shouts of these brigades as they crossed the Emmittsburg Road. The tears in my eyes, which welled over as a group of Union reenactors two monuments down began to shout “Fredericksburg! Fredericksburg!” More of Abbott’s words came to mind:
“The moment I saw them I knew we should give them Fredericksburg. So did everybody. We let the regiment in front of us get within 100 feet of us, & then bowled them over like nine pins, picking out the colors first.”

After all nine brigades reached the stone wall, and the Confederate and Union lines melded into one mass of humanity, the formal program ended and the commemoration became organic, reactionary, and personal. I witnessed a man in Union blue, so moved by the echoing notes of Taps, break out in a mournful ballad, his carrying baritone attracting a crowd.
I watched a group dressed in Confederate butternut kneel beside the North Carolina monument, praying and weeping. I wept, not only for Henry Ropes and Henry Abbott, but for all those lost in our nation’s bloodiest four years.

For me, in this moment, the history I study became more tangible than I ever thought possible. It was not so much a thought, but a feeling that maybe one hundred and fifty years isn’t really that long.

Henry Abbott was my age. He lost a brother. He watched his friends die. And he had less than a year to live. That is what I will remember from Pickett’s Charge.

One hundred and fifty years from now, historians studying the commemoration will look to answer those big picture questions. And those questions are, inarguably, significant. However, it is my hope that these personal reactions will survive as well. Because it was Henry Abbott’s personal reaction that I was thinking of on July 3rd. And it is my personal reaction that I will remember, and try to make sense of, for years to come.