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Valor Finally Honored

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Valor Finally Honored

Abstract

It has taken one hundred and fifty-one years, but finally, 1st Lt. Alonzo H. Cushing is getting his due - which in this case is the Congressional Medal of Honor.

In a ceremony today at the White House, President Obama will award the Medal of Honor posthumously to Cushing "for conspicuous gallantry... while serving as commanding officer of Battery A, 4th United States Artillery, Artillery Brigade, 2nd Corps, Army of the Potomac during combat operations in the vicinity of Cemetery Ridge, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on July 3, 1863." [*excerpt*]

Keywords

Gettysburg, Battle of Gettysburg, Civil War, Alonzo Cushing, Medal of Honor, 4th US Artillery, Pickett's Charge, Cemetery Ridge

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

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And as anyone from Gettysburg can tell you, conspicuous is an understatement when it comes to Alonzo Cushing.

He was born in Wisconsin in 1841, blue-eyed, with reddish-brown hair and a bit on the small size. His father, a doctor, died with he was six years old, and the family had no where else to turn for a college education for the boy but the cost-free version provided at West Point. He graduated in June, 1861 – just in time for the Civil War to break out – and was immediately commissioned as a 1st lieutenant in the 4th U.S. Artillery.

Cushing didn't actually see much action through the first year of the war. His corps commander, Edwin V. Sumner, saw a wealth of talent in Cushing's small package, and attached him to his staff as a topographical engineer (which is to say, Sumner's personal mapmaker). When Sumner left corps command at the end of 1862, Cushing went back to the 4th U.S. Artillery, in command of Battery A and its six long

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Ordnance Rifles.

Staff work hadn't slowed Cushing's touch. He won a brevet (honorary) promotion to captain for service at the battle of Fredericksburg in December 1862, and another brevet promotion to major at Chancellorsville six months later.

But it was at Gettysburg that Cushing's star shone – for one brief moment. His Battery A was posted at the low stone wall which forms the Angle on Cemetery Ridge – the very point where the spear of Pickett's Charge would land on the final day of the battle. Confederate artillery opened the famous Charge with a lengthy bombardment that fell so heavily on Cushing's battery that three of its ammunition limbers were blown up and four of its guns disabled.

Cushing was hit in the thigh by a piece of Confederate shell, but re-

fused to seek aid. When the long lines of Confederate infantry began their march up to Cemetery Ridge, Cushing let fly with his two remaining guns – only to be hit himself a second time, in the shoulder. The brigade commander at the Angle, Alexander Webb, ordered Cushing to the rear. But Cushing replied that he intended to give the rebels “one more shot.” And at one hundred yards, he let off full loads of canister at the swarming Confederates. At that moment, a third and final bullet hit Cushing in the head, and he dropped into the arms of his battery sergeant, Frederick Fuger, dead.

The great attack was repulsed, and nine days later, Cushing was buried at West Point, under a stone engraved, “Faithful Unto Death.” Indeed he was. His right thumb had been burned to the bone – the mark of a determined gunner, closing the vent on his cannon.

It can sometimes seem longer than justice should permit to honor valor of Cushing's sort. But even if memory is short, courage never is. Today is a day to honor 1st Lt. Alonzo Cushing – and his valor at Gettysburg.

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