

# My ancestor at Gettysburg

By Michael Carolan

A few years ago a distant cousin contacted me with the news that our ancestor was wounded at Gettysburg. I had been seeking a connection ever since I played a soldier at a reenactment 20 years ago.

On Aug. 1, 1861, a few months after the war started, Robert Cooley joined the 29th Pennsylvania — an outfit of Philadelphians from neighborhood firehouses. With dark hair and dark eyes, my paternal great-great-grandfather was 5-feet-6½, a 21-year-old immigrant from Ireland. He thought a few months of military service a fair trade for expedited citizenship.

At Gettysburg, on Culp's Hill, his regiment built breastworks but were called away to fight elsewhere. Upon returning, it found Confederates were there. "All the fiends of Hell were having a whistling and shrieking match over us," a soldier wrote. Their commander barked, "Aim for their knees." It worked: They reoccupied the hill, the enemy "demoralized by the undaunted bearing of the men of the Pennsylvania Brigade."

The fight lasted seven hours, the longest sustained firing of the battle. One brigade counted 270,000 rounds spent. "A terrible sight to see the dead, laid in heaps," wrote a witness.

My ancestor's brigade watched a wounded Confederate laboriously load his rifle and aim. Not at them, but at himself. Afterward, a Maryland general broke down and wept, "wringing his hands and crying, 'My poor boys.'"

Out of 357 men of my great-great-grandfather's regiment, 15 were killed and 43 wounded; he was one. A miniball struck him in the right shoulder. He spent the rest of the war in a hospital, one of nearly 30,000 wounded over those three days.

One hundred thirty years later, I was a reenactor from the Washington area, part of the Confederate Second Maryland Infantry, which lost big at Gettysburg.

At the 1993 reenactment, I was ordered to "fall." Authenticity was our pride. The firing intense, I tasted

gunpowder. Cannons boomed in front of us. Hay bales were set on fire across the fields. Horse-drawn ambulances arrived. The audience cheered.

I died.

It was horrifyingly spectacular.

Today at Gettysburg, right next to one another, you can see monuments to Robert Cooley's 29th Pennsylvania and the Second Maryland. It turns out that the Marylanders fought my great-great-grandfather's regiment. On a postage-stamp piece of ground at Culp's Hill. In close quarters.

A peculiar post-historical gesture this: My great-great-grandfather "killed" me.

Of course, I survived my mock Gettysburg battle, and will never really fathom his experiences. The number of dead, maimed, and dismembered. Nearly 8,000 alone in less than an hour at the famous Pickett's Charge. All told, 50,000, in three days. In sweltering heat. In thick wool. With heavy rifles. The one from the fellow right next to you exploding in your ear.

The price we paid.

One Union.

Under God.

Indivisible.

With liberty and justice for all.

Pvt. Robert Cooley found his justice: He became a legal U.S. citizen 25 days after his discharge. His shoulder injury prevented him from manual labor — coloring leather as a "currier" before the war. Yet he died the owner of a successful Morocco works — crafters of fine leather for shoes and purses. More important, he never forgot his service. His headstone is inscribed "Post No. 10, G.A.R.," for Grand Army of the Republic, the veterans' organization.

By the time he died in 1903, he had fathered six children — his daughter's Bridesburg Rose Funeral Home still operates four generations later. I spoke recently with her grandson, Robert Cooley Rose, about the ancestor for whom he was named — our witness to that one holy and unforgettable American moment 150 years ago.

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