

SNG-Nowlan-Cheatham's Hill-1-2-12

Cheatham's Hill a monument to Illinois soldiers

By Jim Nowlan

The Illinois Monument at Kennesaw Mountain Civil War Battlefield National Park near Atlanta, Georgia is a rather nondescript vertical block of granite. The monument stands at the top of Cheatham's Hill, a place the soldiers of the 85<sup>th</sup> and 125<sup>th</sup> Illinois Regiments almost but never quite reached that June 26, 1864. The monument commemorates the courage and cohesiveness of the men who came within 30 feet of the impregnable Confederate earthen parapets at the top of the sharp rise.

Each holiday season I visit my sister's family in Marietta, Georgia. And each year I am drawn back to Cheatham's Hill, just west of the family's suburban Atlanta home. I stand at the top of the hill and wonder how men could have marched in formation up the steep incline, sure to absorb a hail of fire from guns stuck through the slits of space between the earthen berms and the braced logs atop.

The grassy line-of-march up the hill is the shape of a football field, though maybe half again as wide and deep. Loblolly pine and various nut-bearing trees frame the battlefield, tall, mute sentinels to the carnage of that day, which counted 397 Union killed and wounded at just this one, relatively insignificant hill.

Before entering the battle that day, Union Colonel Daniel McCook, Jr. recited for his men McCauley's popular, "Horatius, the Captain of the gate; Death will cometh sooner or late, and how can man better die than facing fearful odds, for the ashes of his father's grave and the temples of the gods."

After the first siege, a Confederate soldier wrote in his diary later that, “The ground was piled up with one solid mass of dead or wounded Yankees.” Hundreds of Yankees lay helpless on the hill in the face of approaching grass fire, started by the gun and cannon fire.

Lt. Col. William Morgan of the 15<sup>th</sup> Arkansas (a Confederate state) stood on the earthworks and declared a ceasefire. “Come get your men, Yanks; they are burning up.”

The following day, Union officers presented Morgan a pair of Colt revolvers in appreciation. The next day, McCook was killed as he nearly reached the parapet.

Kennesaw Mountain was not a big or major battle in the course of the larger Civil War, I suppose. There were eight thousand Union infantry versus a similar number of Confederates on the mountain itself. Plus several thousand more of each side spread across the four miles south to the hill that came to bear the name of Confederate Colonel Benjamin Franklin Cheatham, commander of the hill defenses.

The Union lost 3,000 killed, wounded and missing, the Rebels only 1,000 in the battles around Kennesaw Mountain. The Confederates did not lose the battles, but several days later they retreated silently toward Atlanta, as Union General William Tecumseh Sherman continually out-flanked them. Back was the only direction left to them in the war that saw more than half a million men lose their lives to battle and disease.

Back home in Stark County in Illinois, ministers noted in diaries that there were no men in their congregations, most off to fight the war to preserve the Union, and not so much to free the slaves.

Four miles away from Kennesaw in Marietta, two hillside cemeteries host those lost in June 1864. The national cemetery marks the Union dead in neat rows around the hill. The Confederates built their own cemetery a couple of miles south, unwilling to share space with the Yankees.

Among the Union headstones, most represent men from Ohio, Indiana and Illinois. The names from the “Sucker State” (Illinois’ first nickname, after a common fish) are those of many old families of the area, mostly English, Scots, and Irish at that time, before emigrations from the rest of Europe: Smith and Jones and Miller, of course, and Bennett, Green, White, Carter, Rogers, Gilfillan, Russell, Reid, Berdine, Strange, Anderson, among those I recall.

The march the men made up that hill inspires awe in me. Could I have made such a march? How could one? Courage, of course, and probably as much so the fear and shame of failing one’s comrades should one bolt from his tight formation.

The prominent historian William McNeill wrote a book entitled “Marching in Time,” which holds that man has always created cohesiveness through group drill, even group dancing. The cadences and precision of march and drill create a bond that instills group loyalty, says McNeill.

Regardless, as we enter the New Year, we can respect our forebears who marched up Cheatham’s and scores of other hills to preserve the Union.