

SNG-Cheatham's Hill-12-28-15

Cheatham's Hill a monument to our enduring Union

By Jim Nowlan

The Illinois Monument at the Kennesaw Mountain Civil War battlefield north of Atlanta is a rather nondescript vertical block of marble.

The monument stands atop Cheatham's Hill, which the soldiers of the 85<sup>th</sup> and 125<sup>th</sup> Illinois Regiments almost but never quite reached on June 26, 1864. The marker commemorates the courage and cohesiveness of the men who came within 30 feet of the almost impregnable Confederate earthen parapets above the sharp rise.

Each holiday season I visit my sister's family, who live near the park, outside Marietta, GA. And each year I am drawn back to Cheatham's Hill.

I stand at the top of the hill, looking down from the dug earthen defenses, still evident. I wonder in awe how men could have marched in formation up the hill, sure to absorb a crippling fusillade from rifles stuck through the slits of space between the earth works and the braced logs atop.

The open, grassy line of march up the hill is the shape of a football field, though maybe half again as wide and deep. Loblolly pine frame the battlefield, tall, mute sentinels to the carnage of that day. The Union lost 397 killed and wounded at just this one hill, rather insignificant in the larger scheme of things.

Before entering the battle that day, Union Colonel Daniel McCook 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."

A Reb soldier wrote in his diary later that, "The ground was piled up with one solid mass of dead and wounded Yankees." Ignited by the rifle and cannon bursts, grassfires threatened the Yankee wounded on the hillside.

Lt. Col. William Morgan of the 15<sup>th</sup> Arkansas 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. Chivalry was not dead.

Eight thousand Union infantry versus a similar number of Confederates were on Kennesaw Mountain itself and spread across the four miles south to the hill that came to bear the name of Confederate Col. Benjamin Franklin Cheatham, commander of the hill defenses.

The Union lost 3,000 killed, wounded and missing; the Rebs, only 1,000, in the battles of Kennesaw Mountain. The Confederates scored a tactical victory but not the knock-out they desperately needed. Several days later they retreated in the night, again, silently, toward Atlanta, continually flanked by Sherman's forces.

Back was the only direction left to them in the war that saw half a million men lose their lives to battle and disease.

At home in Stark County, where I live (between Peoria and the Quad-Cities), 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.

A local historian has painstakingly counted participation in the conflict by men from tiny Stark. He found that nearly half the men in the county between 17 and 51 (fighting age, he reckons) served in the Civil War!

As part of my annual ritual, I walk up this hillside that inspires me, in the footsteps of the Illinois soldiers. Could I have made such a march; how could one? Fortitude, of course, and probably even more so the fear and shame of failing one's comrades.

William McNeill, the prominent historian, wrote in "Marching Together in Time" 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.

Whatever, as we enter the New Year, I think we can thank our forebears who marched up Cheatham's Hill and across scores of open killing fields to preserve our Union. The world might look much different today had the Confederates won and separated our nation into lesser parts.