

In the mid-Atlantic states I really enjoy the autumn weather, with brightly colored trees and blue skies, and a respite from the heat and humidity of summer, in spite of the threat of coming winter snow and ice.

This past weekend, a group from our scout troop camped and hiked at Gettysburg National Military Historical Park, on the fields of the pivotal battle of the American Civil War. It's quite a sobering experience to see the expanse of that battlefield, and to try to understand the enormity of the events that unfolded there. There were nearly as many casualties, counting both North and South, in three days of battle at Gettysburg as Americans killed during all of the Viet Nam war.

We hiked the "Billy Yank" trail, a ten mile trail that focuses on the events of July 2, 1863. We started at the Virginia memorial on Seminary Ridge and crossed the fields toward the "high water mark of the Confederacy" (which is actually somewhat southeast of the Confederate lines on Seminary Ridge), trying to imagine 12,000 men on a line stretching over a mile wide, marching into cannon fire on a frontal assault of the Union forces on Cemetery Ridge. After we crossed Emmitsburg Pike, we got on line and "charged" up the hill with "rebel yells" to the stone wall defining the Union line. When we got there, we turned and looked back at the field of fire that was available to the Union troops. While we rested and had a snack, I reflected that some of the boys with me were as old as some who likely fought in that battle.

We passed some farmhouses that had been taken over as field hospitals during the battle. The houses were stripped of everything... all food, all clothing used as bandages, rail fences knocked down and used for campfires, crops trampled, floors and furniture stained with blood. In spite of submitting claims after the war, most families got very little compensation. One family received \$15. Yet most of them returned and rebuilt their livelihood.

Eventually we came 'round to Devil's Den and the "Slaughter Pen" at the foot of Little Round Top, an imposing hill with a commanding view of the battlefield. LRT anchored the left flank of the Union defenses. If the Confederates had held this bald hill, they could have put cannon fire anywhere on the Union line. On the morning of July 2, LRT was left undefended, apparently when Gen Sickles moved his troops to what he thought was a more favorable position along Emmitsburg road and angled back to Devil's Den. Lee had ordered Longstreet to take the hill, but Longstreet waited for reinforcements from Law's Alabamians, who made a forced march from Chambersburg, 28 miles away. They set out at about 4 am, marched all day at double quick speed, coming over South Mountain, and swung directly into battle at about 3 pm! Were it not for Gen Meade's aid, Gouverneur Warren, who found the hill undefended and moved reserves to defend it just as Longstreet's forces approached, history of the US may have been very different.

While we were surveying this view, we saw a storm approaching over South Mountain and decided to go down from the open hill. About that time there was thunder, heavy rain, and hail. Then the sun came out and dried us off, then another storm, then the same thing again. As we were in the middle of the hike and several miles from camp,

there was nothing to do but put on ponchos and walk, keeping to the low ground. After the three waves of thunderstorms, the weather turned much colder.

After a good supper, we had a campfire and songs. A scout told a story about ghost cannons and soldiers on the battlefield. A leader remarked that Gettysburg is one of the "most haunted" places in the US. It got cold at night. There was no ice, but there was frost forming. We all turned in early, for protection against the cold. At about 11:15 pm, I was awakened by the sound of explosions. I got out of my tent to see where they were coming from. There were flashes of light toward Gettysburg. The white moon shone eerily on the frost over the battlefields. It could have been a homecoming celebration at Gettysburg College, but then again...

We broke camp in sunshine on Sunday morning. The boys all said that they want to go back next year to do the other trail - the "Johnny Reb."

"It is good that war is so horrible, lest we grow fond of it." - R.E.Lee