

LOOKING BACK AT OUR CIVIL WAR

# Gettysburg: the turning point

For Union, victory was essential, and R.I. units helped achieve it

In probably the greatest land battle ever fought in the Western Hemisphere, Union and Confederate forces clashed at Gettysburg, Pa., on July 1-3, 1863 — 150 years ago.

During these three days, some 70,000 Confederate soldiers, led by Gen. Robert



FRED ZILIAN

E. Lee, engaged 90,000 Union soldiers, led by Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade, in command of the Army of the Potomac for only three days. Lee had invaded the North with the hope of scoring a decisive victory which, politically,

might strengthen the Northern peace movement and force President Abraham Lincoln to negotiate for peace.

Rhode Island had six troop units at this battle: an infantry regiment and five artillery batteries. Of these, four units saw action.

Battery A of the 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery Regiment was commanded by Capt. William A. Arnold, a bookkeeper from Providence. It included 139 men with six 3-inch rifle guns. The unit took part in the heavy fighting on July 2-3 and sustained four killed and 24 wounded.

Battery B was commanded by Thomas F. Brown of Providence. After he was wounded, command passed to Lt. William S. Perrin. It brought 103 men to the field using six 12-pound smooth-bore Napoleon guns. It also fought on July 2-3.

In action on July 3, the battery was under fire preceding Pickett's Charge. The muzzle of one gun was hit and two gunners were killed instantly. Two others rushed to load a ball into the gun, now distorted. A second Confederate shell struck, causing the cannon to collapse. After the barrel cooled, the ball was trapped permanently in place. This is the famous "Gettysburg Gun" on display at the state's capitol. Battery B lost seven killed, 19 wounded and two missing.

Battery E was commanded by Lt. John K. Bucklyn, born in Foster, who was wounded in action on July 2. Second Lt. Benjamin Freeborn, himself wounded, took command. Battery E had 116 men serving six 12-pound Napoleons. In action on July 2, it sustained casualties of three killed and 26 wounded.

Finally, the 2nd Rhode Island Volunteer Infantry Regiment also saw action at Gettysburg. It was commanded by Col. Horatio Rogers Jr., a lawyer from Providence. It was used as a reserve unit in the 2nd Brigade, 3rd Division, 6th Corps. The regiment arrived on the battlefield but was not directly engaged in the fierce fighting on July 3. Of the battle, Rogers wrote: "Death seemed to be holding a carnival."

Elisha Hunt Rhodes of Cranston was a member of this unit, and his diary reveals his thoughts as Pickett's Charge was repulsed. "Our lines of Infantry in front of us rose up and poured in a terrible fire. As we were only a few yards in rear of our lines we saw all the fight. ... What a scene it was. Oh the dead and



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Capt. William A. Arnold of Providence led Battery A of the 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery Regiment at Gettysburg.

dying on this bloody field." On July 5, he wrote: "Glorious news! We have won the victory, thank God, and the Rebel Army is fleeing to Virginia."

The battle witnessed uncommon valor and good and poor tactical decisions on both sides, culminating in the ill-fated Confederate assault led by Maj. Gen. George Pickett. Of the 14,000 Southern troops who attacked that July 3, only about half returned. While the Union won a resounding victory, the human toll on both sides was very costly: 23,000 Union casualties (killed, wounded and missing) and 28,000 Confederate casualties, more than a third of the Confederate force.

Riding among his men, Lee maintained, "It's all my fault. ... It is I who have lost the fight ... ." Noted Civil War historian Shelby Foote called Gettysburg Lee's "greatest and worst-fought battle." Like Hannibal in the Punic Wars of ancient Rome or Napoleon of revolutionary France, Lee was thought to be invincible, a myth that was now shattered.

Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia would fight and win many other battles after Gettysburg; however, their former dominance in tactics and initiative was now matched by experienced Union forces, soon to be led by the formidable and intrepid Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant. It was Grant who had just forced on July 4 the surrender of Vicksburg, Miss., placing the entire Mississippi River under Union control. The war had reached a turning point.

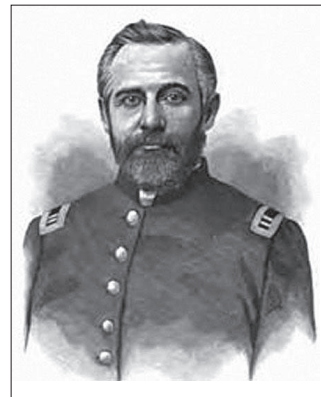
Many Americans who know of this battle may not know of its magnitude and significance. Many perhaps make facile assumptions about the inevitability of the North's victory in the Civil War, similar to the common view of World War II — we all know the conclusion and casually assume the Allied victory was inevitable.

Not so. The Battle of Gettysburg could have gone either way, and with it the Civil War. If Lee had prevailed over Meade, there was no guarantee that the North's superiority in manpower, finances and industry, along with



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Rhode Island's Battery B was commanded by Thomas F. Brown of Providence until he was wounded.



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Lt. John K. Bucklyn, born in Foster, was wounded at Gettysburg on July 2, 1863. He commanded Battery E of the 1st Rhode Island.

Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, would win the war. If the Confederacy succeeded in stifling the North sufficiently so that public opinion shifted dramatically, we would have become two separate nations. Lincoln's greatest nightmare would have come true: that self-government was a chimera.

*A retired Army officer, Fred Zilian teaches history at Portsmouth Abbey School and Salve Regina University and is a member of the Rhode Island Civil War Sesquicentennial Commemoration Commission Advisory Council. He is writing an occasional series of columns highlighting various aspects of the Civil War and their impact on Newport County and Rhode Island for The Daily News. Send him email at zilianf@aol.com or check out his blog at www.zilianblog.com and his Abe Lincoln website at www.honestaberi.com. A musical-theatrical Tribute to the Battle of Gettysburg will take place July 26 at the Newport Casino Theater. For tickets, go to: www.fortadams.org.*