

Gettysburg College

Hidden in Plain Sight:
Distinguished Gallantry in Action

History 300

Historical Methods

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By

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Among the many paintings of Abraham Lincoln hanging in the Civil War Institute, there is one face that may not be as familiar. Peering out from a small wooden frame in the main office sits Philip Goettel, a Civil War soldier. His posture is relaxed as he sits in a chair proudly displaying his Union uniform. A caption with the mere word “Father” appears below him, along with a significant date: 1863. Truly, the year 1863 would be a pivotal year in Philip Goettel’s life. He would be wounded, scale a mountain under fire, and earn a Medal of Honor.

At the age of twenty-two, Philip Goettel enlisted in Company B of the 149th New York Volunteer Infantry.¹ At the time of his enlistment, Goettel, a German immigrant, lived in the county of Onondaga, near Syracuse.² Between September 4 and 6, 1862 Goettel made his way to Camp White, just outside of Syracuse, where he was drilled and learned the duties of a soldier. While in camp, the colonel of Goettel’s company, H.A. Barnum accepted the regimental flag, affectionately dubbed “Old Glory,” and passed the colors on to the color bearer.³ On September 23, the 149th was ordered to Washington. A fellow soldier in Goettel’s regiment recalled the scene.

The memory of that embarkation is of having very sad hearts, marching after awkward men in new uniforms, with the shelf creases in them, weighed down by knapsacks, blankets and canteens; . . . excessive fatigue, . . . It seemed to take the form of patriotic duty, on the part of some, to tone up the hearts of men departing, perhaps forever from family and friends, by generous gifts of poor whiskey.⁴

Philip Goettel was among those green, tired men heading to Washington. However, in the year to come, Goettel would see his fair share of war, and become a seasoned veteran very soon.

¹ George K. Collins, *Memoir of the 149th N.Y. Inf. 3d Brig., 2d Div., 12th and 20th A.C.* (Hamilton, NY: Edmonston Publishing Inc., 1995), 357.

² Gabor Boritt, interview by author, Gettysburg, Pa., 21 September 2006.

³ *Memoir*, 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

The first major battle Goettel took part in began on May 1st, and lasted until May 6th of 1863. Prior to the Battle of Chancellorsville, the 149th New York had participated in minor skirmishes including minor fighting at Fairfax Station. However, their first major test came at Chancellorsville. The majority of the 149th's fighting took place along a plank road. Here, under the command of General Henry Slocum of the Twelfth Corps, the 149th clashed with Stonewall Jackson's troops. As Regimental Historian of the 149th New York, Captain George K. Collins recalled:

The men in the 3d Brigade were nervous and began to feel a solicitude for their personal safety, when suddenly a roll of musketry was heard proceeding from the woods in rear, followed by the well known cheers of the men in the Union lines. Soon the "Johnnies" came in view running across the open field dropping here and there before the well-directed fire of the Union men, as they tried to make their escape. In a few moments the open field was strewn with bodies of the enemy . . . ⁵

Philip Goettel would have been present during this fighting. According to the Memoirs of the 149th New York, Goettel was wounded at Chancellorsville on May 3, a day after Jackson's attack.⁶ After fighting Jackson's men, Joseph Hooker recalled the Twelfth Corps behind his works in Chancellorsville, fearing that Slocum's men would have been flanked.⁷ For the remainder of the battle the 149th New York waited behind the Chancellor House, listening to the bursting of shells. The only other duty that Captain Collins reports the 149th taking part in was the support of a battery on the left of Chancellor House on May 3. It is quite possible that Goettel took his wound while

⁵ Ibid., 108.

⁶ Ibid., 357.

⁷ Ibid., 109.

defending the battery.⁸ The severity of his wounding is not known, however, for it to be recorded it would have warranted a visit to the hospital.⁹

As a result of his wounds, Goettel would not be present at the next major engagement that the 149th New York took part in, the battle of Gettysburg.¹⁰ While Goettel recuperated from his wounds, his fellow soldiers participated in heavy fighting at Culps Hill alongside the 122nd New York Volunteer Infantry also from Onondaga County. The irony of Goettel's absence is that although he never fought at Gettysburg, his Medal of Honor hangs in the town. However, Goettel made up for his absence at Gettysburg during the Chattanooga Campaign.

On September 23, 1863, the 149th New York was transferred to the Army of the Cumberland and fought under the command of General Hooker, the same man who had been in command of the Army of the Potomac at Chancellorsville, where Goettel received his wounds.¹¹ Under pressure from Washington to break the siege on Chattanooga in order to relieve pressure on General Burnside in Knoxville, Tennessee, General Ulysses S. Grant decided to take action. The 149th New York would take part in some of the most important fighting of the battle. On Grant's orders, the Twelfth Corps under Hooker's command would harass Confederate General Braxton Bragg's left flank at Lookout Mountain.¹² Collins recalled the apprehension the 149th had over attacking Lookout Mountain on November 24, 1863. "What!" said the men to one another, 'does

⁸ Ibid., 111.

⁹ Telephone Correspondence, John Heiser to author, 30 September 2006. Heiser is the Gettysburg National Battlefield Park librarian

¹⁰ Ibid. John Heiser was unable to find a list of men from the 149th New York at Gettysburg. However he speculated that if Goettel had been wounded at Chancellorsville, it is highly unlikely that he would have fought at Gettysburg.

¹¹ Wiley Sword, *Mountains Touched with Fire: Chattanooga Besieged, 1863* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1995), 41.

¹² James Lee McDonough, *Chattanooga- A Death Grip on the Confederacy* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1984), 100-104.

the General expect us to fly?’ But they quietly determined whatever the orders, they would do the best they could to perform them.”¹³

The Twelfth Corps, including the 149th New York would be fighting against two brigades of Major General Benjamin F. Cheatham’s Division on the lower slope of Lookout Mountain, and higher up were two brigades from Stevenson’s Division. Goettel’s regiment would attack Walhall’s Brigade in the center of the Confederate line.¹⁴ Collin’s recalled the fighting

After encountering the enemy, the plan of attack was to clamber forward as rapidly as possible, overwhelm him by the fury of the charge, and prevent him from doing any great harm. As the boys pressed forward, the enemy fired a volley or two into their ranks and then made a desperate struggle to get away. . . . it was a pure question of courage, muscle and personal endurance.¹⁵

After taking Lookout Mountain, Hooker was ordered to help Sherman take Missionary Ridge the following day.

As a result of inclement weather, Hooker’s march to Missionary Ridge was slowed when attempting to cross the flooded Chattanooga Creek. Finally, Hooker reached Rossville Gap, turned left and just as Sherman’s men were breaking through the Confederate lines on Missionary Ridge, Hooker’s troops, including the 149th New York were there to meet them on the western slope.¹⁶ As a result of clearing the Confederates off of Missionary Ridge, the battle of Chattanooga was declared a Union victory. However, Grant was not ready to leave General Bragg alone.

On November 27, the day of the nation’s first national Thanksgiving, the 149th New York set out to harass the enemy at Ringgold Gap. When the 149th New York

¹³ *Memoir*, 207.

¹⁴ *Mountains*, 206-221.

¹⁵ *Memoir*, 209.

¹⁶ *Mountains*, 262-263, 306-311.

arrived, portions of Hooker's command had already assaulted the Confederates in the gap and were retreating quickly. Upon seeing Brigadier General Geary, Hooker asked "Have you any regiments that will run?" Geary responded "I have no regiments that will run." "Then," said Hooker, "Send some men into that gap and hold it until my artillery arrives."¹⁷ The 3rd Brigade quickly formed, and with the 149th in the lead, made their way towards the enemy. The 3rd Brigade was able to hold out against the Confederates, taking cover behind trees and a barn. Four men from the 149th were able to put one of the rebel's cannons out of commission as well. Finally, the men heard the familiar noise of rumbling wheels as horses pulled Union artillery into position. "Bang! bang! bang! sounded the opening peal. Hurrah! Hurrah! Hurrah! Came back the glad response from the men in the gap."¹⁸ The artillery fire from the Union proved to be too much, and the Confederate lines soon broke. Coming out from their cover, Union infantry followed the retreating rebels. "The bugle sounded, its note of command, the battery quickly limbered up and came forward to a new position and renewed its work amid the cheers of the men. In a few moments all was over and the boys in blue were in possession of the field . . ."¹⁹ Although the Confederates under Cleburne did retreat, it was done after inflicting heavy casualties on the Union troops.²⁰

Philip Goettel was among the soldiers who were farthest advanced in the Union line. Around twelve thirty in the afternoon when firing ceased, Goettel and his fellow soldiers left the bank of the river they were lying near and pursued a Confederate artillery

¹⁷ *Memoir*, 215.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Mountains*, 342.

piece from Semple's Alabama Battery, that had been harassing the Union troops.²¹ Although the attack was unsuccessful, Goettel captured the guidon of the battery along with a Confederate flag. As was standard during the Civil War, Goettel received the Medal of Honor for his heroic capture of two Confederate flags at the battle of Ringgold.

One-hundred and forty three years later, Philip Goettel's medal hangs in the Civil War Institute at Gettysburg. The story of the 149th New York is truly an odyssey in itself, as the men fought in major battles such as Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Chattanooga, and the Atlanta Campaign under Sherman. The 149th was also present for the Grand Review at the end of the war. Although Goettel may not have fought at Gettysburg, it seems fitting that his medal, which represents so much history should be housed in a place where history is still alive and appreciated.

Every summer since 1983 the Civil War Institute has organized a Civil War program. All of those interested in the Civil War attend this week long event where they listen to Civil War scholars discuss various aspects of the war. One of the long time members of the Civil War Institute was Herb Crumb, from Norwich, New York.²² He was a Civil War enthusiast who edited a collection of Civil War letters for publication.²³ Crumb admired the hard work that Gabor Boritt, the director of the Civil War Institute, put in to expanding everyone's knowledge of a pivotal aspect of American history.

Herb Crumb was the great grandson of Philip Goettel. He was born in 1921, just one year after his great grandfather died.²⁴ The story of how Crumb ended up obtaining Goettel's medal is not quite clear. However, it obviously was kept within the family for

²¹ *Memoir*, 218.

²² E-mail correspondence, Gabor Boritt to author, 24 September 2006.

²³ Herb Crumb's book, entitled *No Middle Ground: Thomas Ward Osborn's Letters from the Field (1862-1864)*, details the military life of a Civil War artillerist from New York.

²⁴ E-mail correspondence, Gabor Boritt to Ashley Towle, 24 September 2006.

two successive generations before reaching Crumb.²⁵ According to Boritt, Crumb had no one else to pass the medal on to when he passed away. He was worried about giving the medal to his children, who did not have a love of history, and therefore would not give it the respect it deserves. Instead, Crumb decided that the Boritt should hold on to the medal.²⁶

On May 5, 1993, Crumb wrote to Boritt officially handing the medal over to him. Crumb wrote, "It is not a major event, but is important to me. Institutions are too impersonal and this is a personal overture."²⁷ Boritt was flattered by Crumb's gift, but asked if the medal would not be better off if it were donated to Gettysburg College. Crumb insisted that Goettel's medal would be well taken care of by Boritt at the Civil War Institute. Boritt accepted Crumb's generous gift and responded "The medals and the certificate that goes with them will continue to be displayed at the CWI. Someday, when my time comes to go, I will make sure that the medals continue in the spirit you have given them to me."²⁸ Thirteen years later, Goettel's medals continue to hang on the wall of the Civil War Institute. When asked what he would do with Goettel's medals in the future, Boritt responded that he would probably donate them to the college where they will be taken care of.²⁹

Herb Crumb could not have picked a more suitable place for Goettel's Medal of Honor to be displayed. Anyone who enters the Civil War Institute has some interest in the

²⁵ Herb Crumb died in 2003. The author was unable to find any relatives to contact that would have information about Goettel. The author contacted Sue Greenhagen, a friend of Herb Crumb, but she did not respond. The author also contacted the Onondaga Historical Society for information on Goettel, but there was no response.

²⁶ Gabor Boritt, interview by author, Gettysburg, Pa., 21 September 2006.

²⁷ Herb Crumb, Norwich, NY, to Gabor Boritt, Gettysburg, 5 May 1993, transcript in the hand of Herb Crumb, personal collection of Gabor Boritt.

²⁸ Gabor Boritt, Gettysburg, to Herb Crumb, Norwich, NY, 12 May 1993, transcript in the hand of Gabor Boritt, personal collection of Gabor Boritt.

²⁹ Gabor Boritt, interview by author, Gettysburg, Pa., 21 September 2006.

Civil War, and immediately would understand the magnitude and significance of a Medal of Honor. However, Goettel's medal is modest, and could be easily overlooked. Housed within a small glass case are two small medals. The medal on the left is the original Medal of Honor that Goettel received for his actions at Ringgold. A plaque above the medals reads:

Corp Philip Goettel
149th New York Volunteer Infantry
Received Medal of Honor for
Capturing Two Confederate Flags at the Battle of Ringgold
November 27, 1863 ³⁰

The medal on the right is the revised Medal of Honor from 1896. The only major difference in the design of the 1896 medal is to the suspension ribbon.³¹ The certificate that Boritt refers to in his letter to Crumb goes along with the 1896 Medal of Honor issued by Nelson Miles, who was commander of the army at that time.³² The certificate states that Goettel's medal was number 268 issued. Goettel's second Medal of Honor was issued on March 13, 1896 as a result of "distinguished gallantry in action."³³ This certificate is not on display, and remains at Boritt's home, as part of his personal collection. However, to the left of the displayed medals is a small picture of Goettel from 1863. It is a modest picture; Goettel faces the camera head on as he sits in his uniform. There is no other information given on the picture besides the word "father."³⁴

Everyday Civil War Institute employees, work-study students, research assistants, customers and college employees walk by Goettel and his Medal of Honor. Without

³⁰ Medal of Honor in the Civil War Institute.

³¹ Gabor Boritt, interview by author, Gettysburg, Pa., 21 September 2006.

³² E-mail correspondence, Boritt to Towle, 24 September 2006.

³³ Medal of Honor Legion Certificate, number 268.

³⁴ It would seem that this picture would have had to have been taken following Goettel being mustered into the army. Perhaps when he was injured at Chancellorsville he was given furlough and had his picture taken while he was home. Military records would have to be obtained to see if Goettel was granted furlough. The author did not have sufficient time to place a request for these records.

reading the plaque, one might not even recognize what the medals mean. However, there is a truly remarkable story behind them. Too often in the study of history there is too much emphasis placed on those who are famous. However, Goettel's medals are a tribute to those basic soldiers who fought. Goettel's medals are steeped in history. Here was a man who fought against Stonewall Jackson, ascended the heights of Lookout Mountain, captured the flags of a Confederate artillery battery and marched with General Sherman in Atlanta. His fellow soldiers would come to Gettysburg, and as if not wanting to be left out, Goettel has made his way to Gettysburg too, to share his story. Sadly, there was not much known about Goettel's life. Employees at the Civil War Institute could only offer the information from the plaque. Boritt also admitted that he was not well versed in the history of Goettel's life, although Crumb had once told him.

When asked why Boritt continued to display the Medal of Honor at the Civil War Institute, he responded by saying that it was a tribute to those men who fought for their country. Also, he hoped that it would serve to enlighten the public about history. He noted that today people are not as concerned about American history. They tend to have the "don't know, don't care" attitude. Boritt says that the whole reason he runs the Civil War Institute is to educate people about their heritage.³⁵ Philip Goettel's medal is just one more way to do this. Although Goettel did not fight at Gettysburg, his Medal of Honor serves to educate students of American history, just as much as the 149th New York Volunteer monument at Culps Hill does. Goettel's medals truly are a treasure of Gettysburg.

³⁵ Ibid.



Photo of Philip Goettel hanging in the Civil War Institute



The photograph of Philip Goettel next to his Medal of Honor displayed at the Civil War Institute.

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