Ghosts of the Civil Wa

The Specia Sacrific Made by th 8th Ohi Volunteer Infantr Regimen

By Kenneth R. Callah

During the century or so since his death, Capt. James K. O'Reilly has rummaged around my family's attic, a ghost. His personality has been historically transmitted by hard artifact, through anecdotal remembrances and with subtle intuition. His essence must remain, finally, ineffable, the reflected image on the pond that scatters when grasped.

But what is flesh, blood and sinew is this: that O'Reilly, together with his fellow Clevelanders in the Hibernian Guard of the 8th Ohio Volunteer Infantry Regiment, helped change the course of the Civil War, and thus history, at the Battle of Gettysburg.

Indeed, the 8th Ohio was among the hardest fighting units on either side of the Civil War, a group that signed up the day after the first shots were fired at Fort Sumter and that saw and gave fierce combat in almost every major Eastern battle thereafter.

The 8th Ohio's greatest hour was at the Battle of Gettysburg, where, isolated for two days in the center of the battlefield, their enfilade into Pickett's Charge turned two Confederate brigades streaming toward the rear with their colors. There is, today, very near the center of the site, a monument to the valor that the 8th Ohio displayed those humid days of July 1, 2 and 3, 1863, on what is still Pennsylvania farmland.

However, what we, the descendants of "James K.," know of him must remain forever attenuated and skeletal. He was my grandfather's grandfather, an Irish immigrant from County Cork who came to Cleveland in 1858 via New York City, and who worked with his friend, James Butler, at the Thomas Jones and Sons Marble Monument Co. at E. 28th and Prospect. The senior Mr. Jones, his employer, wrote that, before the war, O'Reilly possessed a naturally strong constitution, a fine physique, was temperate and "in every respect correct in his habits." We know that O'Reilly led the bayonet charge at the Bloody Lane at the Battle of Antietam and his bravery was noted at the battles of Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor. And I have learned that after the war, because of the war, O'Reilly remained forever diminished, a fraction of himself.

The Call

It was 4:30 on the morning of April 12, 1861, when Maj. Robert Anderson, commander of Fort Sumter, heard Gen. Pierre Beauregard's artillery rounds fly overhead, thus beginning the Civil War. On April 15, in response to Sumter's fall, President Abraham Lincoln issued a proclamation calling 75,000 militiamen into national service for 90 days. The response in the North was overwhelming. Responding to the War Department's call for 13 regiments from Ohio, then-Gov. William Dennison wired Washington that, "without severely repressing the ardor of the people, I can hardly stop short of 20."

We know that O'Reilly and his boyhood friends, Thomas Galwey and Jim Butler, attended Mass on that Sunday, April 14, in Cleveland. As they left, they saw a large crowd of people gathered around a community bulletin board on Public Square, peering over each other's heads to get news of Fort Sumter. Most gathered believed that the war would not last long, because the South was sparsely settled and the slaves would rise up and join the Union Army. O'Reilly, Galwey and others talked of war far into the night.

The next day, Monday, Galwey related that he, O'Reilly and Butler went to the armory of the Cleveland Grays (located now on Bolivar Rd. off Playhouse Square), thinking to enlist with them. Galwey stated, "However, they did not seem to be the stuff that soldiers were made of" (Galwey was 15 years old), so the three went to the armory of the Hibernian Guard and became the first three names on the company's roll. Thus, within 72 hours of the war's first shot, O'Reilly was a soldier. The Hibernians became Company B. Two days after this enlistment, Butler, Galwey, O'Reilly and others were marched to Camp Taylor, located at Kinsman and Hudson, where they trained for 90 days. Enfield rifles were issued in July, and the unit was transferred to the hills of what is now West Virginia, where it engaged in protracted skirmishes with the rebels for the next year.

Gettysburg

The one thing we know for sure about the summer of 1863 was that it was extremely hot. After losing at the Battle of Chancellorsville on May 8, the Northern troops were kept literally on the run for six weeks. It was "a long and weary march" for the 8th Ohio. Galwey wrote: "The weather is fearfully hot — the sun pours down on us unmercifully. ... About nightfall we reach the Occquen [River] where we bivouac. ... Every man in the corps is stripped and in the water." Because of the heat, Gen. Alexander Hays, commander of the 2nd Corps of which the 8th Ohio was a part, issued an order stating with clarity: "Stragglers must be shot."

It was a journey that would have a profound effect on O'Reilly: He developed sunstroke, causing him to be desperately ill, so that he had to be delivered to the Gettysburg battlefield via ambulance. His decision to ignore the command of the regiment's surgeon, a Dr. Joseph A. Benton, to remain in the field hospital, and instead join his comrades in the middle of the Gettysburg battlefield, caused the formerly robust O'Reilly to be a virtual invalid the remainder of his life, and led finally to his death. Tired, weary and ill, O'Reilly and the 8th Ohio arrived at Gettysburg on July 1, 1863.

At Gettysburg, on the morning of July 3, 1863, two gigantic, proud and urgent armies uneasily faced each other. Each was desperate: The Army of Northern Virginia, though bolstered by its previous successes over a statistically superior army, was aware the war could not continue as it had, for time was against it. The army must win a deciding victory or ultimately succumb to increasing numbers. The Army of the Potomac, too, had just cause for despair. The Confederates had badly stung it at the battles of Chancellorsville, Fredericksburg and Manassas, and now were threatening its capital.

For two days, each side had fought savagely but inconclusively. Impatient for a decisive victory, Gen. Robert E. Lee made his fateful decision. "The enemy is out there and I will fight him," he noted, while preparing for the massive, climactic and tragic assault on the center of the Union lines known, wrongly but forever, as Pickett's Charge.

The two armies formed almost parallel lines, each occupying a ridge which provided rock and tree cover. Between them was a farming plain of about one mile, bisected diagonally by Emmitsburg Rd. This area of intense crossfire was empty, except at the very naval of this savage battleground, for the 8th Ohio.

Col. Franklin Sawyer, in command of the 8th Ohio, had been ordered there by Col. William Carroll the day before. Confederate sharpshooters, occupying a ridge behind Emmitsburg Rd., "sent whizzing Minnie [a round shell] among us," and greatly annoyed the officers. The road, which extends southeast to northwest between the line, was a considerable distance from the protective ground of Cemetery Ridge, where the Union troops stood. Col. Carroll, rea ing the importance of the natural r pit, sent the 8th Ohio across the (yards "to take this point and hold it the last man." With this, Sawyer, horseback, ordered the regiment f ward "double quick" and, with the fl and cheers of supporting troops, t dashed forward.

"The balls came thick and spitef among us. The men began to fall, so dead, some wounded," Sawyer wr Still, they persisted, and, after scal several stone walls and meeting the bels in hand-to-hand combat, fin prevailed, sending those who did surrender (of which there were 70) f ing back to their lines. With the ridge cured, the 8th Ohio formed a line skirmishes on its brow. The 14 cas ties the regiment suffered were retur to the protection of the lines.

The regiment's position did not unchallenged, however, for the Con erates seemed also to have wanted position. Several attempts were m later that day and the next to regai Rebel skirmishers, "in pretty g force," made a sudden and desperat fort to regain this position. Though t killed or injured 17, they could not lodge them.

O'Reilly was deathly ill and manded to hospital, but when he h of the position of his comrades, grabbed his rifle and ran to join the ment.

PHOTO COURTESY OF KENNETH R. CALLAHAN

Capt. James K. O'Reilly was called the "real author" of the attack at Gettysburg.

Throughout the evening, Sawyer and his men fell victim to sharpshooters and shells. When he asked for reinforcements, Gen. Hays replied he had no men to spare, but to "hold the point at all costs." Thus, their advanced line was kept up and at arms throughout the evening. From this careful watch, they felt certain that their position was being stealthily reconnoitered and "we felt sure of [an] attack early in the morning," wrote Sawyer.

The opinion proved correct. Just past dawn on the morning of the 3rd, some 300 or 400 rebels came charging toward the position which the 8th Ohio held, delivering a frightful volley. They were repulsed again. (During this attack, Sawyer received a ball that went through his hat and tore out his hair but caused him only a "hallucination of stars.") After this, the 8th Ohio was not bothered again until later that afternoon.

The Artillery Barrage

Others have described the enormous, unceasing, deafening artillery attack launched by Southern guns against the Northern center which preceded Pickett's Charge; it remains the largest single cannonade conducted on the North American continent. Sawyer described the scene:

"Nothing more terrific than this story of artillery can be imagined. The missiles of both armies passed over our heads. The roar of the guns was deafening, the air was soon clouded with smoke, and the shrieks and the startling crack of the exploding shells above, around and in our midst; the blowing up of our caissons in our rear; the driving through the air of the fence rails, posts and limbs of trees; the groans of dying men, the neighing of frantic and wounded horses, created a scene of absolute horror."

Fortunately for the regiment, it suffered only two deaths from this attack. The 8th Ohio stayed silent for two hours, uttering no words and "staying stock still."

When the Confederate guns finally ceased, they ceased for the wrong reason, believing that the Northern artillery had been destroyed. Hay's 2nd Corps gunners, who had been returning the fire, decided at last that, since they were doing little damage to the enemy, it would be wise to allow the guns to cool. The Confederates prepared to begin their infantry attack, in the mistaken belief that they had badly hurt the defenses, when in fact the 2nd Corps and the 8th Ohio were preparing to defend themselves in a battle they knew would have far-reaching consequences.

Pickett's Charge

Out of the woods the rebels came in formation, bayonets glistening and officers on horseback. On Pickett's left (and directly facing Sawyer, O'Reilly and Galwey) was James J. Pettigrew's division. "They moved up splendidly," Sawyer said, "deploying into column as they crossed the long, sloping interval between [us] and their base. At first it looked like they would sweep our position, but as they advanced, their direction lay to our left."

As these 13,000 Confederates came marching toward Cemetery Ridge, the first sign of faltering came from Col. J.M. Brockenbrough's brigade of Virginians who, under Pettigrew, were stationed in the extreme left of the advance, that is, directly in front of the 8th Ohio. At this time, Sawyer and his men numbered no more than 250, probably less than 220.

As the Confederate flank came within 100 feet of this skirmish line, the 8th Ohio opened a tremendous, terrible volley of musketry on Brockenbrough's men, striking them abreast, and l them falling. Brockenbrough's men we sure they faced a force 10 times great than existed. "Some fell, some ran bac most of them, however, threw dov their arms and were made prisoner wrote Sawyer.

It was lack of a possible retreat tl propelled the regiment forward. Sa Sawyer: "Our blood was up — we mu take our chances where we stood — a the men loaded and fired and yelled a howled at the passing column."

Not content to repel this entire b gade, the 8th Ohio swung round and tacked the next brigade, Joseph Dav (a nephew of the Confederate pre dent). The effect was devastating. Th still standing, or who had not retreat threw down their arms and wav handkerchiefs as signs of surrender.

Just beforehand, Southern G James Longstreet, seeing this seri threat to Pettigrew's extreme left, ser Maj. Orman Latrobe to warn them, Latrobe's horse was shot from un him. By the time he could get the m sage through, it was too late; an unc manned regiment had inflicted a co plete rout of the two brigades wh numbers were perhaps eight times tl own.

They then chased elements of M shall's Brigade toward their own l capturing 200 and 4 flags. O'Rei boyhood friend Galwey gave this count of the battle: "Our own loss severe. I myself was hit three times tween the opening of the cannonade the rout of the enemy. The first and ond sergeants of my company each a leg. Old John Burke, who had se 21 years in the 18th Royal Irish, o British Army before entering ours, lost the use of a leg. Lelievre, who an old French sailor, was also crip in the leg. Wilson was killed outrigh was Corp. Barney McGuire, a b humorous fellow, and Priv. Wil Brown died before dark. Out of the men that our regiment took into b we lost 103 in killed and sev wounded. As for the slightly wour almost every man was hit. In words, we suffered nearly 100% ca ties."

That battle marked the beginni the end for the Army of Northern ginia, and the Southern Confed and a way of life. The Civil War, the most bloody and destructive in our history, was decided that sun day by adolescents.

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War

Continued from Page 15

As for James K. O'Reilly's role at Gettysburg, I have come to believe that it was significant. In a letter to The Plain Dealer, written at the time of O'Reilly's death in 1900, Galwey describes him as the "real author" of the attack, a view that is reflected in anecdotal history.

He was obsessed by the war, I learned on a hot summer day in Cleveland in 1962. I had occasion to meet James K.'s daughter, Belle O'Reilly. She lived in the Woodhill area and was in her 90s and still lucid. I was with my father, a doctor and a Civil War historian. She talked in a slow, 19th-century way, with deliberate, undulating rhythms. I listened in forced deference, wishing I was elsewhere. She blamed her father for the fact that she did not marry, stating that he compelled her suitors to sit in the parlor and talk about the Civil War late into the night, and not to her.

No matter. We, the descendants of James K. O'Reilly, accept that we must never come to know the true man, and that we are fortunate to have fragments, a partial image. He will, one suspects, remain a ghost with us, and our children, into the next century. And in this, one suspects further, our experience is similar to many others of Greater Cleveland; many from this area track forebears to this remarkable regiment.

Fascination with the Civil War continues to enlarge; it will probably remain the central paradigm of the American experience, marking our nation's soul even more clearly than the Revolution. It is because of this that Clevelanders should know the sacrifice of the 8th Ohio Voluntary Infantry.

Their ghosts, their sense of duty, resonate in the quiet even now.