



MY FIRST YEAR REENACTING

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In a previous article I wrote about how I became a Civil War reenactor. I thought it might be interesting to share a few experiences during my first year as a member of the 3rd Maine Regiment.

Each year the 3rd Maine Regiment has a Camp of Instruction, usually during late April or May, for new recruits or for the “veterans” to get the winter rust off. My first Camp of Instruction was during the first weekend of May 1997. I had purchased my uniform, musket, cartridge box, cap box, haversack, canteen etc., but did not have a tent. I was told not to worry as someone would have a tent for me to use.



Our Camp of Instruction was at Fort Knox in Prospect, Maine, on the Penobscot River. When I arrived, I was told that someone had a tent that I could use. The tent was a dog tent, which was a replica of the size they had in the Civil War. Since the average height of a Civil War soldier was 5 feet 8 inches, and I was 6 feet 2 inches, I rapidly discovered that I was too long for the tent. I had a choice—either my head or my feet would be sticking out of the tent. I chose my feet and covered them with a blanket which, again, was too short for me.

This would have been fine except it was an exceedingly cold night and I remember getting, at most, a few hours' sleep. The tent I was sleeping in was open at both ends. The next day was cold and while drilling there were times that snowflakes were falling with a steady, cold wind. During the afternoon we received a weather report saying an exceptionally large storm with high winds, rain, and snow would arrive that night. Because of the impending storm, it was decided that the rest of the Camp of Instruction would be canceled. Since I had a short, open-ended tent, that was fine with me.

The big reenactment in 1997 was Antietam, in Maryland. While not on the actual battlefield, it was close to it. Estimates had the total number of reenactors between 15,000 and 20,000. I still remember getting up in the



morning and looking out upon hundreds of tents, which only included the Union campground. We had a small, unscripted battle the first afternoon. The larger battles, with the spectators attending, began the next day. Since this was the first big, out of state reenactment for myself and several other 3rd Maine members, the veterans told us to “take a hit”

(pretend to be shot) early in the battle and lie there to get an idea of what the battle would be like and what we should do. I thought that sounded like a good idea and was prepared to fire a few rounds and then “take a hit.”

When it was our turn, they marched us out onto the field with civilian reenactors and other soldiers cheering us on. We had barely reached the field and formed up into a line of battle when the Confederates hit our left flank and wiped out over half of our company. It was then that our first sergeant grabbed me and said, “I need you to mark the line so don’t take a hit!” He then pulled me to a spot and the rest of the company formed up on me. As a result, I learned while participating and was able to fire my musket numerous times.

The next day was the battle in a cornfield that had been grown specially for the reenactment. We were awakened early in the morning and marched out of the campground in the dark. As we approached the battlefield, I can still remember seeing the flashes from the cannons as they lit up the dark skies. There were cameramen,



dressed up as soldiers, taking videos of the reenactment. (We were able to purchase copies a few months later.) The video had one scene of the Union soldiers marching through the cornfield. When I looked closer, I saw that I was in that scene.

What the video did not show was that after marching past the camera we came out of the cornfield where our commanders formed us into a line of battle. The first sergeant went to get orders when one of the veterans said they had lined us up in front of a Confederate cannon and if it fired, we would all be dead. It did fire and most of us on the 3rd Maine went down. The sergeant came back, saw we were all down, had a fit, and reported to the captain that the company was wiped out.



The last day had the reenactment of the battle that took place at the Sunken Road. We were able to watch several Union regiments cross the field and attack the Confederates before it was our turn. By the time we got to the Sunken Road it was full of Confederate reenactors who pretended to be killed or wounded. It was a sobering sight and when we crossed the road it was exceedingly difficult not to step

on anyone. While this was just a reenactment, it did give us a good sense of the brutality of the war. When the battle was over, we shook hands with the Confederates and some of them had tears in their eyes just thinking of the actual soldiers who had fought and died in the battle 135 years previously.

The last memory I have of my first year is vivid. After the last battle my friend, Craig, and I went to Gettysburg. We parked the car and walked through Devils Den to go to Little Round Top. On our way up it was dusk. We still had our uniforms on with three days of sweat, dirt, and gunpowder on them. On the way we ran into a few people. One of them said, "I don't think you're ghosts, but let me touch your uniform to make sure."

Once he touched our uniforms and was relieved that we were real, we continued on to Little Round Top. We spent several minutes there and started back to our car. While walking back I turned around and saw a full moon just rising over Little Round Top. It was a beautiful sight and I thought how strange it was to have such a peaceful scene on the sight of where thousands had fought and been killed or wounded.

