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Paths of Glory

By Cindy Ross

Photograph by Walter Calahan

A summertime ride through Gettysburg National Military Park gives Scouts from Troop 424 in Lyndhurst, Ohio, their battlefield bearings.



History to Go: Sid Straub pedals along the Union line, past genuine artifacts and monuments honoring Gettysburg heroes.

At a mock Union medical camp set up at Spangler's Spring on the 800-acre grounds of Gettysburg National Military Park, Boy Scouts from Troop 424 chat with a Civil War reenactor playing a nurse.

The boys listen carefully as she teaches them about the primitive care available to soldiers in the mid-19th century. For instance, the boys learn that when battlefield physicians ran out of the silk thread used to suture soldiers' wounds, they substituted horsehair. But first, they boiled it. This discovery led to the now-routine practice of sterilizing medical instruments to kill germs.

Nearby, a "wounded" Union soldier lays sprawled on a quilt that has been spread on the ground, his body wrapped in bloody bandages. "That one isn't going to make it," one reenacting doctor tells 13-year-old Sean Starick. The young Scout's eyes widen, and a look of deep concern crosses his face. He turns to a woman standing next to him and whispers, "I thought it was against the law for reenactors to use live ammunition."

"Honey," she tells him in a soothing voice, "it's just make believe."

Make believe, yes, but make believe with a purpose.

What took place on the killing fields of Gettysburg, Pa., from July 1-3, 1863, altered the course of the War Between the States and led to the preservation of the United States of America.

On a similar, sunny summer day, Gettysburg battlefield reenactors give Troop 424's Scouts a powerful lesson in history,



Reenactor Mike Williams, of the "Basil Manley" 1st North Carolina Artillery Battery A, teaches Scouts Joey Bloom (center) and Sean Starick how to load a disarmed Civil War-era cannon.

putting them, albeit virtually, in the thick of the action at the largest land battle waged on North American soil—and the most important.

This Gettysburg experience marks the third trip to the park for Troop 424, chartered to Grace Tabernacle Baptist Church in Lyndhurst, Ohio.

“The first year we hiked,” says Scoutmaster Bob Bowland. “But the sun and the open fields made for a brutal day. So last year, the boys tried bicycles.

“It was a free-for-all race,” Bowland adds with a laugh.

This time, seeking a new way to get more out of the visit, the boys pedal slower, combining learning with one of their favorite activities. And they’ve come prepared.

Two weeks before the journey to Gettysburg, marksmen from the National Rifle Association (NRA) instructed the Scouts in the basics of shooting black-powder rifles. The boys also watched the 1993 film *Gettysburg*, starring Martin Sheen as Gen. Robert E. Lee, Tom Berenger as Lt. Gen. James Longstreet, and Jeff Daniels as Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain.

Troop 424 has set up camp in McMillan Woods, where Confederate soldiers bivouacked at the time of the battle. A lottery system allows Scouts, or any nonprofit organization, to stay at one of the 24 free group campsites—the only campground location in the historic park.

Scouts bike the blacktopped three-mile Johnny Reb Trail and the nine-mile Billy Yank Trail. They pass huge granite statues depicting heroes of the battle, read informational plaques on some of the park’s 300 trailside monuments, and stop occasionally to receive interactive lessons in Civil War lore from the reenactors.

In addition, Bowland has combined 10 associated activities into a scavenger hunt that prompts the boys to use their compass-reading and distance-figuring skills.

They follow a printed guide that outlines five trails in the park that serve as part of the Boy Scouts of America Heritage Trails Program. Scouts receive patches for each completed trail.

Created through a partnership between York-Adams Area Council in York, Pa., and the National Park Service, the booklet chronicles all of the major events that took place at the Battle of Gettysburg.

On the first evening in camp, the Scouts get a preview of what they’re going to learn about the park, the soldiers, and the conflict. They walk the road atop Seminary Ridge, the sight of fierce fighting on Day 1 of the battle, with surrounding fields drenched in moonlight and fireflies dancing in the open air.

Assistant Scoutmaster Sam Bowland, himself a Civil War reenactor who has read all six volumes of author Mark Nesbitt’s *The Ghosts of Gettysburg*, tells creepy stories and notes some people’s claim that there are more paranormal activities on Gettysburg’s hallowed ground than anywhere else in the country. As the boys walk and Sam Bowland talks, it is easy to imagine the rush of the slain soldiers’ spirits wandering here still.

The landscape at Gettysburg National Military Park looks remarkably the same as it did in 1863. The peaceful farms, fencerows, peach orchards, and wheat fields remain.

Park managers preserve the region’s natural features—huge granite rock formations, woods of white oak, white ash, and northern red oak, fields of herbaceous plants and wildflowers, and even some buildings—as they appeared at the time of



Rock of Erin: Artist Dan Troiani's painting depicts soldiers of the 69th Pennsylvania Irish Regiment holding the line during Pickett's Charge on the final days of the Battle of Gettysburg.

Photograph by www.historicalimagebank.com, Southbury, Conn.

the battle. Because they once served as concealment for the soldiers, those features help visitors visualize how the combatants might have reacted during attacks and retreats.

Left to the Scouts' imaginations, as well as the skillful storytelling techniques of the reenactors and the exhibits in the new Gettysburg Museum and Visitor Center, are the grim, real-life experiences of the 172,000 soldiers who fought here.

Over that three-day span in July 1863, the air was filled with the smoke and roar of 634 canons. And at the end of the battle, the ground was littered with the bodies of 51,000 men and 5,000 dead horses. Curious Scouts linger at the boulder-strewn area known as Devil's Den, where Longstreet's Confederate First Corps launched a fierce assault on the Union forces on Day Two of the fighting.

Using their Scout skills, they estimate the distance between Confederate sharpshooters and Union forces on Little Round Top to the west. They crawl among the shaded boulders or simply stare at the ground as other Scouts read from the trail guide a description of the carnage that took place in the valley below,

"A great basin lies before us full of smoke and fire and literally swarming with riderless horses and fighting, fleeing, and pursuing men..."

"Everywhere we look, everywhere we step, there were dead and dying soldiers. They were hiding from the sun and the heat and the flying bullets."

"Imagine charging up Little Round Top," says 17-year old Ryan Pope, "We'd have to carry our bikes and wear wool clothing just to get an idea of what it was like to carry that heavy gun."

"Plus be dehydrated and hungry and real scared too," adds 11-year old Scout Joey Bloom.

At the end of a long day of cycling the trails, climbing the knolls, reading the stories, following the guide, hearing the reenactors' stories, and walking in the footsteps of those who fought and died here, the Scouts wearily pedal back to McMillan Woods.

Before they reach camp, they encounter a group of Confederate artillery troops cooking their evening meal over an open fire. The soldiers, in charge of cannons on a ridgeline, offer to give them a demonstration.

"You boys want to join the army?" they ask the Scouts. "Gotta be 16 to carry a rifle."

Suiting up in wool jackets and hats like those worn by Union and Confederate soldiers, the boys tote a sponge rammer and vent pick to a genuine Civil War-era artillery piece mounted on heavy wooden wheels. There they watch a demonstration of how to load the cannon.

That evening, the boys knew what the Battle of Gettysburg must have been like and how this day might have changed their perception of those events.

"I never really cared about the Civil War until this trip," says 13-year-old Patrol Leader Ryan Zittkowski. "But it seemed so real. For the first time, I enjoyed history."

Gettysburg's reenactors had done their job.

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Enlisting is Easy

Obtain a Gettysburg National Military Park trails guidebook from York-Adams Area Council (\$1, www.yaac-bsa.org/filestore-new/activities/gettysburg-1.htm).

The council also assists Scout troops with finding accommodations other than at the campsite in McMillan Woods—at either Camp Tuckahoe, located 25 miles from Gettysburg in Dillsburg, Pa., or at the smaller Camp Conewago in New Oxford, Pa.

For more information on reservation procedures and site availability check out www.nps.gov/gett/planyourvisit/campgrounds.htm or www.nps.gov/gett.