

Senator's view: The 1st Minnesota: 'Saviors of our country'

Minnesota played an important role in the Civil War, and Minnesotans played a crucial role at the Battle of Gettysburg.

By: **Roger Reinert**, Duluth News Tribune

One of the most significant battles in U.S. history took place 150 years ago last week. On July 1-3, about 166,000 men from the Union and Confederate armies met near the small town of Gettysburg in what was to become the turning point of the Civil War. Had the Confederates won, the road would have been open all the way to Washington, D.C., and the pressure in the North for a negotiated peace settlement would have been tremendous. Instead, the Union army earned a desperately needed victory and momentum. President Abraham Lincoln earned much-needed support from the public and additional time to prosecute the war.

I returned home from Gettysburg, Penn., on Thursday after spending all three days of the battle on-scene. I have the honor of serving on the Minnesota Civil War Commemoration Task Force, and along with other state leaders and everyday Minnesotans was there to remember, honor and rededicate, as part of the official Minnesota delegation to the commemoration.

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Every fall I take some of my students at Lake Superior College to the State Capitol. In many ways, it's a shrine to our state's involvement in the Civil War. It was built shortly after the war by men who had been there and survived in honor of men who did not make it home. As a civics teacher, history buff and proud Minnesotan, this trip and tour is always a highlight of the year for me. I give the Capitol tour myself and talk to my students about two very important displayed artifacts: the battle flag and the staff of the 1st Minnesota Volunteer Regiment.

When word reached the Minnesota Capitol that Fort Sumter in South Carolina had been surrendered, Alexander Ramsey, Minnesota's second governor and the namesake for today's Ramsey County, was in Washington, D.C., and gave Minnesota the distinct honor of being the first state to pledge troops in defense of the Union. Upon returning to Minnesota, he and other state leaders put the call out for 1,000 volunteers. These volunteers became the 1st Minnesota. The 34th Infantry Division of the Minnesota National Guard, the "Red Bulls," traces its lineage all the way back to these men.

There was no standing guard or reserve forces in Minnesota at the time; and while some of these men came from communities with local militias, very few of them had any significant military training. They were farmers, lumberjacks, traders and trappers. A few came from business backgrounds, and several were sent by local Minnesota newspapers to report on the activities of the unit and send stories back home. Like many Northerners, they believed the war would not last long. The North had the people, the resources and the industry. They thought they'd be back home in six months or so and along the way have the opportunity to see some of our vast country with the travel bill paid by the government.

But the will and morale of the South was severely underestimated. By Gettysburg, the 1st Minnesota had fought in 10 engagements, including First and Second Bull Run, Antietam and Fredericksburg. Of the 1,000 men who left Fort Snelling two years earlier, 262 remained. After the second day at Gettysburg that number was down to 47. In a courageous bayonet charge that lasted about five minutes, the unit suffered 215 casualties. That 83 percent casualty rate stands to this day as the largest loss suffered by any surviving United States military unit on a single day of battle.

But fate had not yet finished with these men. The next day, July 3, the men who remained found themselves in one of the few places where the Union lines were breached during Pickett's Charge and fighting yet again in close quarters with Confederates.

Our purpose in Gettysburg 150 years later was to ensure these men and their actions on those two fateful days would still be remembered. We stood where they stood and retraced their fateful bayonet charge. We placed wreaths at the two memorials dedicated to their actions and at the national cemetery plot in which many of them remain. It was somber and reflective. I was proud to be there and completely humbled by the experience. Like many there, I found myself wondering if, as President Lincoln put it in the Gettysburg Address, I would have been ready to give my "last full measure of devotion" to the struggle.

President Calvin Coolidge stated that, "The 1st Minnesota are entitled to rank as the saviors of our country." A blog I share with my students states it even better: "July 2nd, a great day to thank Minnesota for saving the Union."

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