

Local Civil War re-enactors fighting to preserve history

BY JEFF FETZER

WITH artillery fire pounding the Confederate troops advancing toward Culp's Hill and volleys of musket fire crisscrossing the field below, a company of Union soldiers anxiously awaits its turn to engage.

From their hidden vantage point in the heavily forested area atop the hill, they catch glimpses of the valley below filling with smoke and swarming with soldiers, firing, falling, marching forward as a brilliant sunset forms over the ridge on the distant horizon.

With twilight setting in, they receive orders to enter the fray. They file out of the woods and double-quick it down a steep, shaggy farm field where the enemy awaits.

Leading the charge, saber raised, is Bradford County resident Kurt D. Lafy, company commander of the 141st Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. Once they reach the flat ground, Lafy orders the men to form lines and prepare to fire, then steps behind the double row of soldiers as he shouts commands over the



CHARGE: 1st Lt. Kurt D. Lafy of the 141st Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry re-enactment group prepares his company to fire at advancing Confederates during the Blue Gray Alliance's 150th Gettysburg Re-enactment on June 29 in Gettysburg.



GUN CLEANING: Claverack member Kevin Corey of Wysox Township cleans his musket at the Union encampment at the Bushey Farm near Gettysburg. Even when not taking part in battle re-enactments, participants remain in period clothing, like Corey's heavy wool trousers, and maintain campsites free of signs of modern living.

cacophony of gunshots, cannonade and rebel yells. His unit lets loose a volley in unison, tearing holes in the string of gray-clad troops 75 yards to the front.

"Fire at will," he barks. "Pour it on, boys."

His troops immediately begin reloading, taking aim and firing, repeating the routine for several minutes.

With smoke from the muskets obscuring the battlefield, Lafy orders his troops to advance. Another volley follows, then more "at-will" firing. The pitched battle ends after 10, maybe 15 minutes, and the defeated Confederates join the Union forces for handshakes, laughter and even a few hugs. The Rebs, obviously from Louisiana, break out in a boisterous chant of "Tigers, Tigers, Tigers," though this camera-toting observer can't be sure if it is to honor the famed Civil War-era Louisiana infantry troop or the LSU football team. The federal troops counter with their own shouts of "Yankees, Yankees, Yankees." More laughter and good-natured banter

follows, and then it's time to gather up the "dead" and head back to camp for the night.

Exuberance and battle stories punctuate the long slog back up Culp's Hill and through acres and acres of darkening forest teeming with tents and glowing campfires. The company sergeant, who hails from Ohio, compliments the men for the precision of their volleys. Lafy heaps praise upon his company for their excellent battlefield performance.

And it was all performance. On this day, June 29, 2013, "Culp's Hill" was found at the Bushey Farm, located several miles from the actual Gettysburg Battlefield and the site of the Blue Gray Alliance's 150th Gettysburg Re-enactment. The muskets and cannons fired powder only, not minie balls, grapeshot or canister. And the "soldiers" were men, even a few women, who opted to forego the conveniences of modern living for the weekend in order to recreate and remember one of the most significant battles in American history.



CAMP: Claverack member Laura "Mae" Hewitt and partner Kurt D. Lafy chat while standing around the campfire at the campsite of the 141st Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. Other members of the local re-enacting unit include, from left, Claverack member Larry Purtell of Little Meadows, Jon Fiske Sr. and Jon Fiske Jr., both of Spring Hill.

Lafy was among an expected 20,000 Civil War re-enactors who converged in Adams County in late June and early July to commemorate the sesquicentennial of the Battle of Gettysburg. The nation's most famous battle took place July 1-3, 1863, and proved to be a pivotal point in the War Between the States, one in which Union forces finally turned the tide against a Confederate Army that had, to that point in the war, been nearly invincible.

For the 61-year-old Towanda native, Civil War historian and author, re-enacting has become a calling, a way to pay to homage to those who fought in "America's family feud," as Lafy calls it.

He and his housemate, Claverack member Laura Hewitt, participate in four or five Civil War battle re-enactments a year, he as a Union officer and she as his wife. Lafy also gives public talks on the war and participates in community parades and living history events with other members of the 141st Pennsylvania Volunteers, Company A, a re-enactment group he and a handful of fellow Bradford County residents and Civil War enthusiasts formed about 18 months ago.

Lafy says he took an interest in the Civil War during its much-celebrated centennial in the early 1960s, when he was a student at Wysox Elementary School. The interest grew into a passion in the late 1980s when, while research-

ing his family history, he discovered his great-grandfather, George Benjamin Lafy, had been a soldier in the Civil War.

While seeking additional information about his great-grandfather on the internet, Lafy came in contact with Tim Traver, a Civil War re-enactor from Binghamton, N.Y. To encourage Lafy to join the re-enacting ranks, Traver mailed him a kepi, a cap with a flat, round top and small visor worn by Union soldiers. The rest, you might say, is living history.

"I put it on," Lafy recalls, "and my youngest daughter said, 'Dad, you look like them.' That was it. I was hooked."

Shortly thereafter, Lafy, a self-employed carpenter, traveled from his home in New Jersey to a historical regimental quartermaster in Hatboro, Pa., to purchase all of the equipment necessary to get started as a Civil War re-enactor: musket, period uniform, tent and accoutrements. He joined his first re-enactment unit in 1990 and was immediately smitten by the charm of camp life and the theater of battle.

"Being a Civil War re-enactor is all about having fun," he says. "I love the camaraderie and the friendships you develop. The modern day disappears, so you don't care about work. It's a great family atmosphere. At night, you'll hear banjo music playing through the encampment, people singing, others just sitting around the campfire talking and enjoying themselves. It's wonderful.

And the battles — oh, my God, are they fun."

Re-enacting, with its emphasis on historical accuracy, provides an opportunity for people to experience soldiering in the Civil War era, minus the fear and bloodshed.

"I was at Gettysburg for a re-enactment about 10 years ago," Lafy recalls, "and we were marching across a thigh-high hay field ringed by trees, and all you could hear was the clinking of the accoutrements, the swooshing of the grass and the occasional booming of cannons in the distance. And I thought to myself that it could have been 1863. So you get to time travel. I live for those moments."

Over the course of two decades of re-enacting, Lafy developed expertise on military tactics and the "school of the soldier" that enabled him to work his way up to first lieutenant while involved with his re-enactment group in New Jersey.

About four years ago, with calls to his carpentry business all but dried up due to the Great Recession, Lafy left the *(continues on following page)*



R & R: Kurt Lafy of Sheshequin Township, Bradford County, relaxes after returning to camp following a re-enactment of the Battle of McPherson's Ridge during the Gettysburg 150th anniversary re-enactment. A Civil War historian and author, Lafy has been participating in re-enactments for over two decades.

LOCAL CIVIL WAR RE-ENACTORS

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Garden State for a job opportunity in Bradford County. Upon his return to his home county, he met Claverack member

Although she professes slight interest in the Civil War, Hewitt accompanies Lafy to re-enactments and living history events, portraying Laura “Mae,” officer’s wife.

the cooking and laundry because I’m using my vacation to do this.”

Today, the 141st Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry (PVI) re-enactment group led by Lafy consists of ten soldiers, a 13-year-old drummer boy and four women who portray soldiers’ wives.

Members of the unit, all descendants of Civil War soldiers, reside in Bradford and Susquehanna counties and include Claverack members Kevin Cory of Wysox Township and Larry Purtell of Little Meadows.

The Civil War-era 141st Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry was an infantry regiment of 1,000 men, the majority of them, about 650, hailing from Bradford County.

The ranks of the 141st Regiment, mustered into service in August 1862, had been severely thinned by the time

they reached Gettysburg as a result of rampant disease and heavy losses experienced during the Battle of Chancellorsville in early May 1863. Of the 1,009

FIRE: Smoke spews from the barrels of Union guns during a re-enactment of the battle of Culp’s Hill. The Confederate Army’s failure to take Culp’s Hill on the evening of the first day of the Battle of Gettysburg is considered one of the great missed opportunities of the epic three-day conflict that claimed the lives of over 7,000 Union and Confederate troops.



READY, AIM: Nate Jelliff of Columbia Crossroads, the 13-year-old drummer boy for the 141st Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry, watches as his company takes aim at Confederate troops during a re-enactment of the fight for Culp’s Hill.

“This is his passion,” she says while waiting out a thunderstorm under the shelter of the officers’ tent at the Gettysburg re-enactment. “How could I not go with him?”

She says she has even come to enjoy the re-enactments because of the friendships she has developed.

“And I love being an officer’s wife because I don’t have to do any work,” she says with a laugh. “I’ll help out, but I don’t want to be responsible for all of

Laura Hewitt, who has since become his “sweetheart, partner and confidant.” They share a house and small horse farm in Sheshequin Township.

At the encouragement of Hewitt, Lafy decided to begin a local re-enacting unit.



original volunteers, only 209 were present for roll call on July 2, 1863, the day the unit valiantly fought at the Peach Orchard during the Battle of Gettysburg. Only about 30 “effectives” followed their commander, Col. Henry J. Madill, an attorney from Towanda, off the field that day; the 141st Regiment experienced 85 percent casualties at Gettysburg, the second highest percentage of losses of any Union regiment on the field.

On the day of the 150th anniversary of the battle in the Peach Orchard, the local re-enactment group conducted a ceremony at the 141st Regiment’s monument on the battlefield at Gettysburg. Lafy detailed the regiment’s actions during the battle and called the role of all 200-plus soldiers who participated, noting if they died or were wounded in the battle. He closed the ceremony by placing a wreath at the monument with the Latin words “Veneratio Fortis,” meaning “Honor the brave.”

Lafy spends a lot of time doing just that. In addition to re-enactment and living history activities, he serves as camp



ENEMY LINE: Rebel forces march from the battlefield during the Battle of Gettysburg Re-enactment held June 28-30 at the Bushey Farm. The farm, located several miles from the actual battlefield, hosted an estimated 10,000 Civil War re-enactors seeking to commemorate the sesquicentennial of America’s bloodiest battle, which took place July 1-3, 1863.

commander of the Pvt. Silas Gore Camp of the Sons of Union Veterans, a national organization dedicated to maintaining Civil War veterans’ graves and monuments.

He has also extensively researched the soldiers of the 141st Regiment as a



means of preserving the memories of the local men who fought to preserve the Union.

From his research, he has written a book, “Draped in Blue & Brave,” published in July, that contains short stories about many of the individual soldiers from Bradford, Susquehanna, Sullivan and Wayne counties who enlisted with the regiment. He had previously written and published a fictional historical novel, “George, A Civil Warrior,” based upon his great-grandfather’s involvement in the Civil War. His books are available through his website, lafybooks.com.

A full-time zoning officer and secretary for Wysox Township, Lafy plans a third book, or series of books, that will document details about every member of the 141st Regiment for whom he can find information. He says he has information for about 65 percent of the soldiers from the unit, including their final resting places, and the book — which will be 1,000 to 1,500 pages when fin-

RELAX: Kurt Lafy puts a new recruit at ease as his company forms prior to safety inspections and a march to the battlefield in late June.

ished — is about 75 percent complete. He admits, however, that as he pores over microfilm and other materials at area libraries, he keeps finding new information, new stories to tell about the soldiers.

So what drives Lafy, Bradford County Historical Society’s 2011 Historian of the Year, to spend so much of his time reliving and rediscovering the period?

“Everything we are as a nation and everything we become as a nation, we owe to these common men who answered the call of duty over and over again,” says Lafy. “The least I can do is try to bring their memories to a concise book so people can look back and read about their ancestors.”

Lafy enjoys sharing his knowledge of the Civil War and the soldiers of the 141st Regiment through public talks and by participating in living history demonstrations with his re-enactment group. For more information, he can be reached by telephone at (570) 673-5103, or via email at: companya@141pvi.us Additional information can also be found on the 141st Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry website, www.141pvi.us. 