

Hartje Paper: Dying for the Cause: General James Wadsworth and his Legacy

Edward Trowbridge Strong

*"No man has given himself up to the war with such self-sacrificing patriotism as Gen. Wadsworth"
~ John Hay*

The entire flank had been crushed and his division was in full panic. He must have seemed terribly out of place, commanding general of the 4th division of the V Corps riding with his aide Lieutenant Rogers¹ trying to reorganize his troops to make a stand. A man who only a few days before had been nominated for promotion to Major General² now galloped along the front lines of the chaotic inferno that was the Battle of the Wilderness, rallying his men to stand and fight. He was beginning to feel his age and at fifty-six, he was nearly a decade older than any other officer in the Union Army.³ He was on his third horse, the first two having been shot out from under him.⁴ The summer's humidity could be felt even through the dense shade of the vast wilderness which he found himself in. His mind raced as he turned to see an advancing column through the smoke and dust; their grey uniforms merely confirmed the fact that had been slowly dawning on him, retreat was the only option. His thoughts oddly turned to home as he turned his horse, his sprawling estate in the peaceful Genesee Valley of upstate New York. Images of the home he had built and family he had raised passed through his mind and then, darkness. He likely did not hear the shot but the ball entered into the back of his skull and smeared blood onto Lt. Roger's chest. Dazed and blood soaked, Rogers desperately fell to his general's side but, with the enemy closing on them fast he was forced to abandon him and flee.

Wadsworth had always been a rebel in his own right and unafraid to fight for what he believed in. The staunch abolitionist had supported and campaigned both the Free Soil and Republic parties. Despite his age and wealth, he offered his services in whatever capacity the Federal government wished upon the outbreak of the war. It is not surprising then, that he would fight for every second of life

that he could. There he lay, passed over and left for dead by the rebels as they gave chase to his fleeing brigades. What he must have thought and dreamed of for hours before he was discovered by a passing confederate officer. Thinking back on the glory his division had won at Gettysburg or perhaps his loss in the New York Gubernatorial Race of 1862⁵. But more than likely his thoughts must have turned to his family, to his son James who at that very moment was also fighting for his father's cause of Union and abolition.

Confederate surgeon James Claiborne⁶ was the first to treat him and immediately determined the wound to be mortal. Claiborne did all he could to ensure that he was comfortable, dressing the wound and giving him water and morphine. The dying general lay resting against a tree, conscious but unable to speak or move. After being identified by Union prisoners, his presence received great curiosity from the many passing Confederates. He was reputed to have more money than the entire Confederate government.⁷ Union prisoners spoke of a man who refused pay for his entire military service and spent his own money to shelter and supply his troops. He would linger on for another two days before finally succumbing to his wounds. His body was returned to the Union army and transported home to be buried in his family plot in the town he and his brother had founded, Geneseo.

His family, community, and country deeply mourned his loss but took heart from his convictions to duty and public service. His son and Grandson would both go on to become United States Senators; his great-grandson Jeremiah became a United Nations Ambassador. But it was Jeremiah's daughter, Alice Hay Wadsworth who would marry a young man who had just been discharged from the Army Air Force following World War II by the

name of Trowbridge Strong. They would have five children together, the oldest named Michael. Michael would go to law school, as General Wadsworth had, and met a woman there whom

he married and had four children. The youngest of those four was named for his two grandfathers, Edward Trowbridge Strong and grew up in the house the general built in Geneseo, New York.

Works Cited

Krumviede, John F. *Old Waddy's Coming The Military Career of Brigadier General James S. Wadsworth*. Baltimore: Butternut and Blue, 2002.

Foote, Shelby. *The Civil War: A Narrative Vol. III*. New York: Random House, 1974.

Endnotes

¹ John F. Krumviede, "Old Waddy's Coming" *The Military Career of Brigadier General James S. Wadsworth* (Baltimore: Butternut and Blue, 2002), 110.

² Krumviede, 119.

³ Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative Vol. III* (New York: Random House, 1974), 171-172.

⁴ Krumviede, 107.

⁵ Foote, 172.

⁶ Krumviede, 111.