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## Inside living history: Reporter goes inside Civil War reenactment as a soldier with a point-of-view camera

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Sunday, October 28, 2012



Macomb Daily reporter Don Gardner dresses as a Confederate soldier, complete with a point-of-view camera, before joining a reenactment of the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Shepherdstown at Wolcott Mill Metropark in Ray Township.

The smell of spent gunpowder is in the air.

Soldiers dressed in navy blue and butternut and gray scurry back to their units. Commanders discuss the results of the skirmish and account for wounded. They talk quietly amongst themselves how the attack will be better coordinated the next time the two sides meet again on the field.

The Battle of Shepherdstown is over. The Maryland Campaign in the Civil War has come to an end with Confederate forces retreating from the state.

Two Confederates, weary after a day of battle, clear their rifle muskets, wipe their brows and take a

slug of water from their canteens.

“What time does the Michigan-Michigan State game start?” one soldier says.

OK, so it isn't a real Civil War battle, and it isn't Maryland in 1862.

It's 2012 at Wolcott Mill Metropark in Ray Township, and about the only bloodshed on the battlefield this day comes from the ring-finger knuckle on my left hand, the result of whipping my 1853 Enfield rifle musket from my shoulder, to the firing position, to the ground and back to the firing position.

The Civil War reenactment replayed the Battle of Shepherdstown, the third leg of the bloody Maryland campaign which included Antietam, honoring the 150th anniversary of the battle. It was the final reenactment of a busy spring and summer for the 4th Texas reenactment unit, which was the host unit for the event at Wolcott Mill.

Wolcott has played host to Civil War reenactments for 20 years, the battles determined by the calendar and if the topography can accurately reflect that of the original battle.

The battles at Wolcott each year are small potatoes compared to the battles fought at historic battlefields, such as the Battle of Perryville in Kentucky that the unit took part in earlier in October. Large reenactments such as Perryville bring in hundreds or thousands of participants.

For this reenactment, I was given a chance to play a part. Thanks to longtime reenactor John Fross of Redford, I was able to suit up as a 4th Texas Confederate infantry, portraying a soldier in Gen. A.P. Hill's corps, while we battled the 1st U.S. sharpshooters and the 4th Michigan.

And I was able to wear a point-of-view camera on my forehead to capture the sights and sounds of the battle up close and personal.

Reenactors call themselves “history nerds,” and they wear that badge with honor. Reenactments are partly a campout and partly a family reunion, but they are mostly a chance to become living history – bringing history books to life with period clothing, living arrangements, weaponry and battle tactics. The events regularly attract strong crowds eager to mingle with and ask questions of the reenactors before and after the battle.

Capt. Steve Domke, a Utica High School government teacher, has been portraying Civil War soldiers for 33 years. On this day he portrayed Capt. Jethro Yates of the 42nd Tennessee, who fought at Shepherdstown. Yates was Domke's great-, great-, great- grandfather's brother.

“These things help us remember what our country has been through,” Domke said. “The men in our ranks enjoy recreating the history and giving the public a chance to see what it was like when we were divided in the hopes that it never happens again.

“I'm still in love with Civil War history. The personal stories, the personal tragedy as I read on my own about the battles that we are portraying. I enjoy the camaraderie of the men that I'm in ranks with. All these men have different careers ... but they all have a common love of the Civil War. And just being outside, being part of all of this is just fantastic.”

Wolcott Mill was rimmed with dozens of white military-style tents fronted with fire pits used for cooking and providing warmth. Period musical instruments could be heard throughout the encampment, and nearly 100 men and women strolled the area in Civil War-era clothing when I located Fross, who was to provide me with my uniform.

As I dressed inside Fross' tent, I began to feel the spirit of the 1800s and the Civil War time period envelope me. My uniform included a cotton shirt, wool socks and wool pants and jacket, leather shoes and hat, leathers to hold my ammunition, a haversack and a canteen. After I got dressed, Fross reminded me to take off my T-shirt, since T-shirts didn't exist 150 years ago.

If there is any criticism of reenactors, it typically comes in the form of men who take the hobby too seriously – hard-core reenactors, “button-counters” or “stitch-Nazis” as they are sometimes called. Such people can give the hobby a bad name in the eyes of the public and drive off fellow reenactors who are criticized by the hard-core members for not living up with expectations, whether in dress or how far they are willing to live the life of the men they are portraying.

Col. Scott Cummings of Bay City and the 4th Michigan (a unit that actually fought at the Battle of Shepherdstown) prefers the term “progressive” over hard-core and says he doesn't agree with those whose attitudes discourage other men, but he does prefer the more serious events that draw the participants closer to what life was really like for soldiers 150 years ago.

“To get up at 4 a.m., issue your men rations, bust up the hardtack box and throw it on the fire and burn it and then march off with the men and basically live in the field -- that's an aspect that a lot of mainstreamers don't get to feel,” said Cummings, who saw his first reenactment at 12 years old in Gettysburg and has been doing it for 29 years.

“As a progressive, I like to teach by example. I don't like to jam in down anybody's throat. I think that's where the negative connotation comes from.

“I think it's an honor to portray the men who lived before, who did this as a lifestyle in the Civil War. For me it's like, you can't go water-skiing behind a rowboat. If you're going to do something, you have to do it right. You have to have the proper equipment, proper mindset, but I don't begrudge anyone who wants to do it mainstream, because I go back and forth.”

Dressed in my full uniform, I couldn't help but feel the part, much like an actor in dress rehearsal for the first time. But I also felt woefully below Cumming's Mendoza-line for a “progressive” soldier, ill-prepared to accurately portray one of history's brave soldiers.

Fross provided me with about a half-hour of drill — including learning how to march, how to carry the rifle musket and how to shift it from shoulder to shoulder and shoulder to ground to the firing position. But I was not allowed to fire my rifle musket due to safety and insurance considerations.

Later, I was introduced to the rest of the 4th Texas, with my POV camera awkwardly protruding from underneath my hat. Under Domke's command, we began to march and drill in preparation for battle in front of the public. I silently prayed I wouldn't screw up too badly and embarrass the unit.

“Work him over a little bit if you have to, to keep him in line,” Fross told the rest of the unit with a

wink and a smile.

The rest of the 4th Texas certainly must have felt like I was an invader, but they sure didn't act like it. As we marched and drilled, several of the men would gently remind me what are orders were and/or if I was out of position.

"Don, after three or four shots, I want you to go down. Then you can lay down in the field or retreat back with the other wounded, whatever is best for your taping," Domke said. "For the rest of you, we lose this battle, so you can be killed on the field or run like a coward, your choice."

Finally, it was time to march to the field. I felt like yelling, "It's a good day to die, boys," but I thought better of it. We marched crisply to the battleground, with the sounds of rattling canteens, metal heels contacting stone and the occasional smart-aleck remark.

The battle commenced with final instruction from our commanders and two cannon blasts from our right flank to soften up the enemy.

After asking fellow Johnny Reb Ted Cates three or four times if my camera was on, we moved forward.

Immediately I fell behind the pace of our march, but I quickly caught up. When we encountered the enemy, Domke ordered us into skirmish positions, five paces apart.

I thought I was in good position, until Domke singled me out twice to move over. The battle erupted with the sounds of gunfire from both sides. After a while, I went down, "wounded," with what my family watching from the sidelines said was the worst acting they had have ever seen.

I propped myself up against a tree to continue filming and later retreated using my rifle as a crutch.

Better acting if I do say so myself.

Then I dropped back behind the ranks and rejoined the unit after a full recovery. Later, I went down again as the Federals rushed past me chasing the retreating Confederates.

We concluded the afternoon's event by reassembling in our units, mounting our bayonets to the end of our rifle musket barrels and charging the audience of several hundred as if to attack.

As a Civil War buff myself, I had seen battle reenactments before, but this was my first time actually in the battle, and I enjoyed it immensely. I, too, wear the "history nerd" label with pride. Prior to the battle, a handful of spectators approached me and asked me questions. Obviously, the uniform had made me some sort of authority in their eyes, but my knowledge of the war made me comfortable enough to answer their questions confidently.

Being a reenactor no doubt requires a love of history, but it also requires the ability to step back and strip down, removing all of the comforts of modern-day life and instead embracing the chill of a fall evening, the smell of wood smoke and roughing it in the great outdoors.

Nonetheless, afterward I was happy to get inside out of the rain, warm up, take a shower and see who

won the big intra-state college football battle.

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