

Arthur MacArthur

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MacArthur's Flag



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The 72-year-old retired Lieutenant General Arthur MacArthur, Jr. glanced briefly around the room. He shouldn't have been here, he had risen from his sick bed just for this occasion. The feeble former general wouldn't have missed it – it was the 50th reunion of what remained of his old military unit – the 24th Wisconsin. Only 90 members were still alive, and they had asked MacArthur to speak to them. On the wall behind the podium from which he would address them hung a flag; old, tattered, and bearing the scars of combat. It was the battle flag of the 24th Wisconsin, a flag that stirred the heart of MacArthur. perhaps, as he waited his moment of address, his mind wandered back half a century.

The date was November 25, 1863. The place was a small ridge overlooking Chattanooga, Tennessee. From the one-thousand-foot heights of a Missionary Ridge Confederate General Braxton Bragg's soldiers trained their artillery on the city below. Major General Ulysses S. Grant and his men had pitched their tents there, and now the soldiers were at the mercy of those relentless cannon. Trapped and faced with starvation and annihilation, the Union troops had lost so many horses that they couldn't even mount an artillery battery in their defense.

It was a frustrating feeling of helplessness and imminent disaster, compounded by the winter drizzle and ominous skies. Major General William Sherman had mounted an attack to the right and was quickly stalled. Under pressure from the enemy, he requested a

feint elsewhere to relieve his embattled troops. It wasn't intended to be a major offensive, such was an improbable military operation. The reserve troops were simply to attack the center of the Confederate lines at the base of Missionary Ridge to draw attention away from Sherman.

The battle for the gun pits was furious, soldiers fighting hand-to-hand and engaging each other with bayonets. As the Confederate soldiers were slowly defeated and the young Union soldiers gained control of the gun pits, they found themselves trapped at the base of the ridge by the cannon mounted above them. Their brief victory had turned into a nightmare of death. Watching from a distance, General Grant's worst fears materialized as the withering fire threatened to destroy his valiant soldiers. "Pull back," he probably thought to himself, "retreat... get out of there before it is too late."

No thought had been given to attacking Missionary Ridge that day, Grant knew it would be suicidal. The move to the gun pits at the base of the ridge had simply been a token attack, designed to divide the enemy forces and provide some relief for Sherman's embattled soldiers. Yet suddenly, without orders, the 18,000 young men trapped in the gun pits rose to their feet and began to assault the enemy entrenched on the 1,000-foot slope. Angry at the suicidal offensive, Grant asked, "Who ordered those men up the ridge?" A subordinate replied that the attack had commenced without order. Chomping his traditional cigar and fearful of the worst Grant replied,

"Well, it will be all right if it turns out all right."

Among the units advancing on the entrenched Confederate soldiers that day was the 24th Wisconsin Infantry. The unit detailed to advance the colors was led by an 18-year old First Lieutenant named Arthur MacArthur. When the soldier assigned to carry the battle flag of the 24th Wisconsin fell to an enemy bayonet, another soldier rushed forward to hoist the flag. The roar of cannon fire filled the ridge and the second color bearer fell, decapitated by a cannonball. Bloody and wounded, Arthur MacArthur retrieved the colors himself. Raising the already battle-scarred flag high, he turned to his troops with the shout "On Wisconsin!" and proceeded up the ridge. As MacArthur reached the summit, he firmly planted the staff of the flag in the ground. Below him, the advancing soldiers saw their flag, battered and scarred, waving in the breeze at the top of the precipice. Their hearts filled with the inspiration they surged forward, doing the improbable, achieving victory at Missionary Ridge.

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