



Rutherford B. Hayes

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Rutherford B. Hayes

By Emily George

“I think I have never enjoyed any period of my life as much as the last three months...

The risks, hardships, separation from family and friends are balanced by the notion that I am doing what every man, who possibly can, ought to do, leaving the agreeable side of things as clear profit.” Writing on 9 October 1861, Rutherford Birchard Hayes described his military experience with enthusiasm. Although originally worried about the consequences of a war between countrymen, Hayes, who enlisted in the Union Army following the attack on Fort Sumter, South Carolina, would come to view his service during the Civil War as one of his proudest moments. From a historical perspective, Hayes is remembered more for his controversial election to the presidency in 1876. However, his participation in the Civil War would remain the defining period of his life. Not only did his military service make him a hero in Ohio, essentially enabling his successful political career following the war, but his experiences would instill in him an enduring appreciation for the sacrifices and lessons of a soldier fighting for a greater cause. After cautiously deciding to join the war effort, he noted, “this was a just and necessary war... that... demanded the whole power of the country; ...I would prefer to go into it if I knew I was to die or be killed in the course of it, than to live through and after it without taking any part in it.”

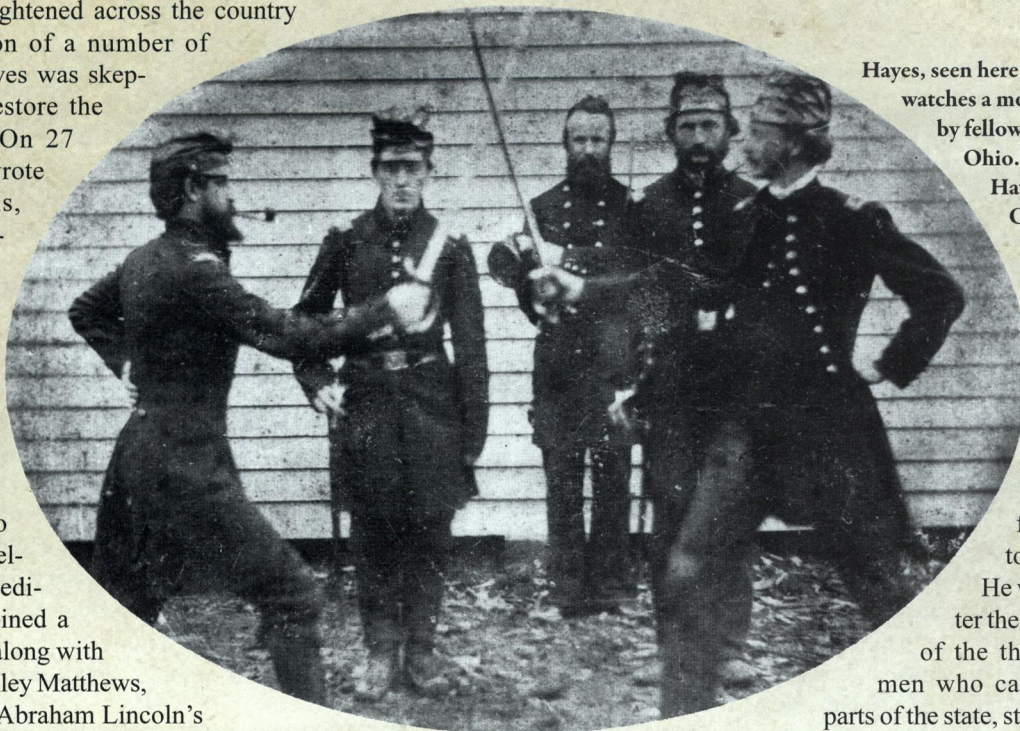
Hayes was born in Delaware, Ohio, on 4 October 1822. His father had died just ten weeks earlier; his mother, Sophia Birchard, never remarried. Her younger brother, Sardis, would serve as a father figure for Hayes throughout his life. After graduating from Kenyon College and Harvard Law School, Hayes opened his own law office in Lower Sandusky (now Fremont), Ohio, where Sardis lived. He eventually moved his law practice to Cincinnati in 1850. There, he married Lucy Webb on 30 December 1852.

Rutherford B. Hayes, who was practicing law in Ohio in 1861, was initially skeptical of the use of force to reunite a divided nation. Following the Confederate attack on Fort Sumter, South Carolina, he enlisted in the 23d Ohio Volunteer Infantry and was appointed the regiment's major. He later commanded the 23d Ohio and eventually rose to the rank of major general. Hayes is shown here in an 1877 portrait by William Garl Browne. (Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center)



As tensions heightened across the country due to the secession of a number of Southern states, Hayes was skeptical of trying to restore the nation by force. On 27 January 1861, he wrote to his Uncle Sardis, "Six States have 'seceded.' Let them go...Freedom and slavery can, perhaps, not exist side by side under the same popular government." Yet, the attack on Fort Sumter would add heat to his initially tepid feelings toward the expediency of war. He joined a volunteer company along with his friend, Judge Stanley Matthews, following President Abraham Lincoln's first call for enlistments. Ohio Governor William Dennison appointed Hayes a major in the 23d Ohio Volunteer Infantry Regiment in June. Matthews was appointed lieutenant colonel of the same regiment. Interestingly, another future president, William McKinley, joined the 23d as a private in 1861.

Serving under Colonel William S. Rosecrans, the 23d Ohio was the first three-year regiment organized in Ohio. Although the officers of the 23d were not elected by the troops, as was tradition, Hayes's appreciation for both professional soldiers and new recruits gained him the respect of regulars and volunteers alike. Reflecting on Hayes during the Civil War, McKinley would later write, "I think it is safe to say that he was the most beloved officer in the regiment



Hayes, seen here in the background, watches a mock duel acted out by fellow officers of the 23d Ohio. (Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center)

from the beginning to the end of the war. He was ever looking after the care and well-being of the thousands of young men who came from different parts of the state, strangers to him, with no military experience, and no experience in taking care of themselves."

After Rosecrans was promoted to brigadier general, Eliakim Parker Scammon assumed the colonelcy of the 23d Ohio. Under Scammon, the regiment departed from Columbus, Ohio, to western Virginia on 25 July 1861 to join Rosecrans's forces. Hayes's first combat experience occurred at the Battle of Carnifex Ferry in western Virginia on 10 September 1861, but Hayes admitted, "our brigade...had little or nothing to do, except to stand as reserve." Owing to his legal education, Hayes served as judge advocate of the Army of Western Virginia from 19 September 1861 until his promotion to lieutenant colonel on 24 October 1861. Following winter quarters,



Hayes and his men spent the final month of 1862 and the first months of 1863 at Camp Reynolds, Virginia. Hayes's wife Lucy would visit with their two oldest sons, Birchard and Webb, for two months, arriving 24 January 1863 and following the troops to Camp White near Charleston before leaving on 21 March. (Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center)

the 23d Ohio joined Brigadier General Jacob D. Cox in the Kanawha Valley.

Although dedicated to his men of the 23d, Hayes had gained significant confidence in his abilities and believed his leadership skills could be better utilized at a higher rank within the Army. He requested to be appointed to the colonelcy of one of the new Ohio regiments, and was offered command of the 79th. However, as he knew he would "never like another regiment so well," Hayes postponed "the evil day of decision as long as possible." As rumors spread about Scammon's potential promotion to brigadier general, Hayes hoped to avoid leaving his beloved 23d. On 15 August 1862, Major General John Pope ordered the 23d to eastern Virginia, allowing for further delay of the issue. Arriving at Upton's Hill on 30 August 1862, Hayes and the 23d just missed the Second Battle of Bull Run but would soon see action in the coming weeks. In reaction to General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia crossing the Potomac River into Maryland, Cox's six Ohio regiments were quickly assigned to Major General Jesse L. Reno's IX Corps.

At the Battle of South Mountain, 14 September 1862, Hayes suffered the first of several battle wounds. Colonel Scammon ordered Hayes and his men up a mountain path to capture two Rebel guns. Around 0900, Hayes saw a strong Rebel force rushing toward him and his troops. After receiving a heavy volley, Hayes ordered the men to charge, driving the enemy out of the woods. After a second order to attack, Hayes "felt a stunning blow and found a musket ball had struck [his] left arm just above the elbow." Feeling "weak, faint, and sick at the stomach," he lay down behind his line of men, as "balls passed near [his] face and hit the ground all around [him]." After being told of a threat from the Rebels to his left, Hayes ordered one company to fall back to defend against a flank attack. However, as more soldiers followed suit, Hayes was left between his line and the enemy. The engagement continued for another fifteen to twenty minutes, until the fighting gradually

This photograph shows the color guard of the 23d Ohio. While recovering from wounds suffered at South Mountain on 14 September 1862, Hayes was given command of the regiment in October 1862. Just over a month later, he assumed command of 1st Brigade, Kanawha Division, IX Corps. (Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center)



subsided. Unsure of exactly what had occurred, Hayes called out to his men. As they rushed out to retrieve him, the Confederates opened fire. Eventually, Hayes was carried to the rear and taken to a field hospital to have his wound dressed.

While Hayes recuperated from his injuries in Fremont, Ohio, Scammon was promoted to brigadier general, allowing Hayes to be appointed colonel of the 23d Ohio on 15 October 1862. He returned to his troops now at Camp Reynolds in western Virginia on 30 November 1862 and assumed command of 1st Brigade, Kanawha Division, IX Corps. He and his men saw little action in the following months. Hayes, however, suffered a deep personal loss when his youngest son, Joseph Thompson, died of dysentery on 24 June 1863 while the family was visiting him at Camp White near Charleston, West Virginia. Though Lucy struggled to deal with the sudden death, Hayes, who had hardly known his eighteen-month old son, quickly turned his attention back to the events of the war. Upon learning of the defeat of Rosecrans at Chickamauga, Hayes wrote in his diary, "I suffer from these blows more than I did from the loss of my sweet little boy."

Aware that the terms of his men's three-year enlistments would be up in 1864, Hayes proactively encouraged them to re-enlist in hopes of keeping his regiment intact for the duration of the war. More than sixty men answered Hayes's pleas. Around this time, some of Hayes's friends had begun calling for his promotion to brigadier general because of his successful leadership and popularity among his men. Though flattered, Hayes merely replied, "I would rather be one of the good colonels than one of the poor generals." Acknowledging the importance of skilled colonels for the Union cause, Hayes willingly placed the success of the Union Army above any personal military ambitions.

After the capture of Brigadier General Scammon in January 1864, Brigadier General George Crook became the new commander of the Kanawha Division. Hayes would develop a strong admiration for Crook throughout their service together. Under Crook's leadership, the Army of West Virginia marched up the Kanawha Valley with aims of destroying a stretch of the Virginia & Tennessee Railroad, effectively cutting off communications between Richmond and southwestern Virginia. Confederate Brigadier General Albert G. Jenkins was in charge of protecting the region. Aware

of the approaching Union forces, Jenkins set up a defensive position at Cloyd's Mountain, Virginia. On the morning of 9 March 1864, Crook's Union forces prepared for battle. Deciding against a frontal assault, Crook led his men through the heavily forested surrounding areas to the Confederate right flank. After sending in his brigade of green West Virginians under Colonel Carr B. White, Crook moved with Hayes's brigade to launch a frontal assault. Hand-to-hand combat followed, with both sides suffering heavy losses, including Jenkins who was mortally wounded. As the Rebels retreated, many Union soldiers began to celebrate their success. Hayes, however, recognized the opportunity to inflict further damage against the Confederate forces. Gathering around 500 men, Hayes pushed forward toward Dublin and the Virginia & Tennessee Railroad. Demonstrating his leadership skills, he spearheaded this second charge, enabling Federal troops to take Dublin and destroy a valuable stretch of railroad. Though Crook and the remaining Union soldiers eventually joined in the assault, Hayes's initiative proved crucial to the overall success of the attack. Regrettably, the loss of men from the 23d Ohio was great, but the final victory made the engagement "[their] finest experience in the war," according to Hayes. He wrote to his wife, "Don't repeat my talk. But it is true; the Twenty-third was the Regiment."

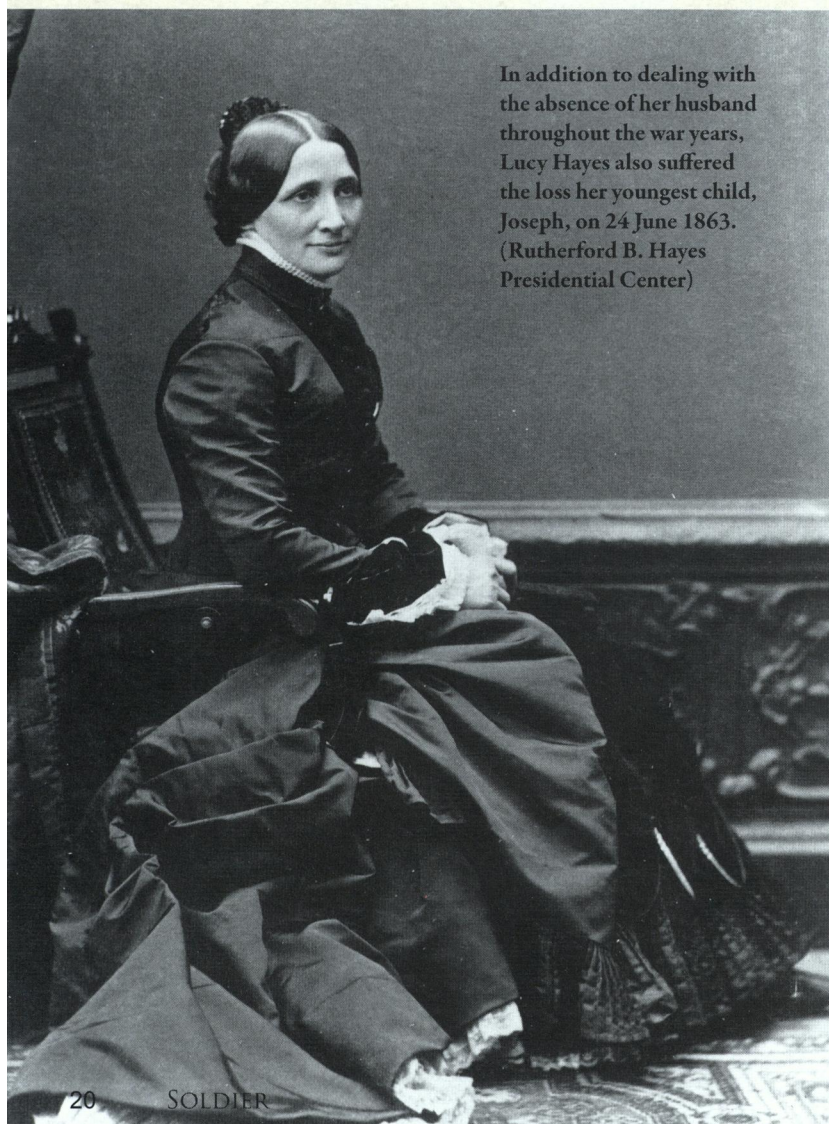
Following this engagement, however, a distinctly frustrating period of the war began for Hayes. Crook and his army, including Hayes and his brigade, were ordered to join Major General David Hunter's campaign in the Shenandoah Valley. Hunter, who had

replaced Major General Franz Sigel, was a controversial figure, and Hayes had little respect for his volatile personality. The failure of the campaign to capture Lynchburg in June 1864 only strengthened Hayes's criticism of Hunter. In reaction to Confederate Lieutenant General Jubal Early's invasion of Maryland, Crook and his army were called east. The resulting Second Battle of Kernstown was devastating for Hayes's brigade. The 23d suffered 136 casualties as did the 36th Ohio, the highest of all regiments engaged. Hayes had his own horse shot from under him. By the end of the summer, much to the happiness of Hayes, Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant had replaced Hunter with Major General Philip Sheridan.

Meanwhile, a number of Hayes's friends in Ohio believed he would be a suitable candidate for Congress in the upcoming 1864 election. Receiving the nomination on 6 August, despite his lack of direct involvement in the matter, Hayes wrote to his Uncle Sardis, "As to the candidacy for Congress, I care nothing at all about it, neither for the nomination nor for the election." Hayes was aghast at the suggestion from his friend, William Smith, to take a furlough to dedicate some time to campaigning. He wrote to Smith, "An officer fit for duty who at this crisis would abandon his post to electioneer for a seat in Congress ought to be scalped. You may feel perfectly sure I shall do no such thing." Hayes's dedication to his men and the success of the Union remained his prime focus. While his friends in Ohio had already declared him a war hero, Hayes was determined to serve with his fellow soldiers until the end. Ultimately winning the election, Hayes did express his happiness to Lucy, but emphasized his full devotion to the war effort. He explained, "My particular gratification is much less than it would be, if I were not so much gratified by my good luck in winning 'golden opinions' in the more stirring scenes around me here...the consciousness that I am doing my part in these brilliant actions is far more gratifying than anything the election brings me."

On 3 September 1864 at the Battle of Berryville, Hayes and his men experienced "one of the fiercest fights" against Confederate forces. Despite the severity of the fight, Hayes wrote home about the "pleasant battle." He explained, "I suppose I was never in so much danger before, but I enjoyed the excitement more than ever before." After an encounter with the Rebels at Opequon Creek (Third Battle of Winchester), 19 September 1864, Hayes was appointed commander of the Kanawha Division in place of Brigadier General Isaac Duval, who had been seriously wounded.

Although he was unaware at the time, Hayes's combat experience would come to an end with the Battle of Cedar Creek on 19 October 1864. While Union troops slept soundly at Cedar Creek, in parts of Frederick, Shenandoah, and Warren counties of Virginia, Early deployed his Confederate soldiers on a night march. Crook's VIII Corps, which included Hayes and his division, was the first unit Early's men encountered. Caught completely off guard, Hayes attempted to organize a line of defense. However, most of his troops were overwhelmed by the sudden attack and the line quickly fell apart. As Hayes tried to regain control of the retreating men, his horse was shot from underneath him. The animal immediately fell causing Hayes, upon hitting the ground, to be knocked unconscious. Regaining his senses, he realized his ankle had been injured in the fall. Shaking off shock and ignoring his minor injuries, he resumed command. A number of his retreating men reported they had seen Hayes struck dead. Such a statement almost



In addition to dealing with the absence of her husband throughout the war years, Lucy Hayes also suffered the loss her youngest child, Joseph, on 24 June 1863. (Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center)



LEFT: Hayes commanded a division of VIII Corps during the Union victory at Cedar Creek in Virginia, 19 October 1864. As he tried to rally Union troops after the initial Rebel attack, Hayes had his horse shot out from under him and was struck in the head by a spent ball. (Library of Congress)

RIGHT: Despite his rise in politics following the Civil War, culminating in his election as U.S. President in 1876, Hayes viewed his military service as the defining experience of his life. He frequently attended reunions of Civil War veterans, like the one pictured here at his home at Spiegel Grove in Fremont, Ohio, in the fall of 1877. (Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center)



came to fruition, as Hayes had yet another “narrow escape” after he was “hit fairly in the head with a spent ball.” Suffering from “only a slight shock,” he eventually caught up with his staff, was given a new horse and began to reorganize his troops. With the return of Sheridan, who had been away on other business in the morning, the Union troops counterattacked, gained momentum, and ultimately drove back Early’s Confederates.

The Union victory at Cedar Creek was an appropriate ending for Hayes’s military service. All who were present recognized his bravery in the face of serious danger. Both Sheridan and Crook recommended him for a brigadier generalship. On 9 December 1864, Crook informed Hayes of his official promotion for his meritorious actions and daring in the battles of Opequon, Fisher’s Hill, and Cedar Creek. He later was brevetted a major general on 13 March 1865 for his gallantry and distinguished service during the Shenandoah campaign of 1864 and at the battles of Fisher’s Hill and Cedar Creek.

In early April 1865, Hayes assumed command of a brigade that was part of a Union force attempting to capture Lynchburg, Virginia. With the surrender of Lee at Appomattox on 9 April, however, such a campaign was unnecessary. With the war over, Hayes resigned from the Union Army on 8 June 1865.

After four years of military service, Hayes embarked on a long and successful political career, first as a congressmen, then Governor of Ohio, and eventually President of the United States. His wartime experience would continue to have a significant influ-

ence over his life. Obviously his political responsibilities required constant discussion of the outcome of the war and its effect on the nation as a whole. His contested election to the presidency in 1876 essentially encompassed the many divisive issues still engulfing the nation. Despite the many problems he faced in attempting to fully restore the Union, Hayes’s admiration for his time in the Army would remain steadfast. Committed to instilling the memory of the Civil War within the United States’ citizenry, Hayes consistently attended veteran gatherings for the rest of his life. In an address at a 23d Ohio reunion on 14 September 1877, Hayes remarked, “No period of my life is as dear as the four years we spent together in the war for the Union.” Just months before his death in 1892, Hayes gathered with his beloved 23d to march with the Grand Army of the Republic in Washington. Though he could have marched as former commander-in-chief, he preferred his place as one of the “good colonels” alongside his fellow Union veterans. ☞

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Emily George is an intern for the Army Historical Foundation. She graduated from Williams College in 2009 with a B.A. in History and Political Science. She was the archival intern at the Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center in Fremont, Ohio, in the winter and spring of 2011. For more information on Rutherford B. Hayes, please visit www.rbhayes.org.