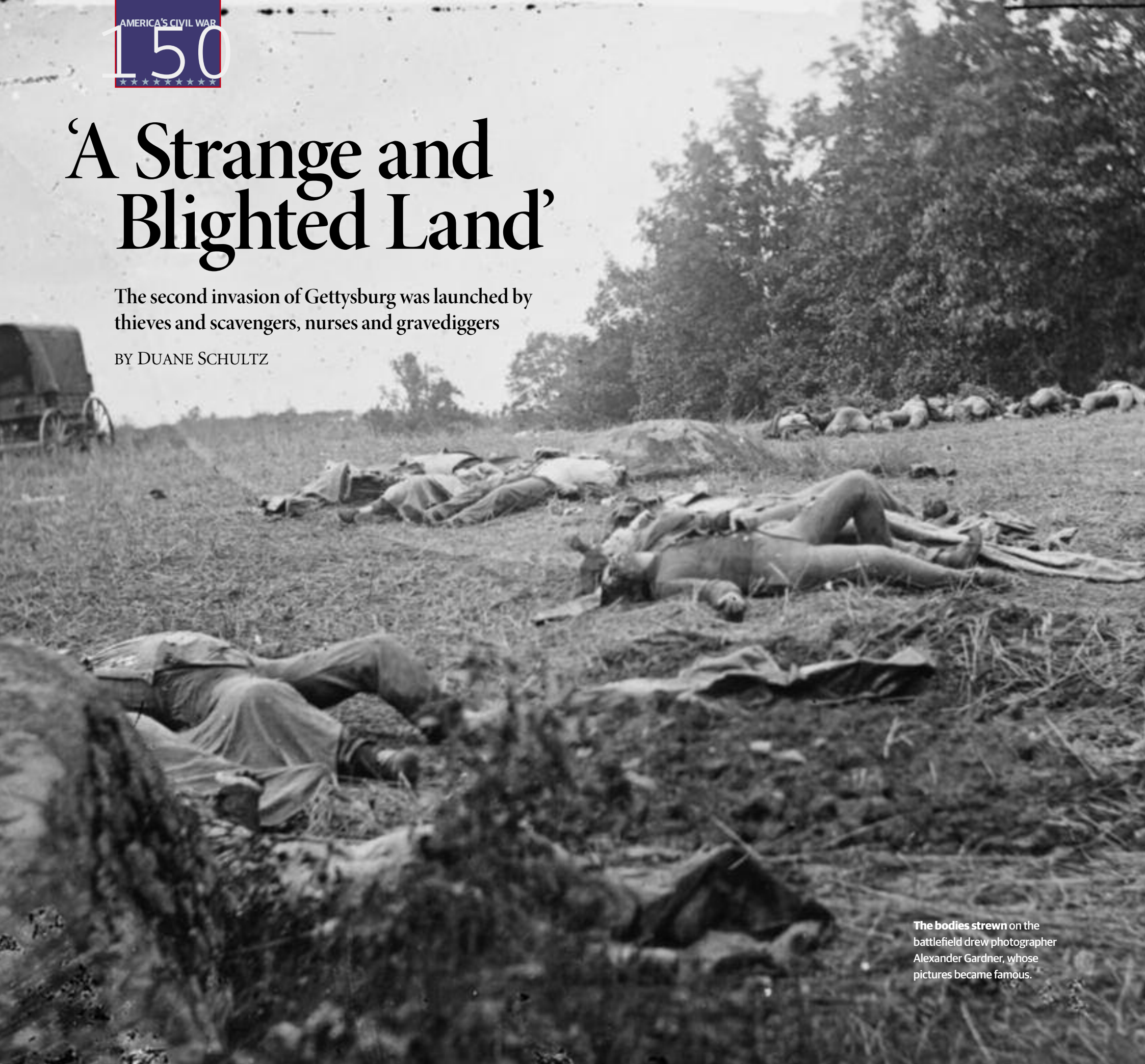


'A Strange and Blighted Land'

The second invasion of Gettysburg was launched by thieves and scavengers, nurses and gravediggers

BY DUANE SCHULTZ



The bodies strewn on the battlefield drew photographer Alexander Gardner, whose pictures became famous.

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They came by the thousands to the scene of death and suffering. Some came to help the wounded and comfort the dying. Others searched among the living and the dead for sons and husbands. Some came to profit from the tragedy—to embalm fallen men, fabricate coffins, and ship the bodies home, or to take photographs, as Mathew Brady and Alexander Gardner did—often for substantial fees. ★ Many were tourists, gawkers in their best Sunday clothes, come to see where history had been made. They wandered past dying men, seeming not to even notice them. They offered no aid or comfort. Colonel Robert Powell, an injured Confederate, watched them from an open tent. “A torn and bloody garment would attract a crowd,” he wrote, “which would disperse only to concentrate again to look at a hat perforated by bullets.” ★ On July 4, 1863, the day after the ferocious three-day battle at Gettysburg ended, Robert E. Lee led his troops in retreat, having sustained an unprecedented 28,000 casualties. It was then, when all was quiet on that Pennsylvania battlefield, that the second invasion of Gettysburg began. People came to plunder, to hunt for souvenirs, swarming over the battlefield looking for items of value to sell. They cut leather harnesses off dead artillery horses, gathered up blankets, sabers, muskets, and cartridge boxes. They rifled the pockets of dead men, even dug up corpses searching for trinkets. As many as 5,000 of these human vultures were counted in a single day. Whole families came with babies and children, showing no shame or sympathy or embarrassment, vis-

itors on an outing to some exotic land.

Gettysburg seemed alien even to those who lived there. Tillie Pierce, age 15, had been sent out of town to stay with friends. When she made her way home four days after the fighting ended, she wrote, “The whole landscape had been changed, and I felt as though we were in a strange and blighted land.”

When other residents returned or came out of hiding, they saw things they never forgot. More than 30 years later, Fannie Buehler, wife of the town postmaster, still carried the vivid images of July 4 with her, writing: “The wounded, the dead and dying, all heaped together; horses that had fallen beneath their riders with limbs shattered and torn—dead, wounded and bleeding...all lying in the streets, so far as we could see.

“Such was the awful scene spread out before us as we ventured to the front of our houses in the morning of the Fourth of July, 1863.”

The people of Gettysburg did not remain outdoors for long that Independence Day. Although the Confederate army was heading south, Lee had left sharpshooters along Seminary Ridge southwest of town. They opened fire at every moving target, including women and children. At least three civilians were hit by Rebel gunfire during the town’s first day of peace.

Within minutes of the first fusillade, Union riflemen took up positions in upper-story windows of many houses, forcing the families to leave—only an hour or so after the town had been liberated. Others became captive in their homes. “We were between two fires,” wrote 30-year-old Sallie Broadhead, “and were kept close prisoners all day, not daring either to go out or even to look out of the windows on account of the bullets fired at every moving object.”

While most of the citizens found shelter from the hostile fire, there was no way to escape the stench as the bodies of thousands of men and horses decomposed in the heat. The sickening stink of rotting flesh would linger for more than two months, until autumn brought cooler weather. Flies, rats, and other vermin arrived, stirring fears of pestilence and plague.

Within a few days, there was another overwhelming smell—chloride of lime—a powerful disinfectant spread liberally over sidewalks and streets to check the spread of disease. People doused themselves with cologne; some carried small bottles of peppermint oil and pennyroyal to camouflage the putrid odors. Women

Union cavalry saber found in the field after the battle



Caught rifling the pockets of dead soldiers, this man was declared a “vulture” and an “inhuman creature.”

kept smelling salts handy in case they felt faint, but nothing really made a difference.

More than 7,000 corpses needed to be buried quickly before they bred disease that could claim new victims. Captain Francis Donaldson of the 118th Pennsylvania remembered that “as far as the eye could see, the dead lay in all manner of shapes, some upon their faces, others upon their backs... There were others who had clutched the leaves and grass in their death struggle, whilst their mouths were filled with the soil as they had literally bitten the dust.”

At first the soldiers tried to carry out their grim tasks respectfully, digging a deep rectangular hole for each man and placing him gently into the ground. But amid the heat and the stench, with the fallen all around them, decorum and dignity gave way to expediency and an ever-growing urgency to get the job done quickly.

The men started on July 4 in boiling heat and high humidity; rain showers in

the mornings and afternoons turned the red-stained earth to sticky mud mixed with blood. The graves became shallower and two, even three, bodies were tossed in. As time passed, the diggers simply carved out long trenches into which they dumped as many as 150 bodies, covering them with only a few inches of dirt.

The gravediggers grew indifferent to death. They groped the pockets of the dead and stole rings, money, and anything else worth having. When an officer reprimanded a soldier for breaking a corpse’s arm so the body would fit in a burial trench, the soldier shouted that since the man was dead, breaking his arm would not bother him.

The Union army left town on July 6 to pursue Lee’s men, who were making their way back to Virginia. The Federals had buried most of the bodies and set huge fires to burn the 5,000 horse carcasses. But the Gettysburg they left had become one vast hospital, with churches, homes, stores, and public buildings overflowing with some 22,000 wounded and dying soldiers from both sides. (Approximately 33,000 soldiers in total were wounded at Gettysburg.)

Fannie Buehler, whose husband had fled

just before the Rebels came, was left alone with her children, as were most of the women of the town. Her home was full of wounded men. “The sights and sounds...for a week after the battle are too horrible to describe,” she wrote. The men screamed in agony as bullets and shrapnel were removed and limbs amputated without anesthesia.

Sallie Broadhead went to the theological seminary to assist and was overwhelmed by the sight of hundreds of wounded. “It is dreadful to behold, and to add to the misery, no food has been served for several days. The little we have will not go far with so many.”

The situation appeared hopeless. Union major general George Meade had taken most of the supplies, rations, and surgeons when he led the army south to chase Lee. There were not enough bandages, gauze, splints, medicine, or doctors. There were few tents or blankets to cover the wounded, who lay outside in the rain. Nor were there even enough lanterns to provide light after sunset. In one building, there were only two boxes of



A cord-and-metal grenade recovered at Gettysburg

soda crackers to distribute among 3,000 men who had eaten nothing for three days. Thousands more would surely die unless help arrived soon.

Appeals went out via newspaper headlines, in pleas from church pulpits, and by word of mouth—for doctors, nurses, food, medicines, and other supplies—and within hours of hearing about the battle, people mobilized, heading for Gettysburg from all over the Northeast. They came by train, carriage, wagon, and horseback, and on foot. It was the largest relief operation in U.S. history to date, and it was spontaneous, selfless, and heroic. Where the government was impotent and helpless, the American people, one by one, responded with an outpouring of generosity and sacrifice on a scale never believed possible.

By July 7, relief workers and supplies had begun to pour in, the start of an avalanche of aid. Among the first to arrive was a group of nuns from a convent 11 miles away, prepared to min-

Searching for their kin, they dug up the wrong bodies



Men survey Union dead. With more than 7,000 killed, the odor of rotting flesh lingered over the town for months.

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Volunteers from the U.S. Sanitary Commission (here with Union soldiers) arrived in Gettysburg on July 4, the day after Pickett's Charge. The federally chartered relief organization raised \$1.7 million (in today's dollars) in just two weeks and brought in 40 tons of food and supplies daily.

ister to the wounded. When one of them wiped encrusted blood from the face of a badly injured soldier, she discovered that he was her brother.

The largest official relief organization was the poorly named U.S. Sanitary Commission. Although chartered by Congress, it was financed and run by volunteers. Since the beginning of the war, the group had raised substantial sums of money for the care and rehabilitation of wounded troops. In just two weeks, the commission raised a phenomenal \$75,000 (\$1.7 million, in today's dollars) and shipped in 40 tons of food and supplies every day. Another large charitable organization, the U.S. Christian Commission, an outgrowth of the YMCA, sent soap, socks, towels, and canned food along with paper and stamps so the wounded men could write home.

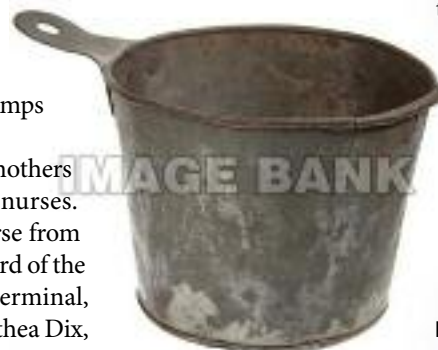
Hundreds of women came on their own, the mothers and wives of wounded men as well as trained nurses. Cornelia Hancock, an attractive 23-year-old nurse from New Jersey, left for Gettysburg on the day she heard of the need for assistance. At the Baltimore railroad terminal, Hancock met the legendary and autocratic Dorothea Dix,

superintendent of U.S. Army nurses, who was stationed there to assess the fitness of nurses who wanted to help the wounded. Dix rejected Hancock as too young and pretty, but the young woman boarded the train anyway and refused to budge from her seat, leaving Dix to rant in vain.

Euphemia Goldsborough, a 27-year-old Southern sympathizer from Baltimore, stayed in Gettysburg for nine weeks to help care for the Confederate wounded. Among her patients was a young man from Texas with whom she fell in love. "My poor lost darling," she wrote after he died on September 13. "Would

to God I could have died to save you, but all is over." She went home after that, so exhausted and worn that her sister and mother did not recognize her. Her sister said that Euphemia "was never the same joyous girl again."

As late as two months after the battle, by early September, men were still dying at the rate of nearly 20 per



Federal soldier's tin water dipper

PHOTO CREDIT

day. In July, the rate had been much higher. "A perpetual procession of coffins is constantly passing to and fro, and so it has been ever since we have been here," one nurse recalled.

"Oh mercy, the suffering," Cornelia Hancock wrote. "All the worst are dying rapidly."

Nurse Sophronia Bucklin wrote: "Everywhere were evidences of mortal combat, everywhere wounded men were lying in the streets on heaps of bloodstained straw."

Georgeanna Woolsey, a nurse from New York, remembered how Union and Confederate soldiers, former enemies, came together in their distress. "It was strange to see the good brotherly feeling come over the soldiers, our own and the rebel, when side by side they lay in our tents." Her own attitude changed as well; she despised the Rebels at first but when ministering to them "couldn't help being so good to them."

Morticians set up shop—usually a couple of planks resting on two barrels—near where the wounded were being treated and did a thriving business with relatives of the dead who flocked to Gettysburg. Because burial records were spotty, parents or wives of the deceased occasionally dug up their loved ones only to find it was the wrong person. In these instances, the corpse might be left in the open or carelessly replaced with little or no cover.

Some undertakers advertised coffins made of metal, guaranteed to be airtight so that they could rest in the front parlor back home free of noxious odors. Others offered coffins with ice to prevent the bodies from further decomposing during shipping. But most of the coffins were crude affairs fashioned by anyone with a hammer, wood, and nails. Piles of coffins awaiting burial or shipment soon blocked the streets. "Many are dying," wrote Chaplain William Way of the 24th Michigan, "and it is almost impossible to get a coffin for their remains, so great is the demand."

The Army of the Potomac sent Captain William W. Smith to Gettysburg on July 7 with orders to collect the property left by both armies. He arrived only three days after the fighting, but he was already too late. The scavengers and thieves had been hard at work.

On his first night, Smith and his detachment of 100 cavalrymen stopped 76 large wagons on their way out of town and found 30 of them full of stolen property such as rifles, ammunition, saddles, and shovels. Smith estimated he caught no more than one out of every 10 scavengers, but he dealt harshly with the offenders, putting them to work in burial details under armed guard.

In mid-July, Captain Smith led his men in a sweeping search of the houses and barns in the countryside for 15 miles around Gettysburg. They uncovered stolen property at every farm. He

'The sights and sounds are too horrible to describe'

ordered each farmer to load the goods onto wagons and to follow the cavalrymen to the next farm. By the time Smith headed back to town, there was a long wagon train behind him.

Some farmers tried to make money from the tragedy by charging for meals and accommodations they provided the wounded (there is no record of the women in town doing so). A few even levied a fee for the straw the wounded died on. Others wanted money to cart the injured into town for care. One farmer brought in a dozen men and demanded payment of \$20 from the army quartermaster. The officer was so angry that he requisitioned the farmer's horses and made him walk home.

A battle's aftermath—what the war leaves behind—is like the battle itself; it brings out the best and the worst in people. But it also leads, however gradually, to a lessening of the horrors. The severely wounded die; the rest begin to respond to treatment and are moved to hospitals and rehabilitation centers away from the battle site.

At Gettysburg, the wounded were sent on to hospitals elsewhere as quickly as possible. By July 14, nearly 12,000 had been relocated. By the following week, another 4,000 had left. Camp Letterman, a central medical facility of 400 large tents, was established a mile east of town. When the remaining wounded were brought there from Gettysburg's houses and public buildings, they formed a line of stretchers a mile and a half long.

The nurses were often sorry to see them go. Cornelia Hancock wrote, "It is just like parting with a part of one's family. I go to see the boys and some of them cry that I cannot stay." Sophronia Bucklin noted a personal sadness: "All were gone. My occupation was gone. The strain of months was suddenly let go, and I found out how much the strength of my hands depended on keeping them steadily employed."

The huge tent hospital closed forever on November 20, the day after President Abraham Lincoln came to give a brief speech, later famous as the Gettysburg Address, to dedicate the new cemetery. After that, the wounded, the crowds, the reporters, the sightseers, and the soldiers went away, nearly overnight, leaving behind a pile of wooden coffins on the platform of the railway station, and more than 7,000 graves scattered in and around the town.

The second invasion of Gettysburg was over.

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Union identity tag