

Presentation at Memorial Day Service by Chelsey A. D'Albini, Garnett Cemetery, Monday, May 28, 2018

Half a league, half a league  
Half a league onward,  
All in the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.<sup>1</sup>

As a kid, I always loved poetry, and not the Dr. Seuss kind of poetry. When preparing for today I picked up a favorite of mine, Lord Alfred Tennyson's *Charge of the Light Brigade*. Tennyson's poem for me has always been about loss. Standing here in the cemetery today, we are surrounded by so many different memories of loss. Some here today understand far too well the sting of a loss that is long expected, is slow and painful to watch unfurl before them. Some know the kind of loss whose sharp barbs happen abruptly, without provocation and produce an aching response. Some here also know the pain of loss that is hoped and prayed against and is foreign and unknown. Loss is something that has touched each and every one of us standing here in one way or another.

Here in this quiet meadow is a family that knows all those kinds of loss in a very real and tangible way. Their name is lost to time, but their descendants are still a part of our community. In the late 1880's a small family from Iowa moved to the Garnett area. It was a move necessary for the health and well-being of their mother. The couple had lost several children to illness and accident in Iowa. They were yearning for a new place and looking for a fresh start. They settled on a farm in rural Garnett and raised a family full of children. Three boys were at the tail end of that birth order and came of age together here in Anderson County. This is where they grew up. This is where they went to school. This is where they fished in creeks, climbed trees and did what brothers do. As any mother of three boys within six years of each other can attest to, I would imagine their house was a busy one.

When the Spanish American War broke out, the two older boys enlisted with Company K, the Kansas Volunteers, and brought their "tag along" little brother with them. The boys boarded the train here in Garnett and took it to Topeka and reported to Camp Leedy for training. When they finally received their orders that they were to be sent to California for preparatory training for the Philippines, the boys knew they were headed for adventure. Much to any mother's chagrin the older two had been given promotions over their younger brother, I can only imagine that the relationship between them was one of any younger sibling under the command of their older siblings. I can tell you in the case of my family, that would certainly spell trouble. The three boys deployed to the Philippines that autumn.

"Forward, the Light Brigade!"  
Was there a man dismayed?  
Not though the soldier knew  
Someone had blundered.  
Theirs not to make reply  
Theirs not to reason why,  
Theirs but to do and die  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.<sup>2</sup>

Most of the historical accounts are hard to read during this time. Those recording it didn't pay a lot of attention to small detail, probably because they believed we would remember without being told. Gleaning what I can from the records, I can tell you that the battle of the Tullihan River was bloody. The embankments along that river were heavily fortified, and the enemy had been entrenched for a while. The youngest and lowest ranking brother was placed in a forward operating position while the other two maintained a command position. From that position, the two older brothers watched their entire world change in a single shot. In front of their eyes, their younger brother was shot and killed. In a couple different accounts, it's documented that the brothers rushed the field in an attempt to save their brother. They retrieved his body and the middle brother took a wound to the leg. He would live through what one account called

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<sup>1</sup> Alfred, Lord Tennyson. *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. First Stanza. 9 Dec 1854

<sup>2</sup> Alfred, Lord Tennyson. *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. Second Stanza. 9 Dec 1854

a *mortal* wound, but he would always bear the loss of his brother. Captain Dan Craig and Lieutenant Mark Craig accompanied their brother's remains home to Anderson County. Pvt Curran C Craig is buried in the family plot not far from where we stand, right where those Boy Scouts are helping us remember him.

Following his death however, those same two brothers who carried their body from the field of battle were given a choice. When returning him home, they had a choice to retire from service or to re-enlist in the regular army. Both of them chose a life of defending their brothers in arms. Lt. Mark Craig would go on to serve under Gen. John J. "Black Jack" Pershing and Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch in World War I where he was able to advise them from his experience in trench warfare from the Philippines. Mark would lose his life trying to punch a hole in the German lines in the summer of 1918 at the Second Battle of Soissons after volunteering to replace the wounded field officers. Dan feverishly tried to reach his brother in France but didn't make it in time, telling the Garnett Review after learning of his death. Mark's body rested in France for a couple years after the closing the Great War and in 1920 his widow had his remains repatriated to California. General Pershing would attend and speak at his funeral. Cap. Dan Craig would eventually retire from service at the end of the Great War and live to old age.

Lord Alfred Tennyson's poem, *The Charge of the Light Brigade*, is a literary reminder of loss and what the missive is for most soldiers. Written in December of 1854, Tennyson depicts a group of 600 brothers in arms who go into battle not questioning their leadership, but following orders into the valley of Death. I surmise that Curran, if he had lived to tell the tale of the Battle, would have said he was just following orders. Like so many veterans around us here, he was just being a soldier. He was defending his position. He was defending his brothers. I would also imagine that being the youngest of the three brothers, he was most likely to grumble and groan but do his duty anyways, because being disobedient wasn't an option with two brothers in positions over him. But Tennyson's poem doesn't only apply to the soldiers it addresses, it also gives a missive to those who come after the Light Brigade.

When can their glory fade?  
O the wild charge they made!  
All the world wondered,  
Honor the charge they made!  
Honor the Light Brigade,  
Noble six hundred!<sup>3</sup>

Tennyson charges each one of his readers at the end of the poem to be the world that wonders. He asks us to honor the principles of unflinching courage and devotion that our soldiers embody. Tennyson reminds us that each member of the brigade is one of 600. Noble 600. 600 brothers and 600 families are affected by this single charge. He asks us to be aware that these soldiers of the Light Brigade are just soldiers. They do as they are asked, without question, for it's not theirs to reason why, but only to do and die. He asks us to remember that they've made an oath to all of their countrymen that may cost them their life, and they do it willingly.

He reminds us that Mark, Dan and Curran knew that there was a possibility they could be hurt or killed and they still willingly took the field in Tullihan. They knew they stood in harm's way and Mark still volunteered for the field position that killed him. The other part of Tennyson's missive isn't about joining the Light Brigade; it's about taking the time to regard them with pride. It's about remembering. Honoring the Noble 600. So standing here today in this cemetery, we are fulfilling Tennyson's missive to the rest of the world.

When can their glory fade?

Never, so long as we are able and willing to stand here in the sun, clouds, rain and wind to remember, we can fulfill a promise to our veterans that we will honor the charge you've made. We will choose to honor the charges made on all fields of battle. We will choose to stand beside you as you remember the Noble men and women who've passed before us. We will choose to be the world that wonders and we will choose honor you.

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<sup>3</sup> Alfred, Lord Tennyson. *The Charge of the Light Brigade*. Sixth Stanza. 9 Dec 1854