Buford boys – Civil War was cousin vs. cousin

Have you ever seen the movie Gettysburg? What a great film, even if you're not a certified Civil War nut. One of my favorite actors, Sam Elliot, does an exceptional job portraying Major General John Buford. I can see him thumping his chest and giving his speech about taking the high ground. Hollywood at its best! Even more impressive was the real General Buford who did as much as anyone to assure the Union victory at that Pennsylvania crossroads town.

John Buford, West Point class of 1848, was just one of a family of military men who left their mark on America. His grandpa Simeon was a cavalry trooper during the Revolution and served under Henry "Lighthorse" Lee, the father of Robert E. Lee, and his great uncle Abraham Buford held the rank of Colonel in a Virginia regiment. Two other relatives of John's were generals in the Civil War and both walked the streets of Corinth.

Nineteen years older than John was his half-brother, Brigadier General Napoleon Bonaparte Buford. (Talk about a name to live up to if you're a soldier). Napoleon attended West Point as well, and graduated in 1827. He served in the artillery, taught at the Academy for a few semesters and then resigned to attend Harvard. He remained a civilian until the outbreak of the war when he was given command of an Illinois regiment. He fought in a few minor battles in Missouri but his big chance for fame and glory came on October, 3, 1862 in Corinth.

Napoleon was commanding a brigade in the division of General Charles Hamilton and late in the day orders came for Hamilton to make an attack against the left of the Confederate line. The Confederates were not aware of the Union troops to the east and were vulnerable to a flank attack, and Hamilton was in the perfect place to ruin their afternoon. Near dusk the Federals set out from the high ground of what is now the Henry Cemetery and headed west for the enemy across the tracks of the Mobile & Ohio railroad. Things quickly went wrong.

Confederate skirmishers fired on Buford's brigade and rather than continue the attack to the west he veered north to chase away the culprits. The attack was postponed until Hamilton could get the wayward Buford back into position and by the time he had, the Confederates were aware of the threat and the hopes of a surprise attack were ended.

To be honest, Napoleon wasn't much of a battlefield commander, but he did have a touch of the poet in him. On the morning of October 4th he described the Confederate artillery bombardment directed at the forts around Corinth. "At dawn the cannonading announced the beginning of another sharp contest. It was grand. The different calibers, metals, shapes, and distances of the guns caused the sounds to resemble the chimes of old Rome when all her bells rang out." Napoleon saw more fighting in the Vicksburg campaign and again in Arkansas but he was kept far from the real action for the remainder of the war.

John and Napoleon had a cousin who, like them, was raised in Kentucky and sent to the U.S. Military Academy. Abraham Buford graduated 51st (out of 52) in the West Point Class of 1841. He fought in the Mexican War and on the western plains but resigned in 1854 to take up the family business of horse

breeding. When the war broke out he and Kentucky both tried to remain neutral but neither succeeded. Kentucky went with the Union but Abraham cast his lot with the Confederacy.

For the first year he was an infantry officer and a pretty good one at that, but in 1864 he was promoted to Brigadier General and transferred to the cavalry where he excelled. Though Abraham had been raised around horses and had served in the pre-war dragoons, he did not share the dashing image of the cavalryman like his cousin John. Abraham was a bull of a man, topping the scales at better than 300 pounds, with a ruddy red beard and he often stuffed his pant legs into his big clumsy boots. For all his great size he was known to be quite the dancer.

Abraham Buford came to Corinth in May of 1864, a few months after the Union occupation ended. He was in command of a division in the cavalry corps of Major General Nathan B. Forrest and his men called Corinth home for about three weeks. Early in June he and his men were called south and played a major role in the Confederate victory at Brice's Crossroads. A few weeks later they bore the brunt of the massive casualties in the disastrous defeat at Tupelo.

John did not make it through the war. Just months after the Gettysburg victory he was struck down by yellow fever and died in Washington, D.C. Napoleon survived the war unscathed and took on a series of government positions and died of natural causes at the age of seventy-six. Abraham was wounded in the fighting around Nashville but recovered to fight again and was still in the saddle at the close of the war. He returned to Kentucky to raise horses but a series of family tragedies led to his suicide in 1884.

The story of the Buford Boys is a true American Civil War story; family against family, cousin against cousin. It is not a unique story, however. There were hundreds if not thousands of brothers who fought on opposing sides, or fathers who faced their own sons on the field of battle. Nor were they the only family who had so many members wearing a general's stars; there were the Lee's, Crittenden's , Jackson's and McCook's to name a few. In fact there were 52 families that had at least two family members who served as generals in the war. Hmmm, sounds like a good topic for another article.