

The Death of Robert Gay, Part 2

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The last moments of Private Robert Gay, as taken from the official military court martial document known as “General Orders No. 23,” were documented as follows.

His dying speech was uttered without any tremulousness of tone... His voice was clear and distinct, his words unusually well chosen, and his sentences well constructed... So perfect was his self-mastery, or indifference, that it was not till he sat down on his coffin that we could realize that he was about to die...he steadied himself on his terrible seat, as if he was fixing an attitude for a photograph. He heard the clicking of the cocks of the guns of the firing party preparatory to their fearful duty, but even then, though not a second lay between him and eternity, his audible prayer was uttered without a groan or tremor, in voice or limb.

To discourage crowds and perhaps maintain some decorum of private dignity for the condemned man, the military commanders, General Henry B. Carrington and Colonel James Biddle of the condemned man’s own 71st Indiana Volunteers, announced that the execution would take place at 5:00 p.m. But still enough learned the truth to make a crowd of two or three hundred civilians. The place of execution was the open field lying between Burnside Barracks and Camp Morton. Here the 71st was drawn up in a hollow square, with the open side to the east. In a few minutes after this arrangement was completed, the 63rd came up, with drums beating, and marching right past the carriage containing the prisoner, who leaned his head partially out of the window to watch them as they formed on the south side of the square.

The coffin of plain black walnut, with a flat lid, was brought out and laid in the open end of the square...An officer stepped off slowly a space of some twenty-five or thirty feet from the coffin to fix the line to be occupied by the firing party...and the firing party of twenty men two from each company, marched in and formed in two ranks on this line...The soldiers, impassive as statues, changed no feature or muscle, but all seemed to draw a long breath as four men walked in at the open space, and stood in front of the coffin. One carried a small cord and a band of black cloth in his hands; this was the Sergeant Major of the regiment, whose duty it was to bind and blindfold the prisoner.

Next to him was the prisoner, so unmoved and calm, that everybody had to ask "Which is the prisoner?" Thus stood the man who was to die, and the men who were to kill him!...army regulations provide that the firing party shall not know whose gun holds the fatal bullet. The twenty guns are loaded, ten with ball, and ten with heavy blank cartridges. The soldiers...do not see the loading done, and draw their guns from a confused heap, so that no one can tell whether his gun contains a ball or not. Thus each man is furnished a reasonable probability that he has no part in the bloodshed.

Adj. Brown, of the 71st Regiment, stepped forward, and read clearly and distinctly the order of execution. The reading occupied two or three minutes. Then Col. Biddle stepped from the right of the firing party, and said, 'Gay, if you have anything to say, you can say it now.' The prisoner, without changing his attitude, with his soldier cap hanging in his right hand...with his plain uniform coat buttoned over his breast, and his well-worn blue pantaloons tucked into his red-topped boots, without a quiver in his voice, or the wrenching of a muscle in his face, began:

"Fellow Soldiers: I am about to die for the crime of desertion. I have done wrong. I know I have done wrong, but I did it unthoughtedly (sic). I can call God to witness, before whom I must appear in a few minutes, that I did not mean to commit a crime. If a man ever tells the truth, it is when he is about to die, and I tell the truth when I say that I meant no wrong. When I took the oath of allegiance, I intended only to get home, so that I might stay, for I did not feel able for service. My health was bad. It has always been poor. I am in better health to-day than I have ever been in my life I meant to stay at home, and not to join the enemy. I never intended to desert my country. But what I did was wrong, and I confess it. I never realized the fate that awaited me till my sentence was read to me. Then I felt that I had to die. I cannot tell you how I have striven with the spirit in the time since that sentence was read to me. I feel that I am about to die a sinner. Take warning by me, and prepare for death while there is yet time. Labor to obtain that religion which is more precious than anything on this earth. Try to reconcile yourselves to God. and live as your duty requires. I suppose my death is needed as an example. If it will serve my country and warn you, I will die cheerfully. I forgive all my enemies, and everybody on earth. I have no malice against any living being. I forgive those who are to fire at me. There are those who thirst for my blood, but I forgive them, too. To you who will fire at me, I would say, take your aim well. Fire at the breast (laying his hand with cap in it on his heart), that is the place. Hold on the spot firmly. I want to die quickly. Don't let me suffer. Hold steady on the spot, and shoot at

my breast. Again I forgive everybody, and ask those whom I have injured to forgive me.” Throughout this speech...the prisoner’s voice was steady, uniform, and devoid of every symptom of perturbation.

The Sergeant Major then stepped up and began tying his hands, which he placed behind his back voluntarily. He stood silent for a moment, and said: “If I could only be spared, I would enter the regiment again, and do my duty as well as any man in it, or (hesitating), as well as I am able.” He glanced round the ranks, and up at the sun, as if to take a last look at earth. The Sergeant Major led him to the coffin, and seated him upon it, facing the firing party, with his back to the east. He sat a second, drew his feet toward him, and settled himself back on the coffin, as if to brace himself against the shock that was to come so soon and so terribly. The Sergeant Major tied the band of black cloth round his eyes...the prisoner, left alone for the first time, exclaimed, “O, that I could see my death,” in a tone of deep sadness...the firing party brought all the guns to a “ready.” The clicking of the cocks was heard distinctly all around. The prisoner heard it, too, but he only showed his consciousness of it by the movement of his lips in prayer, which became audible, but not intelligible, as the guns were lowered to take aim. “Lord God,” in a low tone, and the crash of the guns followed instantly. At the explosion, he fell straight back over his coffin, without a sound or struggle. His feet, which rested on the coffin, were motionless. The surgeon ran to him. “Is he dead ?” asked Col. Biddle. “He is dying; he will be dead in a few moments,” said the doctor. He gasped for half a minute spasmodically, not breathing, and was dead. He was lifted into the coffin, the bandage taken off his eyes, and his little blue cap put on his head. There were eight shot holes in his coat, seven of them in his breast, any one of which would have killed him almost instantly. One struck him right in the heart, but there was not a drop of blood visible. The bullet holes were as clean as if cut with a pair of scissors. Under his body upon the ground was a thick puddle of blood...One shot struck him in the throat, and another grazed his shoulder. All ten of the balls struck him...The Sergeant, with his carbine in reserve, stood by the coffin, to shoot him in the head, and end his misery, if it had been necessary, but...the work had been surely done without him. The coffin was put into Undertaker Weaver’s wagon, the troops were dismissed, and the most impressive and dreadful scene ever witnessed in Indianapolis, and the first military execution in the West, was over.

Originally buried in Greenlawn Cemetery and moved to Crown Hill National when Greenlawn closed. Private Robert Gay is buried in Section 10, Lot 697. It’s interesting to

note that Gay's remains rest not far from Governor Oliver P. Morton, the namesake of the camp in which Gay lived, and died.

Al Hunter is the author of "Haunted Indianapolis" and co-author of the "Indiana National Road" and "Haunted Irvington" book series. Contact Al directly at Huntvault@aol.com or become a friend on Facebook.