PROJECT MUSE®

If You Want to Go: The Essential Guide to Battlefield
Photography

Sonny Fulks

Gettysburg Magazine, Number 56, January 2017, pp. 94-100 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/get.2017.0006>

➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/649336>

If You Want to Go

The Essential Guide to Battlefield Photography

SONNY FULKS

After years of walking with tons of cameras, lenses, and photo junk, I think I can tell you now what to take and how to use it, if you want great battlefield photos without a lot of head and body aches.

Since the mid-1980s, when I first started photographing the Gettysburg Battlefield, I've made the proverbial hobbyist journey of buying, and carrying about, too much camera equipment.

I was young then and working in the photo industry, where I had unlimited access to any camera, lens, and toy imaginable; and I tried to carry them all when I set out to take photos. I tried to have a camera for every film (this was before digital), a lens for every perspective, and a filter for every special effect. Back in the day, I was determined to get something good from a day on the field, regardless of the weather or the season. I've been there in August when the sky was white-hot and the temperature topped one hundred degrees. I've been there in winter when it was so cold that shutters failed and film cracked. To put it mildly, I was a little dumb and egotistical back then about the process of taking great photographs; and I laughed at older, wiser colleagues who seemed to get just as good results as I did, without working nearly so hard to do it.

Along the way, you attract attention from people who assume that you know what you're doing. Why else would you be so invested in the process of photography if you didn't? Why else would you burden yourself with carrying all that crap? Moreover, there've been dozens who have approached me over the years asking about how to do it. They present good questions—what camera, what lens, what film, and what accessories to buy for taking good, or better, pictures when going to Gettysburg.

Once upon a time, I'm sure I discouraged them with too much about too little. But now, thirty years later, I'm sure that I can assist those who still ask and who recognize me from my relationship with this magazine, without breaking their bank account or their spirit to be creative while they enjoy touring the field. To that end, many people still stop to inquire about what I'm shooting and when it will appear in *Gettysburg Magazine*. Some with cameras have actually asked if they could make an image of the same scene just to say they were there when the cover photo was taken and to have their own photo by which to compare and remember the day. That actually bugs some photographers. I, on the other hand, couldn't care less.

So for those people who enjoy it, I've taken the time to make the process simpler for you—a list of things you can use to help make battlefield photography both fun and gratifying. Here's how I think.

Cameras

There is no best brand of camera. Some are just more expensive than others. Personally, I've used Nikons for the past quarter century, but I cut my teeth on Canons. And for about twenty years I was an obsessive collector and user of German Leicas and Rolleiflexes, 35mm and twin lens. They were ridiculously expensive and fun to brag about, but they weren't that much better in terms of picture making.

The fact of the matter is that any of the name brands will produce fine images, respective, of course, to the quality of lens that you buy to go with it. Brand loyalty is fun for the sake of argument; but Nikon, Canon, Minolta, Pentax, Sony . . . they're all fine.

Wild poppies on the Rose farm present an easy-to-make image with a medium telephoto zoom lens. Notice the heat waves on a ninety-eight-degree August afternoon. This image was made with a Nikon D300s with a Nikkor 70 mm–200 mm zoom lens. Courtesy of Sonny Fulks.

I'll add, too, that I've shot just about anything there is to shoot with a camera—professional sports, landscapes, outdoors photos, and portraits; and I can tell you that I no longer even use the most EXPENSIVE Nikon cameras and haven't for years. I now look for a middle-of-the-road model with a good reputation for service and meter accuracy and put a good lens on it. The money I save I put back in my pocket, and my setup works just as well.

I use the digital format and have done so exclusively now for about fifteen years, since the time

that Nikon introduced their D200 and D90 models. But there are those who still insist on using film and processing, and I confess that the colors they achieve using professional Fuji Velvia slide film make my mouth water. It's beautiful, but for my purpose in shooting covers and images to share on social media, it's too much wasted time and too many steps. And besides, modern digital photography is that good . . . extremely good!

You can use a single-lens reflex model of either film or digital if you like. That's the kind of cam-

era where you remove the lens and replace it with something that either makes your scene appear wider or closer—they're called wide-angle and telephoto lenses, respectively. Or you can use one of the modern point-and-shoot cameras from the brand of your choice that's smaller, lighter, and equipped with all the lenses that you'll ever need. Many people will never see the difference in the results. They're that good.

The bottom line is spend as much on a camera as you feel comfortable and buy one that you can see yourself carrying around the battlefield comfortably. Remember, the idea is to have fun taking pictures, not to make yourself and those with you miserable from the process.

Lenses

I have to admit . . . I'm a lens junkie. They're like jewelry to me; and for that reason, I've spent and lost a fortune over the years buying optics I thought I had to have just for the sake of having them. Again, bragging rights! The problem is that there are really only about three that I normally use for battlefield photography.

Perspective is important in any photograph, but it's particularly important when it comes to landscape photography. I see a lot of people lugging around big telephoto zooms on cameras, and I'm sure they get some very nice work for their toil and effort. But remember, I have thirty years of experience in shooting at Gettysburg, and I'll tell you now that I use wide-angle lenses more than any other.

The reason? Think of the impressive sights you see when you look out from Little Round Top toward Devil's Den or northwest toward the Wheatfield with Spangler's farm in the distance. The human eye's field of view typically covers about one hundred degrees. Some say they can see even more, but I don't believe it. So if you're impressed with what your eye sees, aren't you going to be just as impressed with a photograph that captures it in the same way?

My favorite wide angle to use is an old Nikon 17 mm–35 mm zoom that I typically shoot at f/8 for good depth of field, and almost every one of my favorite prints of Gettysburg that I have framed or on display is from that lens. Of course, Sigma, Tamron, Tokina, and other after-market lens manufacturers

Never overlook simple color as the subject of your photo. Good photos do not have to be complex. This photo of a simple wooden fence with the setting sun in the background was made with a Nikon D300s with Nikkor 50 mm f/1.4 lens. Courtesy of Sonny Fulks.

make some good copies, as well; but anything in that 24 mm to 70 mm range will treat you well all day long.

As for the telephoto lenses, the one that I use to get close to a subject is the Nikon 70 mm–200 mm f/2.8. It's tack sharp and light enough to handle without a tripod, and I particularly like it because of the modern optics coatings that allow me to shoot backlit subjects without flare and color distortion.

The other lens I carry is the oldest in the bag—a simple 50 mm f/1.4 Nikon, like the one your parents or grandparents used on their old Nikkormat or Canon FTb or Minolta 201. These are really handy to have for the fact of added f-stop speed on overcast and rainy days, and they render some of the

This scene from Little Round Top has been done a million times, but many struggle with which lens to use. The trick is to match the perspective of your lens to what your eye sees. You'll like it. This was made with a Nikon D700 with Nikkor 24 mm f/1.4 lens. Courtesy of Sonny Fulks.

nicest out-of-focus highlights (called bokeh) of any focal length available.

Again, I've owned almost every type of lens ever made in thirty years, and these three are the ones on which I depend.

Light

A simple rule to follow if you want a good-looking photo is to always have the sun at your back. That way, the camera's meter works predictably, you avoid harsh shadows, you get rich colors, and the sky will always be blue on a cloudless day.

If you want special effects with the natural light, try shooting at a right angle to the sun at first; and if you like what you see, go ahead and shoot while

facing the sun. Those are called backlit scenes, and they can be spectacular, and often by pure accident.

Obviously, some of the best backlit shots you can make are silhouettes at sunup and sundown, when the sun is low in the sky. Just take a favorite monument, a cannon, a building, or whatever, and photograph it against a beautiful sunset sky. It's normally good for "wow" factor!

One of the best ways of getting great battlefield shots is to actually study the work from published photographers, available in the bookshops around town. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery; and once you see what it's supposed to look like, modern cameras and lenses make it much simpler than it once was to achieve early success.

This is a telephoto zoom lens shot of Little Round Top from one mile away on Confederate Avenue. Focus on the distant hill and let the cannon become a nice out-of-focus highlight. Some would use a polarizing filter, but you would lose the effect of intense heat between foreground and distance. I used a Nikon D700 with Nikkor 300 mm f/2.8 lens. Courtesy of Sonny Fulks.

And don't be afraid to take risks, especially with a digital camera. If you don't like what you get, simply erase it and do it again.

Filters

For years, I maintained that retail camera stores sold filters just to improve their bottom line, but I use them in moderation for a variety of reasons.

First, a good-quality uv filter is a very nice protectant for the expensive front element of a fine lens. That 17–35 Nikkor that I mentioned is worth about \$1,500, so I don't want it scratched, and I don't want to rub dirt and grime off it on the field with a lens cloth, regardless of its softness. A good filter keeps your lens sealed from harm.

I mentioned good quality, and I mean that. Why spend hundreds for a quality lens and scrimp on a filter with substandard glass? The best to buy? B+W, Tiffen, and Hoya are the standards.

I'm not a great fan of polarizing filters, because they often eliminate too many spectral highlights, like reflections off drops of water. And people use them to excess, to make the sky bluer than it actually is.

But on white-hot days when there's no color in the sky and no depth in the color of the landscape, a polarizing filter certainly helps. Think of it

Carry a tripod with you for nice, simple shots of interesting architecture and Gettysburg doorways. This photo of a house on Baltimore Street was made with a Nikon D700 with 24 mm f/1.4 lens. Courtesy of Sonny Fulks.

this way—if you only have one day to shoot or one chance to get the shot you want, why not use a polarizing filter to saturate the color and make it look as good as possible?

On cloudy or rainy days, I also use a modest warming filter, something like a Tiffen 81B, to make the landscape look more like what the eye sees, rather than what film or a digital sensor might record. This kind of filter works wonders.

What I don't use is a lot of gradient, special effects filters, because they produce an image that doesn't look like Gettysburg. You get into that artsy realm of photography that becomes purely subjective, and the filters are fragile and expen-

Wide-angle lenses allow for more than getting everything into your shot. They make for interesting lines and the sensation of size. The camera position was just twenty feet away from the barn on the Daniel Lady farm for this photo made with a Nikon D700 with 17 mm–35 mm f/2.8 zoom lens. Courtesy of Sonny Fulks.

sive. And if you only have so many hours to spend, remember that using special effects filters is very time-consuming.

Tripods

When I was young and full of myself as a physical specimen, I rarely used one. I was also using Leica rangefinder cameras back then, because a good “Leica man” could shoot at a thirtieth of a second with an M3 and get sharp pictures without the aid of tripod.

I laugh at those days now and throw a medium-heavy Bogen or Gitzo tripod in the back of my car for every trip. You simply take better images from a tripod, because you eliminate any possibility of camera shake.

And here’s another trick. Don’t spend \$89 for an electronic shutter release that you’ll end up break-

ing or losing. USE THE SELF-TIMER ON THE CAMERA! It has the same benefits as a cable release; you just have to wait a few seconds for it to release the shutter. So be patient, and spend the \$89 on beer and some good cigars. Longstreet would!

Summation

My best days shooting at Gettysburg are those when I throw one camera and lens in the car, along with a tripod, and force myself to be resourceful, to take the extra time and make the extra walk to match visual perspective to that which the camera can capture.

I made mention of a “normal” 50 mm lens earlier in the column, and one of the reasons the 50 mm is so good on good days is YOU HAVE to slow down and see more. A 50 mm only sees a forty-six degree field of view; but if you really evaluate what you

want in that view, in terms of subject, placement of the subject, and depth of field (or out-of-focus background), I guarantee you'll come home with a shot you'll enjoy and enjoy sharing.

People stop me all the time on the field to ask about equipment, which is why I've written to share this information. And I tell them that it's more important to see something spectacular and to know what you want to do with it than to have a spectacular collection of camera gear and miss on using any or all of it. Regardless of camera or lens, light and perspective are the controlling elements of any good photograph. If you can find a good combi-

nation of both, you'll have a great memory of your day in the field. The photograph of the eternal flame on the Oak Hill extension of Seminary Ridge that appears on the inside back cover of this issue was a simple shot made with a Nikon D300S with a 17 mm–55 mm f/2.8 zoom lens.

As one final point, if you don't know which lens to use, simply match the perspective of your eye with what your camera-lens combination can duplicate. If you like what you see, you'll like the same image from your camera.

That's how you do it . . . if you want to go!