

The 20th Maine and the Defense of Little Round Top



Veterans of the 20th Maine Volunteer Infantry gather on Little Round Top at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, with General Joshua L. Chamberlain, 1889.

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During the American Civil War, Maine's 20th Regiment became best known for its heroic performance on Little Round Top at the Battle of Gettysburg in July 1863. The regiment had been brought into being by a thirty-four year old Bowdoin College professor of rhetoric and languages named Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain. An unlikely candidate for military service, on the surface Chamberlain seemed more at home teaching, writing, and conducting church choirs.¹ Although he had spent a short time attending the Whiting Military and Classical School as a youngster, Chamberlain had no other military training, didn't hunt, and had limited horsemanship skills and experience. In fact, he had explicitly chosen the ministry over a military career as his calling and, after graduating from Bowdoin College, had attended the Bangor Theological Seminary returning to Bowdoin in 1855 to teach natural theology and logic. But like many of his generation, Chamberlain, whose grandfather had fought in the War of 1812, also had a deeper, patriotic commitment to defend his nation at a time of crisis and, in the summer of 1862 made a command decision that would change his life forever.

“Defend the National Existence”

After the collapse of the Peninsula Campaign in July 1862, Chamberlain wrote Maine Governor Israel Washburn informing him that “Nearly a hundred of those who have been my pupils, are now officers in the army; but there are many more all over our State, who, I believe, would respond with enthusiasm if summoned by me ...to fill up a regiment at once.”²

Chamberlain's request caused an uproar of opposition from his colleagues at Bowdoin College who felt that he was making a bad decision without their consent, even writing to the governor

¹ Glenn W. LaFantasie, *Gettysburg Heroes : Perfect Soldiers, Hallowed Ground* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), 54-56.

² Mark Nesbitt. *Through Blood and Fire: Selected Civil War Papers of Joshua Chamberlain* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1996), 10.

that their fellow professor was a poor choice for service as he “had no military stuff in him.”³

Chamberlain’s wife and parents were also opposed to the move, and simply couldn’t understand why he would give up an ideal life for such an endeavor. But Chamberlain’s letter to Governor Washburn made his reasons quite clear:

I fear this war, so costly of blood and treasure, will not cease until the men of the North are willing to leave good positions, and sacrifice the dearest personal interests, to rescue our Country from Desolation, and defend the National Existence against treachery at home and jeopardy abroad.⁴

When West Point graduate and seasoned soldier Col. Adelbert Ames (also a Mainer) was assigned to train and lead the regiment, Chamberlain accepted a commission of Lieutenant Colonel as second in command of the 20th Maine. As it turned out, Ames’s role would become vital in training and drilling the regiment’s raw recruits in preparation for battle.⁵ Thus, on September 2, 1862, 939 officers and men of the 20th Maine headed south to join the war.

Assigned to the 3rd Brigade of George Sykes’ V Corps 1st Division, the 20th Maine would actually see little action before the Battle of Gettysburg. Held in reserves at Antietam and confined to the rear after a small-pox vaccination had decimated the regiment just before the Battle of Chancellorsville in May 1863, the only main action the regiment saw was at Fredericksburg. As part of V Corps, they had advanced over the Rappahannock River through the town late in the afternoon of September 13 after the failed, bloody attempt on Marye’s Heights earlier that day. The regiment spent a grisly evening among hundreds of dead and wounded pinned down by continuing Confederate fire coming from behind the stone wall before

³ LaFantasie, 63-64.

⁴ Nesbitt, 10-11.

⁵ John J. Pullen, *The Twentieth Maine* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1985), 33-37.

being able to finally withdraw the next day.⁶ On the eve of the Battle of Gettysburg in June 1863, Adelbert Ames had been promoted to Brigadier General and Chamberlain had assumed command of the 20th Maine as it picketed along the Rappahannock River across from Confederate lines. The 3rd Brigade now consisted of four regiments: the 20th Maine, the 16th Michigan, the 44th New York and the 83rd Pennsylvania. The brigade now also had a new commander, a Harvard-educated lawyer from Erie, Pennsylvania named Strong Vincent, the former CO of the 83rd Pennsylvania.⁷

Gettysburg

The Battle of Gettysburg happened more by chance than by the choice of either commanders of the two great armies in the eastern theater of the Civil War.⁸ In mid May 1863, Army of Northern Virginia commander Robert E. Lee was faced with a critical decision to either “stand a siege [of Richmond] which must ultimately end in surrender, or to invade Pennsylvania.”⁹ Lee, most likely in consultation with Jeff Davis and Confederate Secretary of War James Seddon, chose the latter. Screened by the Blue Ridge mountains, Lee’s three corps thus proceeded north soon to be pursued by seven corps of the Union Army of the Potomac. By late June, Confederate General Richard Ewell’s Corps was well on its way to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania with A.P. Hill’s Corps to the southwest and Longstreet’s Corps not far behind. Lee himself had decided to set up his headquarters at Chambersburg, Pennsylvania on the 27th.¹⁰ Just two days earlier, the Army of the Potomac’s General-in Chief Joseph Hooker had been replaced

⁶ Pullen, 53-55.

⁷ Pullen, 82-83.

⁸ James McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2010), 351.

⁹ Stephen Sears, *Gettysburg* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 14.

¹⁰ Sears, 116.

by V Corps commander George Meade, who proceeded to set up his temporary command center approximately five miles south of the Pennsylvania border in Taneytown, Maryland.

“Blinded” by the absence of J.E.B. Stuart’s cavalry, Lee finally learned of the general whereabouts of the advancing Union Army from a Confederate spy and made a command decision to concentrate the Army of Northern Virginia by moving east from Chambersburg and ordering Ewell’s Corps’ south to join them.¹¹ Although Meade had originally desired to draw Lee south back into Maryland to fight on a ground of his own choosing, upon discovering Lee’s movements he proceeded to rapidly move his army north. The two armies, each approximately 100,000 strong, were now on a collision course.¹² Even though Lee had given strict orders to his commanders *not* to engage the enemy in battle without first with him, Confederate division commander Henry Heth neglected the order and, on the morning of July 1, 1863, decided to fully engage Union cavalry northwest of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. Upon his arrival, Union General John Reynolds, acutely aware of the terrain around Gettysburg (especially the ridge and hills running southeast of the town) without hesitation committed his entire I Corps to fight off the Confederate advance.¹³ The Battle of Gettysburg had begun. Thanks to the heroic fighting of the I and XI Corps on July 1, the Federals were at least able to hold off the Confederate advance long enough to secure the higher ground southeast of the town on Cemetery Hill and the accompanying ridge that stretched southward from it.

Having successfully established fortified positions along Cemetery Ridge, Meade dug in awaiting the rest of the Army of the Potomac to get on line for an anticipated coming engagement. Early on the morning of the 2nd, Lee, now headquartered along Seminary Ridge

¹¹ Sears, 132-33.

¹² Sears, 133, 150.

¹³ Sears, 164-66.

running south along the west side of Gettysburg, had resolved to fight at Gettysburg and was anxious to initiate the attack before the Union Army was fully assembled. But his leading corps commander General James Longstreet disagreed. Longstreet had suggested that the Army of Northern Virginia *not* fight a general engagement at Gettysburg but instead move the entire army south around the Union left, positioning itself somewhere between the Army of the Potomac and Washington, D.C. thereby determining a better ground of their own choosing for battle. Longstreet was convinced that the Union Army had posted itself on such solid high ground at Gettysburg that “it would take the whole army to drive them from [it], and with great sacrifice,” even asserting that the Army of the Potomac now enjoyed a greater advantage than the Confederates had had at Fredericksburg.¹⁴ But Lee had made up his mind and thus ordered Longstreet’s Corps to lead the left flank of an en echelon attack up the Union lines along the Emmitsburg Road while Ewell’s Corps in the north would pound away at Culp’s Hill and the Union right.

The July 2 Confederate offensive ran into serious problems of delay. First, Longstreet refused to launch the attack before Law’s Brigade of John Bell Hood’s division had arrived, which wasn’t until afternoon.¹⁵ Longstreet’s entire Corps was then further delayed getting into position for its attack on the Union left when his divisions marching south had to double back and re-route their advance for fear of being detected by Union pickets who ended up being much further south than the Confederates had anticipated due, again, to the continued absence of General Stuart’s cavalry. It wasn’t until about 3:30 in the afternoon that the Confederate artillery

¹⁴ Sears, 234-37, 254.

¹⁵ Sears, 256-57.

finally opened fire for the offensive, with Hood's and McLaws' Divisions launching their attack some thirty minutes later.¹⁶

The Defense of Little Round Top

Like most of the Army of the Potomac, the 20th Maine had been on a continuous march north since June 26, covering almost one hundred miles before finally reaching Cemetery Ridge with the 3rd Brigade early on the morning of July 2.¹⁷ Before the Confederate attack had commenced that afternoon, III Corps commander Dan Sickles had, contrary to orders, moved his entire corps over a quarter of a mile west, far forward of the Cemetery Ridge line thus creating a dangerous salient on the Union left. Sickles' unauthorized movement had also left the two large hills on the Union left, Little Round Top and Big Round Top, completely unoccupied and undefended. Upon learning of this, an angry General Meade, realizing his left might now be dangerously exposed, immediately dispatched General Gouverneur Warren (chief Topographical Engineer of the Army of the Potomac) to Little Round Top, the northernmost and smallest of the two rises, to apprise the situation. Warren discovered that not only had Sickles' forward movement left only a signal corps on the hill, but he was also able to determine the position of Hood's Division on Longstreet's right flank poised for an attack. It then became painfully clear to Warren that a successful Confederate assault and occupation of Little Round Top would create an impossible situation for the Union Army which would then be faced with an enfilade of artillery fire straight down their entire line extending across Cemetery Ridge.

Rightfully alarmed, Warren immediately ordered an aide out to find General George Sykes whose V Corps had been assigned to the general area. The aide found Sykes who in turn

¹⁶ Oliver Willcox Norton, *The Attack and Defense of Little Round Top* (Gettysburg: Stan Clark Military Books, 1992), 255.

¹⁷ Pullen, 90.

dispatched his own an aide to find the division commander, General Barnes, to order a regiment onto Little Round Top. As fortune would have it, Sykes' aide ran into the 3rd Brigade and its commander Col. Strong Vincent who asked him what orders he was carrying to the division commander. When the aide insisted that he had to find Barnes first to order any movement, Vincent again demanded to know the orders and, upon being told, promptly informed Sykes' aide that "I will take the responsibility of taking my brigade there."¹⁸

Wasting no time with bureaucratic formalities, Vincent immediately ascended Little Round Top to survey the terrain and choose the best possible positions in which to place his brigade in order to defend what was quickly becoming the end of the Union line.¹⁹ By now, Confederate artillery across the field had already begun firing in preparation for the attack as Vincent ordered his regiments to their assigned positions along a spur on the southwestern side of the hill. On the right, he posted the 16th Michigan on a terrace part way down the hill, followed by the 44th New York and 83rd Pennsylvania side by side in the center along the same general latitude. He then ingeniously chose the tip of the spur which was closest to the saddle between Little and Big Round Top as his left flank. Here he placed the 20th Maine telling Chamberlain to "hold that ground at all hazards."²⁰

On the Confederate side, Law's Brigade of Hood's Division had been assigned to the far right wing of the attack. The battle had barely begun when Hood was seriously wounded and had to be taken from the field. Under his leadership, Hood's was a crack division and now his personal absence from the battle would definitely diminish the effectiveness of his brigades.²¹ Replacing the fallen Hood as division commander was Evander Law who seems not to have been

¹⁸ Norton, 264.

¹⁹ Norton, 262-63.

²⁰ Norton, 212.

²¹ Sears, 268.

entirely prepared for his new leadership role. Law had also left his own brigade (i.e., Laws Brigade) with no commander to replace him until well into the battle.²² This turn of events on the Confederate right tended to create confusion often leaving rapid deployment decisions and movements to commanders at the regimental level.²³ One of those was Col. William Oates of the 5th Alabama, whose regiment along with the 47th Alabama was on the furthest right of the attack. While coming under fire from Union sharpshooters, apparently on his own initiative Oates decided to move his regiment so far to the right that they actually ended up ascending Big Round Top at the far end of the field.²⁴ Oates, whose regiment had been on the march to Gettysburg since 3:30 a.m., had also run out of water on this, one of the hottest days of the year. It took a visit and direct command by one of Law's staff officers to get Oates off of Big Round Top to join the action below.²⁵ The 47th and 15th Alabama Regiments thus became the far right of an assault of six Confederate regiments on Vincent's 3rd Brigade positions on Little Round Top.

On the spur of Little Round Top, Col. Chamberlain detached Captain Morrill's Company B as skirmishers to protect his far left flank. The Confederate attack proceeded en echelon from right to left along the entire 3rd Brigade line, and soon reached the right side of the 20th Maine where it became "quite sharp and at close quarters." Then, mounting a rock a large rock, Chamberlain was stunned to see "a considerable body of the enemy" moving to the left and rear of his lines.²⁶ About to be outflanked, Chamberlain ordered the extremely difficult maneuver of "refusing" his left wing by skillfully shifting his ranks to the left with no break in the line, all while continuing their fire on Oates' advancing Alabamians. This bent the 20th Maine line at

²² Norton, 142.

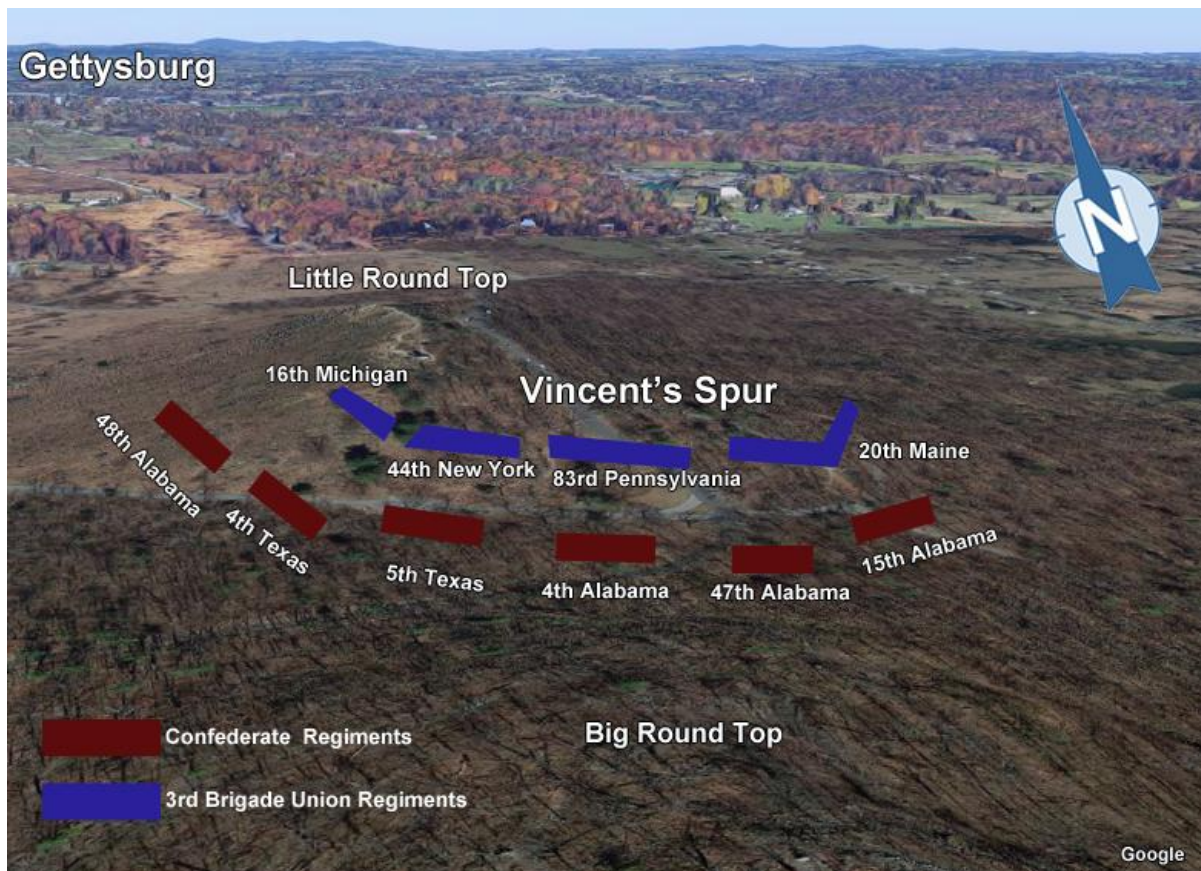
²³ Harry Pfantz, *Gettysburg, The Second Day* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 173.

²⁴ Norton, 256-57.

²⁵ Pfantz, 217-18.

²⁶ Norton, 212.

right angle with the far left facing almost down the western slope of Little Round Top. Functioning like a well-trained chorus line, the regiment apparently executed the move so efficiently that the Alabamians were completely startled when met with a thunderous volley as they approached what had just moments before been a completely unguarded flank.²⁷



Configuration of Col. Strong Vincent's 3rd Brigade line across the spur of Little Round Top and attacking Confederate regiments (Robert Wesser)

What then followed was an entire hour of fierce assaults on the 20th Maine position, later described by Chamberlain as “wild whirlpools and eddies [where] at times I saw around me more of the enemy than my own men; gaps opening, swallowing, closing again with sharp convulsive energy...All around, strange mingled roar...everywhere men torn and broken,

²⁷ Pullen, 118-19.

staggering, creeping quivering on the earth.”²⁸ As a third of his regiment lay wounded or dead around him, Chamberlain then heard the terrifying sound of musket fire coming from his right that seemed to be so close and intense that he “feared that the enemy might have nearly surrounded the Little Round Top.” With their ammunition now exhausted, Chamberlain then proceeded to order the only option available under his orders to hold at all hazards. “I ordered the bayonet. The word was enough. It ran like fire along the line from man to man and rose into a shout, with which they sprang forward upon the enemy,” Chamberlain wrote in his official report on July 6th following the battle.²⁹ Since his left wing had been bent so far back, the bayonet order, whether conceived of as such or not, essentially resulted in a right-wheel forward charge creating the effect on the Alabamians of being attacked on two sides. Oates’ exhausted and still thirsty men (they had never been able to re-fill their canteens) which had initially outnumbered the 20th Maine two to one, panicked and ran, some straight back up Big Round Top from whence they had originally descended to join the attack. In the end, Chamberlain and his remaining regiment captured four hundred prisoners, all while the rest of the 3rd Brigade had tenaciously held the line on the right and in the center.³⁰

The 20th Maine had arrived at Little Round Top with 386 men, including 28 officers. By the evening of July 2, the regiment had suffered the loss of well over one third of its men killed, missing, or wounded. Much to the loss of the Union Army, 3rd Brigade commander Strong Vincent had also been mortally wounded while heroically shoring up the right of the line behind the 16th Michigan just before Paddy O’Rorke’s 140th New York had arrived on Little Round Top to save the right wing of the brigade. O’Rorke was also mortally wounded shortly thereafter. By

²⁸ Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, *Blood and Fire at Gettysburg* (Gettysburg: Stan Clark Military Books, 1994), 16-17.

²⁹ Norton, 214.

³⁰ Norton, 214-15.

the evening of July 2, the late afternoon Confederate assault had failed with the Army of the Potomac's left flank having held at Gettysburg thanks to the heroic and costly efforts of Strong Vincent's 3rd Brigade and its 20th Maine Regiment. The next day, Lee's assault on the heavily fortified Union center would suffer precisely the kind of failure that Longstreet had warned of on the morning of the previous day. To many a Union soldier, however, the disaster of Pickett's charge had meant that the bloody Union rout at Fredericksburg had now finally been avenged.

“The great reward of service...”

Chamberlain and the 20th Maine Regiment that he had given birth to went on to fight for the duration of the war. Chamberlain himself became commander of the 1st Brigade, 1st Division of the V Corps after Gettysburg, and ended up being wounded a total of six times during the war. He was so seriously wounded outside Petersburg in 1864 that some Maine newspapers had actually reported him as dead. Upon learning of Chamberlain's wounding, General Ulysses Grant personally “promoted him on the spot” to brigadier general.³¹ Chamberlain suffered horrible pain and ailments for the remainder of his life due to his wound at Petersburg, nothing of which he ever mentioned in public writings or speeches. Perhaps aware of the noble character of the professor from Maine, General Ulysses Grant chose Chamberlain to accept the surrender of Confederate troops at Appomattox. In an action that was frowned upon by many of his fellow Union officers, Chamberlain ordered his men to salute the disgraced Confederate soldiers as they surrendered, clearly choosing to exercise his own interpretation of “malice toward none with charity for all” announced just a month earlier by President Abraham Lincoln.³²

³¹ Ulysses S. Grant, “Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant” (New York, Charles L. Webster and Company, 1885). <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/4367/4367-h/4367-h.htm>

³² “Biography: Joshua L. Chamberlain,” *National Museum of the United States Army*, Accessed April 16, 2022. <https://www.thenmusa.org/biographies/joshua-l-chamberlain/>

On October 3, 1893, the remnants of the 20th Maine and other veterans gathered at the site of their heroic efforts thirty years previously to dedicate Maine's monuments at Gettysburg. In honor of all who gave their last full measure of devotion during this horrific conflict known as the American Civil War, I conclude here with the final words of Chamberlain's speech on that occasion:

In great deeds, something abides. On great fields, something stays. Forms change and pass; bodies disappear; but spirits linger, to consecrate ground for the vision-place of souls. And reverent men and women from afar, and generations that know us not and that we know not of, heart-drawn to see where and by whom great things were suffered and done for them, shall come to this deathless field, to ponder and dream; and lo! the shadow of a mighty presence shall wrap them in its bosom, and the power of the vision pass into their souls. This is the great reward of service. To live, far out and on, in the life of others; this is the mystery of the Christ,--to give life's best for such high sake that it shall be found again unto life eternal. ³³

³³ Joshua L. Chamberlain, "Address of Gen. Joshua L. Chamberlain at the Dedication of the Maine Monuments on the Battlefield of Gettysburg" (1895), *Maine History Documents*, 262.
<https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mainehistory/262>

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