

THE TURNING POINT

by Thomas J. Fleming



Pickett's Charge

The United States infantryman has been the hero of all America's foreign wars. But his finest hour came when American met American near a small Pennsylvania town named Gettysburg.

The Civil War hung in the balance as Robert E. Lee's superb, undefeated Army of Northern Virginia, more than 70,000 strong, crossed the Potomac and menaced the heart

of Northern power. Philadelphia, Washington, Baltimore—all were within their grasp. Gettysburg was now or never, for war weariness was gripping the North. One more

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Southern victory, and the average citizen would certainly conclude that Lee was invincible.

Ironically, neither side planned to fight at Gettysburg. Both armies were groping through the Pennsylvania countryside, trying to find each other, when they happened to collide just outside the quiet market town.

The opening round was a Union victory, with troops of the famed Iron Brigade smashing a Southern attack and capturing hundreds of prisoners—but thereafter the day was a Confederate show.

Most of the Union Army was not in Gettysburg at this point, but strung out in a loose line extending almost forty miles. The fraction of the army that was there fought desperately as Lee's army rolled in on them. The 75th Pennsylvania lost 111 men in fifteen minutes. The 16th Maine, ordered to stand or die, clung to a narrow, wedge-shaped ridge, with Southerners blasting them from one side and charging with bayonets on the other. They stood—and they died. Only 35 out of 200 saw the sun set. Six times, the 24th Michigan had its line of battle broken, fell back, formed again to face the howling, oncoming enemy, and saw all but 97 of its 496 men go down.

Shattered Union regiments streamed through the town of Gettysburg and clustered around Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, who had arrived to take charge of the battle. He pulled them together on Cemetery Ridge, south of the town, and swiftly put a division on nearby Culp's Hill. Hancock clung to these vital positions, with barely 5000 fighting men left, while the rest of the

Union Army, marching all night, came into position around him.

Early in the afternoon the Southern brigades swarmed forward again, striking at both Northern flanks. The fighting swirled around three steep, rocky hills—Devil's Den, Big Round Top, and Little Round Top. Major General Gouverneur Kemble Warren, the Union chief of engineers, arrived at Little Round Top just as two Alabama regiments were scrambling up its rocky slopes. He saw at a glance that this hill was the key to the whole federal position—and there wasn't a man on it. Frantically he summoned the first regiments he could find and rushed them to the crucial hill.

A fantastic battle now exploded around and over Little Round Top, with the lines at times so near each other that the hostile gun barrels almost touched.

Again and again the gray soldiers drove the blues from their ledge of rock, only to be flung back by a counterattack. Ammunition ran out, and the fighting became bayonet to bayonet. Finally, in a wild charge, the 20th Maine, half its men gone, crashed through two lines of astonished Confederates, all the way down Little Round Top and over Big Round Top.

Elsewhere on the thunderous field, Confederates smashed Union regiments in fierce fighting around two positions known in history as the Peach Orchard and the Wheat Field. The 1st Minnesota, 262 men, charged a whole Southern brigade, stopped them, and lost 219 men. So ended the second day.

The third day began with a fierce dawn attack on the Union right flank. Again and

again the charging men in gray tried to get to the top of Culp's Hill, but massed federal artillery and entrenched riflemen mowed them down remorselessly, until the Southern ranks began referring to Culp's Hill as "the hill of death." In front of one Union position, when the fighting finally died down at 10:30 A.M., lay 500 bodies. Among them was Wesley Culp, a private in the 2d Virginia Regiment and a former resident of Gettysburg. He had gone to Virginia on business, had fallen in love, and had settled there. His father's house was only a few hundred yards away, and his blue-uniformed brother was fighting on the other side of those entrenchments he had died trying to reach.

At 1 P.M., with one staggering crash, the Southern guns opened fire, pouring a hurricane of shot and shell on Cemetery Ridge, where Union gunners frantically replied with some eighty guns of their own.

Finally, after one hour and forty minutes of pounding, the guns fell silent, and from the Confederate lines there moved forth the most magnificent charge ever made by soldiers. Fifteen thousand men, led by Major General George Pickett, rolled forward, seeming, in the words of one Union observer, "an ocean of armed men sweeping upon us . . . over ridge and slope, through orchard and meadow and cornfield, magnificent, grim, irresistible."

But only for a moment, for from left, right, and center, Union artillery opened up. The Confederate artillery, low on ammunition, could give the men almost no support. Terrible gaps appeared in the oncoming line, and on the flanks Union regiments rushed

out and poured in withering rifle fire.

Pickett's men, halfway up the slope of Cemetery Ridge now, saw flags fluttering above them, but not a sign of a soldier. Suddenly, on order, the entire federal line rose above their stone-wall barricade and fired as one man. The front line of the Confederate column toppled.

But the next division reached the wall, driving the defenders before them. In the same moment Alonzo Cushing, the young West Pointer in charge of the nearest artillery battery, filled his last remaining gun and, ignoring three mortal wounds, fired it into the center of the Confederate line—and fell dead.

The Virginians clustered at the wall, howling their triumphant battle cry. Some ran over to seize Cushing's lone cannon.

Now was the crucial moment. Would the Union soldier panic and run, as he had done too often on other fields, when these whooping demons from the South came bursting through his line? Winfield Scott Hancock was down with a wound, and there wasn't another high-ranking officer in sight. But through the murk of battle smoke came a chaotic, roaring blue charge.

Without order, almost without leadership, from left and right they came, men on fire with the fierce will to victory. Ignoring desperate Southern fire, they swept the comparative handful of Confederates back down that tragic hill, and decided the battle of Gettysburg for all time.

The men of the North had proved that they were brothers in courage to the men of the South.

CHECK YOUR READING

- 1. The selection of Gettysburg as the site of the battle was a**
 - A deliberate strategy
 - B trick that backfired
 - C simple accident
- 2. In the days just before the battle, the Southern forces were**
 - A cynical and war-weary
 - B disorganized and confused
 - C aggressive and victorious
- 3. At the beginning of the battle, the Northern army's greatest disadvantage was that**
 - A most of its men were elsewhere
 - B too many generals issued orders
 - C too much equipment was sabotaged
- 4. Hancock and Warren were**
 - A major generals
 - B Union leaders
 - C Both A and B
- 5. The Battle of Gettysburg lasted for**
 - A three days
 - B five days
 - C seven days
- 6. Private Wesley Culp was a**
 - A Confederate soldier
 - B former Pennsylvanian
 - C Both A and B
- 7. General Pickett led his charge up**
 - A Big Round Top
 - B Cemetery Ridge
 - C Culp's Hill
- 8. Alonzo Cushing's last act was to**
 - A fire his gun
 - B saddle his horse
 - C raise the flag
- 9. The author implies that previously in times of stress Northern troops tended to**
 - A freeze in panic
 - B break and run
 - C Neither A nor B
- 10. The Battle of Gettysburg was**
 - A a Northern victory
 - B a Southern victory
 - C an inconclusive engagement