

# **Gettysburg Stories**

**THIRD DAY OF BATTLE**

**PART TWO**

**BY**

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## Stories Chapter 7, 3<sup>rd</sup> day part 2

### Pickett's Charge

Part of Robert E. Lee's plan for the assault on Cemetery Ridge was that Rebel cannon would advance to support the infantry. But for some reason only a small portion – maybe a dozen guns, not enough to make any difference – got the word to move forward. On the other hand, Union guns from Cemetery Hill to Little Round Top started firing on the advancing Confederate infantry almost as soon as they formed up to start their assault (in fact, even while they waited in the woods, several hundred Rebels were killed or wounded by Union artillery shells aimed at the Confederate batteries.) The guns at the north and south ends of the Union line could fire on the Rebels with what is known as “enfilading fire”, that is, the cannon fired nearly parallel to the infantry lines, rather than perpendicular to them. As the battery commander of the six guns on Little Round Top described it, “several times almost a company would disappear, as the shell would rip from the right to left among them.” Much the same effect came from the cannon on Cemetery Hill, except that there were more of them; thirty-nine guns tore into the left of the Confederate troops.



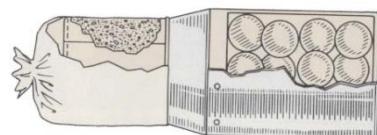
*Modern reenactors recreate a line of Union cannons.*

As the Confederates advanced further, they came under fire from forty-one more Federal guns of the artillery reserve on southern Cemetery Ridge. “We had a raking fire through all three [Confederate] lines,” said their commander. Up to this point, the Union guns were firing long range ammunition: solid shot, case shot (hollow cannon balls filled with powder and balls, exploded overhead by a timer fuse) and percussion shell (hollow projectiles filled with powder that exploded on impact and blew the shell into sharp shards of shrapnel.) Exploding shells simply had to come “close enough” to mow down a handful or more of infantrymen; on the other hand, solid shot had to actually hit the target. But when a solid ball hit home, the effects

were devastating, as described by a captain in the 53<sup>rd</sup> Virginia, in Pickett's Division, who said that a single solid shot left a line of thirteen men "in a perfect mangled mass of flesh and blood indistinguishable one from the other." To maximize the effectiveness of solid shot, when the terrain permitted gunners would aim their cannon so the shot would skip across the ground about chest high. It was common for the men in the ranks to see the shot coming, but there was little they could do to get out of the way.

The remaining Union cannon in the middle of the line, near the Copse of Trees, had used up most of their long-range ammunition, so they stayed silent until the Confederate line neared the Emmitsburg Road, a few hundred yards away. Then these guns opened up with canister rounds, essentially tin cans the diameter of the gun's bore filled with one-inch iron balls. It was terribly lethal up to about 250 yards, and at under 150 the gunners would fire double or even triple canister, that is, two or three cans with each shot. It was ideal for use at close range against a charging enemy.

What remained of Cushing's guns in the Angle fired as the long but thinning line of Rebels crossed the Emmitsburg Road and made their way up the slope in front of the Union lines. When Pickett's Virginians neared the stone wall in front of the Copse of Trees Cushing announced "I'll give them one more round" and pulled the lanyard, spewing forth a double load of canister. As he finished this statement, a bullet entered his open mouth and exited out the back of his head. At about the same time, braving the cannon fire, Confederate General Lewis Armistead led his men over the wall and into the Union line. Just before he reached Cushing's guns, three bullets struck Armistead. He died in a Union hospital less than forty-eight hours later.



*Canister round for a civil war cannon.*



*General Armisted among Cushing's guns at the Angle.*

General Gibbon, who had sat down forward of the Union during the Cannonade, would be wounded in the fighting but would survive the war and remain in the army, finally retiring in 1891. His statue stands on Cemetery Ridge. His adjutant,

Lieutenant Haskell, was unscathed at Gettysburg, despite being in the thick of the fighting, and wrote one of the most famous accounts of the battle soon afterwards. It originally appeared as a seventy-page letter to his brother that was later brought out in book form. Unfortunately, he was killed in June 1864 while leading a charge at Cold Harbor, Virginia. Declared a distraught Gibbon, "My God! I have lost my best friend, and one of the best soldiers in the Army of the Potomac has fallen!"

Winfield Hancock paid a severe price for his bravery. Although he survived the Confederate cannonade, he did not come through Pickett's Charge unharmed. As he urged a regiment of Vermont troops to swing out and fire into the flank of the advancing Confederates south of the Copse of Trees, a minie ball crashed into the pommel of his saddle, driving a large nail and other debris deep into his thigh. As his men lowered him to the ground, he ordered that he not be removed from the field until the outcome of the assault had been determined. He would survive his wound and return to fight after a long convalescence, but the wound never really healed and would trouble him for the remainder of his life.

Alonzo Cushing's body was buried in the West Point Cemetery. His headstone reads "Faithful unto Death." In belated but well-deserved recognition of his valor and service, in 2014 the young lieutenant who gave all he had at Gettysburg was awarded the Medal of Honor.

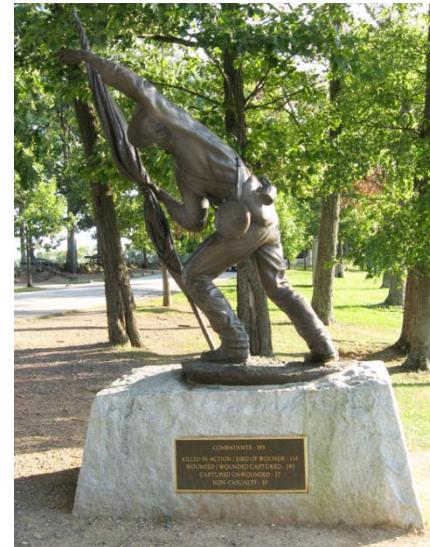
Today the area near the Copse of Trees hosts a couple of dozen monuments and markers. Among the towering, imposing edifices of bronze and granite are two small stone markers that the casual visitor could easily miss. Their inscriptions are so worn as to be barely legible. Both were erected in 1887. One commemorates Lieutenant Alonzo Cushing and his brave cannoneers. A few yards away, stands a memorial to General Lewis Armistead, whose Virginians almost took Cushing's guns.



*General Hancock monument at the site of his wounding. The Rebels came from the woods on the far side of the barn at right.*

## THE 11<sup>TH</sup> MISSISSIPPI

West Confederate Avenue runs along Seminary Ridge through the area where the Rebel infantry waited before starting Pickett's Charge. Along its length stands an impressive array of Confederate monuments, including one to the 11<sup>th</sup> Mississippi. Atop a low granite block, a Rebel flag bearer leans forward as though moving into a gale. His left arm is raised to urge his comrades to follow him. He is headed toward Cemetery Ridge, where the Federal Army waits. On the other side of the field, over 1,000 yards away on the ridge that was their target, stands another monument to the 11<sup>th</sup> Mississippi. This one is a simple stone marker near the Bryan barn, marking the spot where the 11<sup>th</sup> made it all the way to the Yankee position. Well, at least a few of them did.



At the start of the assault, the 11<sup>th</sup> was in the front line, the fifth regiment from the left at the northern end of the Rebel formation. Just to their left were four small regiments under the command of Colonel John Brockenbrough. When the Federal artillery opened fire on the advancing Rebels, many of the guns on the northern end of the line were aimed at Brockenbrough's brigade, and it was calculated that more than 1,600 cannon rounds were fired at them. One Confederate recalled, "The enemy's batteries soon opened upon our lines with canister, and the left seemed to stagger under it." As one Union colonel described it, "Arms, heads, blankets, guns and knapsacks were thrown and tossed into the clear air.... A moan went up from the field, distinctly to be heard amid the storm of battle..." Then came the rifle fire.

The 8<sup>th</sup> Ohio Infantry had been posted just west of the Emmitsburg Road in front of the northern end of the Union line. Seizing the opportunity, their colonel advanced the regiment even further west, then pivoted left so they could fire into the flank of Brockenbrough's men just one hundred yards away. They fired several volleys into the Confederates, then charged. This proved too much for the Rebels, most of whom either fled or surrendered. As much as half of the brigade did not stop running until they had passed back over Seminary Ridge.

After driving Brockenbrough's brigade from the field, the 8<sup>th</sup> Ohio then turned its attention to the 11<sup>th</sup> Mississippi, which was now the left-most regiment in the Confederate line. Two other Union regiments swung out to join the 8<sup>th</sup>, and they all poured fire into the Rebel flank. According to the 8<sup>th</sup>'s colonel "the mass appeared more like a cloud of moving smoke and dust than a column of troops." Men fell by the dozens and many did not advance east of the Emmitsburg Road, but a few kept going. Fourteen men followed the 11<sup>th</sup> Mississippi Regiment's colors all the way to the Bryan barn just in front of the stone wall where the Yankees were. There they took shelter and fired around the corners of the barn as they waited for other Rebel regiments to join them. A lieutenant from the 11<sup>th</sup> wrote of looking back in vain for the reinforcements which would never come. "The state of my feelings may be imagined, but not described" he wrote, "upon seeing the line broken, & flying in full disorder." Able to neither advance nor retreat, they waved a scrap of white cloth and laid low until the Union fire died down enough for them to surrender.

At the other end of the Confederate line, a similar action was taking place. Two Vermont regiments pivoted out to the right and opened fire with 1,300 rifles into General James Kemper's brigade of Pickett's division. Recalled a colonel in the 16<sup>th</sup> Vermont, "Those great masses of men seemed to disappear in a moment...the ground over which we passed after striking their flank was literally covered with dead and wounded men."

At the start of Pickett's Charge, the Confederate formation was nearly a mile wide. The Copse of Trees near the center of the Union line had been designated as the aiming point for the entire formation, so as they crossed the open fields all the regiments squeezed toward the center. Union fire on the Confederate flanks not only disintegrated the brigades on both ends of the advancing Rebel line, it also caused the soldiers to bunch together even more until their formation resembled a wedge, with the point striking at the Angle and the Copse of Trees. This is where the Confederates led by Lewis Armistead made it over the stone wall and into the Union line.

There was another small wedge of men just to the north, and it was made by the 11<sup>th</sup> Mississippi, which despite devastating Union fire, made it as far as any Rebels

did that day. Some say they made it the furthest. For their valor, out of 393 men they lost 110 killed, 193 wounded and captured, and 37 captured unwounded. Only 53 made it back unscathed. One company, known as the University Greys because every man had been a student at the University of Mississippi, suffered 100% casualties – every member of the company was killed or wounded.

At a field hospital behind Seminary Ridge, a Confederate surgeon named Dr. Holt treated one of the wounded Mississippians who had been brought back after the charge. Wrote the doctor, "His left arm and a third of his torso had been torn away and he dictated a farewell letter to his mother."

The note read "This is the last you may ever hear from me. I have time to tell you that I died like a man. Bear my loss as best you can. Remember that I am true to my country and my greatest regret at dying is that she is still not free and that you and your sisters are robbed of my youth. I hope this will reach you and you must not regret that my body cannot be obtained. It is a mere matter of form anyhow. This letter is stained with my blood."



*11th Mississippi marker near the Bryan Barn, just in front of the Union line.*

## THE CALIFORNIA REGIMENT

On Cemetery Ridge stands the famous Copse of Trees which marks the spot at which Robert E. Lee aimed Pickett's Charge. Running just in front of the copse is a low stone wall, behind which the Union troops waited. A few dozen paces north of the copse the wall makes a ninety-degree turn to the east, forming what is now known as the Bloody Angle, or just "the Angle." At the Angle sits a stone regimental monument with an inscription that many find curious: "California Regiment". Did Californians serve in the Union army? Yes, California and Oregon, both Union states, raised ten regiments – but they served only to keep order along the



*71st PA Regiment, the "California" regiment*

Pacific coast. No regiment of California men came all the way from the Pacific coast to serve in the Army of the Potomac. So why the inscription "California Regiment"?

When war broke out, Oregon Senator Edward D. Baker led an effort to raise regiments which would be credited to (and, apparently, funded by) the Pacific coast states (which really meant California, since the population of Oregon was much smaller). In addition to ten regiments actually raised in California, an entire brigade of four regiments was raised, composed of men primarily from Philadelphia. The brigade was credited to California, but was also known as The Philadelphia Brigade to reflect its composition, and the regiments were given Pennsylvania names: the 69<sup>th</sup>, 71<sup>st</sup>, 72<sup>nd</sup>, and 106<sup>th</sup> Regiments of Infantry, Pennsylvania Volunteers.

On the morning of July 3<sup>rd</sup>, the four regiments of The Philadelphia Brigade were stationed along the stone wall from just south of the Copse of Trees to the Angle. The 71<sup>st</sup> Pennsylvania manned the Angle itself, with its right flank "in the air", since there were no Union troops directly on their right. The closest friendly troops were about one hundred yard behind them, where the stone wall took a ninety-degree turn to the north.

When Pickett's Charge smashed into the Angle, the men of the 71<sup>st</sup> at first were driven back by fire coming from both their front and their right. From their new position nearer to the crest of the ridge they continued firing into the oncoming Rebels. As Union reinforcements started to arrive, the 71<sup>st</sup> surged forward, back to the wall, and engaged the Southern troops hand-to-hand.

Today, the 71<sup>st</sup>'s monument marks the spot along the stone wall where they were positioned at the start of Pickett's Charge and to which they returned in the charge's final repulse. It proudly displays its dual identity: 71<sup>st</sup> Pennsylvania and California Regiment.

#### **THE "TEEPEE" MONUMENT**

First-time visitors to Gettysburg are often startled to see on Cemetery Ridge a bronze monument depicting an American Indian in full regalia standing in front of a teepee. One wonders if this means that there was a regiment of Indians fighting at Gettysburg.

While there may have been a few soldiers of Indian descent in the Army of the Potomac, they were not in significant numbers, and there was not an Indian regiment at Gettysburg. But there is an interesting history to the “Teepee Monument.” It is actually the monument of the 42<sup>nd</sup> New York Regiment, nicknamed the Tammany Regiment after the powerful (and corrupt) New York City political organization known as “Tammany Hall” for the meeting hall out of which they conducted business. The hall was named after the Delaware Indian Chief Tammany, and it is his likeness which graces the monument.



The morning of July 3<sup>rd</sup> found the 42<sup>nd</sup> stationed on Cemetery Ridge just east of the Copse of Trees. Here they suffered through the great cannonade and awaited Pickett’s Charge. When Armistead’s men came over the stone wall near the Angle, the 42<sup>nd</sup> joined several other Union regiments to surge forward and blunt the attack. At Gettysburg the 42<sup>nd</sup> lost 15 men killed, 55 wounded and 4 missing.

The 42<sup>nd</sup>’s “Teepee Monument” can be seen to represent two very different facets of New York City’s past. On one hand, it honors the bravery and sacrifice of men who voluntarily risked their lives for a cause in which they believed. But on the other hand, it is a reminder of the city’s shady political past, a legacy that many wish could be forgotten.

Ironically, Gettysburg has another Tammany Hall connection. Former Union General Francis Barlow, whose wife had nursed him back to health after his terrible wounding on the first day of the battle, later became Attorney General of the State of New York and oversaw the prosecution and conviction of many of the Tammany Hall political bosses.

#### THE 26<sup>TH</sup> NORTH CAROLINA

At Gettysburg, Meade’s Army of the Potomac lost 25% of its strength in killed, wounded, missing and captured; Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia lost over 30%. These losses were not spread evenly among the units present on the field. Some regiments on both sides were not involved in the fighting, instead being held in

reserve, guarding wagon trains, or occupied with other such less hazardous duties. Even some of those engaged sustained only light losses. On the other hand, as is always the case in war, some units bore a disproportionate share of the fight and suffered accordingly. The 26<sup>th</sup> North Carolina Regiment of the Army of Northern Virginia has gone down in history as a prime example of this.

On the first day at Gettysburg, the 26<sup>th</sup> North Carolina was part of the Confederate force attacking the Union soldiers on the northwest side of town. The opponents of the 26<sup>th</sup> were the famous Iron Brigade, composed of regiments from Michigan, Wisconsin and Indiana, which had gained a reputation as tough fighters in numerous prior battles. The 26<sup>th</sup> charged again and again, and the Yankees were slowly forced back across the open fields and ridges, and finally back through the town. Eventually, the Rebs carried the day, but at tremendous cost. At least fifteen different men were shot down while carrying the colors of the 26<sup>th</sup> North Carolina, including two regimental commanders. By the time the sun set on the first day's fighting, the 26<sup>th</sup> had suffered over 500 killed, wounded, or missing.

On July 2<sup>nd</sup> they rested. They would need it, for on July 3<sup>rd</sup> the 26<sup>th</sup> North Carolina, a mere shadow of its former self, was assigned as one of the lead regiments on the Confederate left in what has gone down in history as Pickett's Charge. The North Carolinians would be aiming at the Yankee line just north of the famous Copse of Trees.

As the Rebels made the twenty-minute trek across the 1,000-yard-wide fields toward the waiting Federals, solid shot from Union cannon screamed through their echelons, sometimes killing an entire rank with one shot. Exploding shells tore off arms, legs and heads. The Yankee infantry along Cemetery Ridge held their fire until the enemy was well within range. When the left-hand regiments in the Confederate formation reached the fence along Emmitsburg Road, about 200 yards from the Union line, they were slowed while they crawled through or climbed over. At that moment, the entire northern part of the Union line rose from behind a stone wall and poured a devastating volley into the Confederates. Earlier that day, the Yanks had collected and loaded as many muskets as they could find, so they were able to fire multiple volleys without pausing to reload. Union cannon fired canister into the compact Rebel ranks. To make matters worse, the Rebs had to pass through one fence on the west side of the road, cross the road, then go through

another fence on the east side. Many did not advance further than that second fence.

Among those who continued to move up the gentle slope toward the stone wall were some of the survivors from the 26<sup>th</sup> North Carolina. Their colors had been shot down eight times, but every time a willing hand picked them up and continued forward. Finally, just a handful made it up to the wall. But they could go no further. Together, two of the survivors clutched the regimental colors in front of the wall. Suddenly, Union hands reached out and pulled them over and a Yankee voice sang out “Come over on this side of the Lord!”

Today, two monuments to the 26<sup>th</sup> North Carolina stand at Gettysburg. The first marks the spot where they faced off against the Iron Brigade on the first day of the battle. The second sits just in front of the stone wall on Cemetery Ridge, where a few spent North Carolinians almost breached the Union line.

On these two days of fighting the 26<sup>th</sup> suffered over 700 casualties, giving them a casualty rate of 88%, one of the highest, North or South, in the Battle of Gettysburg.



*26th North Carolina monument near The Angle; a similar monument stands north of town to commemorate the regiment's fighting on the First Day.*

### COLD HARBOR VS. PICKETT'S CHARGE

An interesting contrast exists between two of the Civil War's great "charges". Pickett's Charge, which took place on the third day of the Battle of Gettysburg, has gone down in history as a supreme example of courage, sacrifice, and dedication to a cause. Its legacy was the High Water Mark of the Confederacy, and its veterans looked back upon it with pride for the rest of their years. That it failed did nothing to diminish the esteem of Robert E. Lee in the eyes of Southerners, and maybe even Northerners as well. The regiments that participated in Pickett's Charge lost almost 7,000 soldiers.

Exactly eleven months later, another charge resulted in 7,000 casualties. This was at Cold Harbor, Virginia, and was conducted by 50,000 Union soldiers acting upon the orders of Ulysses S. Grant. Although the percentage of losses was much lower than Pickett's Charge (less than 15% vs. over 50%), Cold Harbor became symbolic of the needless waste of lives in poorly conceived and unimaginative military actions. The attack at Cold Harbor was the only decision that Grant would admit to regretting, and for it he was labeled a "butcher", even in the North.



*Artist's rendition of the Union charge at Cold Harbor.*

As Civil War historian James McPherson puts it, "This contrast speaks volumes about the comparative images of Grant and Lee, North and South, Union and Confederacy."