

Attack on Little Round Top: Union and Confederate Perspective

Overview:

In the late afternoon of July 2, 1863, on the second day of the Battle of Gettysburg, Union forces defended a small hill (Little Round Top) on the extreme left flank of the Union line against repeated attacks by Confederate forces attempting to outflank or get around the Union position. The 20th Maine, commanded by Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, was the last Union regiment on the Union left flank. Attempting to get around Chamberlain was Col. William C. Oates, Commander of the 15th Alabama Infantry. Below are eyewitness reports of the event, written by both Chamberlain and Oates who opposed one and other that fateful day. Read both accounts and consider the way both writers viewed the same action on that famous hill.

Perspective #1: Report of Col. Joshua L. Chamberlain, July 6, 1863:

In the midst of this, an officer from my center informed me that some important movement of the enemy was going on in his front, beyond that of the line with which we were engaged. Mounting a large rock, I was able to see a considerable body of the enemy moving by the flank in rear of their line engaged, and passing from the direction of the foot of Great Round Top through the valley toward the front of my left. The close engagement not allowing any change of front, I immediately stretched my regiment to the left, by taking intervals by the left flank, and at the same time “refusing” my left wing, so that it was nearly at right angles with my right, thus occupying about twice the extent of our ordinary front, some of the companies being brought into single rank when the nature of the ground gave sufficient strength or shelter. My officers and men understood wishes so well that this movement was executed under fire, the right wing keeping up fire, without giving the enemy any occasion to seize or even to suspect their advantage. But we were not a moment too soon; the enemy's flanking column having gained their desired direction, burst upon my left, where they evidently had expected an unguarded flank, with great demonstration.

We opened a brisk fire at close range, which was so sudden and effective that they soon fell back among the rocks and low trees in the valley, only to burst forth again with a shout, and rapidly advanced, firing as they came. They pushed up to within a dozen yards of us before the terrible effectiveness of our fire compelled them to break and take shelter.

They renewed the assault on our whole front, and for an hour the fighting was severe. Squads of the enemy broke through our line in several places, and the fight was literally hand to hand. The edge of the fight rolled backward and forward like a wave. The dead and wounded were now in our front and then in our rear. Forced from our position, we desperately recovered it, and pushed the enemy down to the foot of the slope. The intervals of the struggle were seized to remove our wounded (and those of the enemy also), to gather ammunition from the cartridge-boxes of disabled friend or foe on the field, and even to secure better muskets than the Enfields, which we found did not stand service well. Rude shelters were thrown up of the loose rocks that covered the ground.

Captain Woodward, commanding the Eighty-third Pennsylvania Volunteers, on my right, gallantly maintaining his fight, judiciously and with hearty co-operation made his movements conform to my necessities, so that my right was at no time exposed to a flank attack.

The enemy seemed to have gathered all their energies for their final assault. We had gotten our thin line into as good a shape as possible, when a strong force emerged from the scrub wood in the valley, as well as I could judge, in two lines in echelon by the right, and, opening a heavy fire, the first line came on as if they meant to sweep everything before them. We opened on them as well as we could with our scanty ammunition snatched from the field.

It did not seem possible to withstand another shock like this now coming on. Our loss had been severe. One-half of my left wing had fallen, and a third of my regiment lay just behind us, dead or badly wounded. At this moment my anxiety was increased by a great roar of musketry in my rear, on the farther or northerly slope of Little Round Top, apparently on the flank of the regular brigade, which was in support of Hazlett's battery on the crest behind us. The bullets from this attack struck into my left rear, and I feared that the enemy might have nearly surrounded the Little Round Top, and only a desperate chance was left for us. My ammunition was soon exhausted. My men were firing their last shot and getting ready to "club" their muskets.

It was imperative to strike before we were struck by this overwhelming force in a hand-to-hand fight, which we could not probably have withstood or survived. At that crisis, 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, now not 30 yards away. The effect was surprising; many of the enemy's first line threw down their arms and surrendered. An officer fired his pistol at my head with one hand, while he handed me his sword with the other. Holding fast by our right, and swinging forward our left, we made an extended "right wheel," before which the enemy's second line broke and fell back, fighting from tree to tree, many being captured, until we had swept the valley and cleared the front of nearly our entire brigade.

Meantime Captain Morrill with his skirmishers (sent out from my left flank), with some dozen or fifteen of the U.S. Sharpshooters who had put themselves under his direction, fell upon the enemy as they were breaking, and by his demonstrations, as well as his well-directed fire, added much to the effect of the charge. Having thus cleared the valley and driven the enemy up the western slope of the Great Round Top, not wishing to press so far out as to hazard the ground I was to hold by leaving it exposed to a sudden rush of the enemy, I succeeded (although with some effort to stop my men, who declared they were "on the road to Richmond") in getting the regiment into good order and resuming our original position.

Four hundred prisoners, including two field and several line officers, were sent to the rear. These were mainly from the Fifteenth and Forty-seventh Alabama Regiments,

with some of the Fourth and Fifth Texas. One hundred and fifty of the enemy were found killed and wounded in our front.

Questions to consider after reading Chamberlain's account:

1. What examples are presented to demonstrate the cohesion and fighting spirit of the 20th Maine?
2. What factors did Chamberlain have to take into consideration in deciding to counter-charge down the hill to push back the Confederates?
3. What role did Captain Morrill's skirmishers play in the final counter assault?
4. Do you agree with the position that Chamberlain's leadership was superior during the attack? Provide examples.

Perspective #2: Southern Historical Society Papers: Col. Wm. C. Oates, of Alabama

Just as the left of the Forty seventh regiment was being driven back, I ordered my regiment to change direction to the left, swing around and drive the Federals from the ledge of rocks, partly for the purpose of enfilading their line and relieving the Forty seventh. My men obeyed, and advanced about half way to the enemy's position, but the fire was so destructive that my line wavered like a man trying to walk against a strong wind, and then, slowly, doggedly, gave back a little. Then, with no one upon the right or left of me, my regiment exposed, while the enemy was still under cover, to stand there and die was sheer folly; either to retreat or advance became a necessity. My Lieutenant Colonel, J.B. Feagin, had lost his leg; the heroic Captain Ellison had fallen, while Captain Brainard, one of the bravest and best officers in the regiment, in leading his company forward, fell, exclaiming: "Oh God! that I could see my mother," and instantly expired. Lieutenant John A. Oates, my beloved brother, was pierced through by eight bullets, and fell mortally wounded. Lieutenants Cody, Hill and Scoggin were killed, and Captain Bethune and several other officers were seriously wounded, while the hemorrhage of the ranks was appalling. I again ordered the advance, and knowing the officers and men of that gallant old regiment, I felt sure that they would follow their commander anywhere in the line of duty, though he led them to certain destruction. I passed through the column waving my sword, rushed forward to the ledge, and was promptly followed by my entire command in splendid style. We drove the Federals from their strong defensive position; five times they rallied and charged us - twice coming so near that some of my men had to use the bayonet - but vain was their effort. It was our time now to deal death and destruction to a gallant foe, and the account was speedily settled with a large balance in our favor; but this state of things was not long to continue. The long blue lines of Federal infantry were coming down on my right and closing in on my rear, while some dismounted cavalry were closing the only avenue of escape on my left, and had driven in my skirmishers. I sent my Sergeant Major with a message to Colonel Bowles, of the Fourth Alabama, to come to my relief. He returned and reported the enemy to be between us and the Fourth Alabama, and swarming up the mountain side. By this time, the Federal reinforcements had completely enveloped my right. The lamented Captain Frank Park (who was afterwards killed at Knoxville) came and informed me that the Federals were closing in on our rear. I sent him to ascertain their numbers, and he soon returned, accompanied by Captain Hill (subsequently killed in front of Richmond, and reported that two regiments were coming up behind us, and just then I saw them halt behind a fence, from which they opened fire on us. At Balaklava, Captain Knoll's six hundred had "cannon to right of them, cannon to left of them, cannon in front of them that volleyed and thundered"; but at this moment the Fifteenth Alabama had infantry to the right of them, dismounted cavalry to the left of them, infantry in front of them and infantry in rear of them. With a withering and deadly fire pouring in upon us from every direction, it seemed that the entire command was doomed to destruction. While one man was shot in the face, his right hand or left hand comrade was shot in the side or back. Some were struck simultaneously with two or three balls from different directions. Captains Hill and Park suggested that I should order a retreat; but this seemed impracticable. My dead and wounded were then greater in number than those still on duty. Of 644 men and 42 officers, I had lost 343 men and 19 officers. The dead literally covered the ground. The

blood stood in puddles on the rocks. The ground was soaked with the blood of as brave men as ever fell on the red field of battle. I still hoped for reinforcements. It seemed impossible to retreat; I therefore replied to my captains: "Return to your companies; we will sell out as dearly as possible." Hill made no reply, but Park smiled pleasantly, gave me the military salute, and replied: "All right, sir." On reflection, however, a few moments later, I did order a retreat, but did not undertake to retire in order. I had the officers and men advised that when the signal was given everyone should run in the direction from whence we came, and halt on the top of the mountain.

When the signal was given, we ran like a herd of wild cattle right through the line of dismounted cavalymen. Some of my men as they ran through, seized three or four of the cavalymen by the collar and carried them out prisoners. On the top of the mountain I made an attempt to halt and reform the regiment, but the men were helping wounded and disabled comrades, and scattered in the woods and among the rocks, so that it could not be done. This was just about sunset, and the fighting all along our line had pretty well ceased. At this time there were no Federals on Round Top. They never occupied the top of it until near dark. I was on foot, and in my exertions to reform my regiment on the top of the mountain I was so overcome with heat and fatigue that I fainted, and was carried back near to the point from which our advance commenced. It was now dark, and here we bivouacked for the night. After all had got up, I ordered the rolls of the companies to be called. When the battle commenced, four hours previously, I had the strongest and finest regiment in Hood's division. Its effectives numbered nearly 700 officers and men. Now 225 answered at roll call, and more than one half of my officers had been left on the field. Some of my men that night voluntarily went back across the mountain, and in the darkness penetrated the Federal line for the purpose of removing some of our wounded. They reached the scene, and started out with some of the wounded officers, but were discovered and shot at by the Federal pickets, and had, in consequence, to leave the wounded, but succeeded in getting back to the regiment. These men reported to me that Round Top was even at that late hour only occupied by a skirmish line.

After reading Oates account, answer the following questions:

1. What disadvantages and difficulties did Oates' regiment face in attacking the Union position on Little Round Top?
2. What was Oates assessment of his chances to successfully take the hill?
3. What reasons does Oates give for his regiments' retreat?
4. Describe the differences in Oates and Chamberlain's version of events and the reasons for the results of the engagement.