

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Pickett's Charge: Another Perspective

By **John M. Priest**

When many people think about the Battle of Gettysburg, two very famous segments of the battle generally come to mind: Colonel Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain's Spartan Defense of Little Round Top and Major General George Edward Pickett's heroic but futile attempt to break the Union center along Cemetery Ridge. Traditionally, both lionize the determined courage of both armies in the face of impending annihilation, and consequently, historians, have fought and refought them to the point that "everyone" knows what really happened and therefore, nothing new remains to discover.

I thought the same thing when I began researching *Into the Fight: Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg* (White Mane: Shippensburg, 1998). I honestly did not expect to find a great deal of new information. I merely wanted to investigate the attack for myself. The more I delved into the topic, the more I realized I did not know as much as I thought I did.

The popular history of the attack asserts that the Confederate forces brought 15,000 officers and men onto the field and lost an overwhelming number of them. Early scholarship tended to overstate the casualties in the charge reporting that the Confederates sacrificed as much as 75%-85%, which translated into 11,250–12,750 casualties (killed, wounded, and missing). The army of Northern Virginia would never have recovered from such a catastrophic loss and President Jefferson Davis would probably have accepted Robert E. Lee's resignation after the battle.

Another image emerges from this monumental forlorn hope. In Ken Burns' documentary, *The Civil War*, the novelist Shelby Foote regretfully observed, that unlike the Confederates who fearlessly sallied forth on that humid, stifling July afternoon, he did not think that he could have done that. What made the Confederates so very different from our soldiers of today? Were they more fearless? More loyal? More unflinching than the modern soldiers of today? Had they not learned from their previous battles, in particular, Malvern Hill, that artillery would decimate their infantry formations before they reached the Federal guns?

For many the charge represents the futility of linear combat against entrenched positions. For others it represents the beau ideal of Southern manhood selflessly hurling themselves against a numerically superior foe in support of The Lost Cause. The

Confederates in the ranks that day understood all too well, what they faced and decided that it was not a good day to die.

I am not going to rehash why Lee decided to order the attack because I would be second-guessing him. I am not going to critique Lieutenant General James Longstreet's culpability in the charge's failure. Nor am I going to castigate Pickett for being inept or try to rename the charge to make it more historically accurate. History is about what happened and that is where I am focusing my attention.

Numbers

Pickett's Division numbered 5,820 officers and men. Brigadier General James Johnston Pettigrew's Division had 3,784 and Major General Isaac Ridgeway Trimble's Division had 1,916 present for an attacking force of 11,484 reporting for duty. On July 3, Pickett formed his three brigades in two lines of battle. Brigadier General James Lawson Kemper's and Brigadier General Richard Brooke Garnett's brigades in Pickett's Division formed the first line and, less skirmishers and file closers occupied, a 2,914 foot front. Brigadier General Lewis Addison Armistead's regiments held the second line and covered 1,750 feet. On the northern end of the formation, Pettigrew's four battered brigades fell in along a 2,700-foot front. Behind his division, Isaac Trimble's North Carolinians occupied about a 1,530 foot long front.

The formula for calculating the length of a Civil War infantry formation comes from Jack Coggins' *Arms and Equipment of the Civil War* (New York: Doubleday, 1962)—number of men on line divided by number of ranks times two feet. (5,614 men/2 ranks x 2' per man = 5,614 feet or about 1.1 miles. By any standards, that is a very long and unwieldy formation. Had it stayed intact, it would have struck the Federal line on a much larger front than the line, which reached the Emmitsburg Road. By the time Pettigrew arrived at the Emmitsburg Road, his formation had shrunk to around 800 feet, which meant that somewhere across that bloody plain, he should have taken an astonishing 1,900 casualties. Pickett's original line of 2,900 feet had diminished to around 1,400 feet implying he had lost over 50% of his effective strength. Their combined losses should have been an astounding 3,400 officers and men, which meant that the Federal artillery would have really outperformed itself. Normally artillery fire accounted, for around 10% casualties and not the astounding 61% reduction of the front line as it went into the Emmitsburg Road. With losses of that magnitude, even the most stalwart of men would not have continued the attack beyond the shelter of the road.

Puzzled by the greatly reduced frontage, I decided to verify the casualties the hard way. I turned to Kathy Georg Harrison's and John W. Busey's *Nothing But Glory* ((Gettysburg: Thomas Publications, 1993), H. E. Howard's *The Virginian Regimental Histories Series* (Appomattox, VA: H.E. Howard, Inc., 1982-2004), and Weymouth T. Jordan's *North Carolina Troops, 1861–1865: A Roster*, 17 vols. (Raleigh: North Carolina Department of Archives and History, 2004) and identified the casualties for the North Carolina and Virginia regiments in a nominal search of the rosters. Steven H. Stubbs loaned me the then unpublished Gettysburg Chapter from *They Suffered the Most*, his

regimental history of the 11th Mississippi (Steven Stubbs, *Duty-Honor-Valor: The Story of the Eleventh Mississippi Infantry Regiment* (Philadelphia, MS: Quail Ridge Press, 2000). He identified every casualty of the regiment by name. David G. Martin, *Confederate Monuments at Gettysburg*, vol. 1 (Highstown, NJ: Longstreet House, 1986) provided the losses for Fry's regiments.

During the entire duration of the attack Kemper and Garnett lost almost 1,700 officers and men. With the Federal artillery, having allegedly taken out about 1,500 men before reaching the Emmitsburg Road that meant the two brigades suffered only 200 casualties in the supposedly deadliest part of the field—the assault against the Copse of Trees. Similarly, Pettigrew's front line sacrificed around 1,700 in the battle, 200 men less than they supposedly lost before making the final attack against Cemetery Ridge. Something did not seem right.

If the two divisions lost 3,400 men before arriving at the road, and they lost 3,400 during the entire engagement, that meant that they miraculously took no hits in the final struggle along the stonewall.

The numbers do not lie. A nominal study of all of the regiments involved provided the following:

Pickett's two front brigades tallied 1,583 casualties; Pettigrew accounted for another 1,592 killed, wounded and, missing/captured. Armistead contributed 1,057 casualties and Trimble added another 570, which brings the losses to 4,802 of 11,484 engaged: 42%. Something did not make sense.

What really happened? On July 30, 1863, Captain Joseph Graham, commanding the Charlotte Battery (North Carolina) on the northern end of the Confederate artillery line on Seminary Ridge, wrote his father, William, the following about the infantry attack:

Our men advanced steadily, but I fear with too feeble determination, some up to the work, others, not so far, and so on, 'til some did not go more than 150 yards....The lines moved right through my Battery, and I feared then I could see a want of resolution in our men. And I heard many say, "that is worse than Malvern Hill," and "I don't hardly think that position can be carried," etc., etc., enough to make me apprehensive about the result. Davis' Miss. Brigade was the first to give way. The slaughter is represented as terrible, but so far as I would judge, it was not near as bad as reported.¹

Further research verified what the captain wrote.

¹ Joseph Graham to William A. Graham, July 30th, 1863, William A. Graham Papers, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, NC.

Before the Charge

Pettigrew's Part of the Line

Orderly Sergeant Junius Kimble (Company A, 14th Tennessee, Fry's Brigade), after standing on Seminary Ridge to observe the Federal position about one mile to the east on Cemetery Ridge, walked back to his brigade on the western side of the crest, saying to himself, "June Kimble, are you going to do your duty today?" After telling God that he would, he rejoined his regiment where Lieutenant Pembroke S. Roberts asked him what the Federal line looked like. Kimble resignedly told those around him, "Boys, if we have to go, it will be hot for us, and we will have to do our best."² Private Wiley Woods (Company F, 1st Tennessee, Fry's Brigade), asked Sergeant Stant Denson (Company A) to carry the colors if he fell.³

In the 26th North Carolina (Colonel James K. Marshall's Brigade), Captain Thomas J. Cureton (Company B) and his friend Captain Samuel B. Wagg (Company A), having survived the slaughter along Willoughby Run on July 1, quietly strolled to the top of Seminary Ridge to assess the terrain and the Federal position. He later wrote, "Not even a hill to protect a charging line from artillery. The ridge we occupied was splendid for defense."⁴

Lieutenant Colonel George T. "English" Gordon, former British officer, (34th North Carolina, Colonel Lee Joshua Lowrance's Brigade), having known Pickett before the war, walked up to his old friend from the second line. "Pickett," he emphatically said, "my men are not going up –today." Pickett responded, "But, Gordon, they must go up; you must make them go up." "You know, Pickett, I go as far with you as any other man, if only for old acquaintance sake, but my men until lately have been down at the seashore, only under the fire from heavy guns of ships, but for the last day or two they have lost heavily under infantry fire and are very sore, and they will not go up to-day."⁵

Lieutenant William H. Peel (Company C, 11th Mississippi, Brigadier General Joseph Robert Davis's Brigade) studied his silent men, their gray faces reflecting their fear.

² June Kimble, "Tennesseans at Gettysburg: the Retreat," in *Confederate Veteran*, vol. 18, (1910): 460.

³ Wiley Woods, "The First Tennessee Flag at Gettysburg," in *Confederate Veteran*, Battles, 1861-1932, n.d., Box 1, Special Collections Department, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University, Durham, NC, unpublished article.

⁴ Janet B. Hewett, ed., *Supplement to the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 100 vols. (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing, 1994-2001), 5: pt. 1, 430..

⁵Robert A. Bright, "Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg," in *Confederate Veteran*, vol. 38, (1930): 263.

Pickett's Part of the Line

As was customary, particularly before a terrific engagement, soldiers discarded things, which they believed would hinder or negate their chances to go to Heaven. Therefore, Major Edmund Berkeley, who commanded the 8th Virginia (Garnett's Brigade), buried the poker deck which he had carried since the battle of Fredericksburg.⁶

On Pickett's right front, on the Spangler Farm, Kemper's Brigade rested on the western base of the ridge straddling the farm lane. Colonel Joseph C. Mayo, Jr. (3rd Virginia, Garnett's Brigade) noticed his "boys" lying in the grass, ominously quiet. He recollected them as "Still and thoughtful as Quakers at a love feast." Turning to Colonel Waller Tazwell Patton (7th Virginia, he expressed his concern. This news has brought about an awful seriousness with our fellows, Taz." Patton concurred, "and well may they be serious if they really knew what was in store for them. I have been up where Dearing is and looked across at the Yankees."⁷

General Robert E. Lee came upon Lieutenant General James Longstreet (First Corps, commanding) with Pickett, standing under a shade tree to avoid the terrible heat. Captain James Risque Hutter (Company H, 11th Virginia) eavesdropped on the conversation between Longstreet and Lee. He clearly heard Longstreet tell the commanding general, "His command would do what any body of men on earth dared to do, but no troops, could dislodge the enemy from their strong position. Pickett immediately asserted that they could take the works to which Lee told Longstreet to put the question to the men. At the general's request, Hutter took his company and Captain Thomas Horton's Company B to the hilltop along the Emmitsburg Road. After quickly seeing the position on Cemetery Ridge, they turned to each other and shook hands while saying "Good-bye." An enlisted man told them, Boys, many a one of us will bite the dust here to-day, but we will say to General Lee if he wants them driven out we will do it."⁸

During the Attack

No sooner had the assault begun than Federal artillery on Cemetery Hill broke Marshall's North Carolina Brigade before it reached the top of the hill at the Bliss orchard. Pickett, seeing the men scatter immediately send Captain Edward R. Baird and Lieutenant W. Stuart Symington north into Marshall's regiments to stop the route. He also sent Captain Robert Bright back to Spangler's Woods with instructions to tell Longstreet he would need reinforcements to hold Cemetery Ridge once he got there. Symington and Baird succeeded only in capturing the flag of the 47th North Carolina by ripping it from its staff as the color bearer raced toward the safety of Seminary Ridge.⁹

⁶ Edmund Berkeley, "Rode With Pickett," in *Confederate Veteran*, vol. 28, (1930): 175.

⁷ Major James Dearing commanded Pickett's Division artillery. Joseph C. Mayo, Jr., "Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg," in the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, vol. 34, 323-9.

⁸ J. Risque Hutter, "Ninth Virginia, Kemper's Brigade," *The Richmond Times*, September 10, 1905.

⁹ Robert A. Bright, "Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg," in *Confederate Veteran*, vol. 38, (1930): 264.

The panic spread north into Brigadier General Joseph Robert Davis's Mississippi Brigade. Lieutenant Peel (11th Mississippi) heard the officers and sergeants constantly repeat to their men something which he had never heard before, "Steady, boys." When part of the regiment turned toward the rear, Lieutenant William W. Shepard, Pettigrew's aide-de-camp tried to rally them and failed. According to Major J. McLeod ordered his regiment, the 7th North Carolina, to level their bayonets but could not stem the rout.¹⁰

On his way back to find Longstreet Captain Bright rode into a group of men, who were heading rearward. Halting them, he admonished them to turn about and go into the fight. "What are you running for?" he asked. One of the men responded, "Why, good gracious, captain, ain't you runnin' yourself?" The captain suddenly realized that he was also heading west.

Bright came upon Longstreet and asked for reinforcements. Longstreet, in reference to Pettigrew's part of the line, asked, "Where are the troops that were placed on your flank?" "Look over your shoulder and you will see them." the aide replied. The general glanced to the east, toward the ridge on his immediate right. At that moment Lieutenant Colonel Arthur Fremantle, Coldstream Guards, arrived. He exclaimed, "I wouldn't have missed this for anything." Longstreet shot back, "The devil you wouldn't. I would liked to have missed it very much! We've attacked, and been repulsed. Look there!" Fremantle could not believe what he saw. The field was full of soldiers walking rearward. He recalled that it looked like Piccadilly Circus at market time. Longstreet then commanded, "Captain Bright, ride to General Pickett and tell him what you have heard me say to Colonel Fremantle."¹¹

Pickett already had serious problems with which to deal. Garnett's Brigade after crossing the last ridge encountered a strong skirmish line along the western side of the Emmitsburg Road across from the Codori buildings. The six companies from the 69th, 72nd, and 106th Pennsylvania having thrown up a small rail barricade along their front opened fire on Garnett's skirmishers, sending them back to the main line. The brigade, descended into the hollow, halted, and returned fire. Virginians began melting away from the line in clusters. Pickett and his two remaining aides galloped into the confusion to stop the panic but failed to do so.

Pettigrew's Line

As the division passed over the ridge into Bliss's orchard, canister from the Union artillery to the east clattered into his already shaky regiments. Those who had not turned about or been hit surged into the marshy creek bottom hill east of the Bliss farmhouse. Most of them did not leave its protection, further reducing the division's frontage.

¹⁰ Richard Rollins, ed., *Pickett's Charge: Eyewitness Accounts* (Redondo Beach, CA: Rank and File Publications, 1994), 254; William B. Shepard, September 18, 1877, in the *Raleigh Observer*, November 30, 1877.

¹¹ Robert A. Bright, "Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg," in *Confederate Veteran*, vol. 38, (1930): 265.

Kemper's Brigade

Kemper's Brigade, on the far right of Pickett's Division, by the time is moved forward over the hill toward the Rodgers house, had lost about 500 men— some from artillery fire from Little Round Top to the southeast, but the majority from heatstroke and sunstroke. Others, like one very frightened soldier, decided it was not a good day to die. As the brigade crested the ridge, it walked into heavy artillery fire, which forced it to flank left (north) into the hollow on Garnett's flank. One fellow threw himself into the trenches, which the Florida Brigade had dug along the ridge, and landed on top of Adjutant James B. Johnson (5th Florida). The lieutenant asked him if he was wounded. "No, sir, but I can't go forward. I know I am disgracing my family, but I can't go." The lieutenant understood. He hit the man in the shoulder with his sword hilt, told him to head to the rear, that he was wounded. The fellow shucked his accoutrements and took off for the rear lines.¹²

The Emmitsburg Road to the Stone Wall at the Angle

Casualty Returns

Numbers really do not lie. The evidence indicates that a substantial number of men, who got into the Emmitsburg Road, never left the security of its sunken roadbed. Statistically, artillery inflicted about 10% casualties in most battles, Antietam being the exception, where it accounted for an astounding 40% of the losses. Given that, here are the losses of Pickett's, Pettigrew's, and Trimble's divisions, less assumed artillery casualties.

Pickett's brigades, excluding artillery losses were 2,376 casualties: 442 killed, 572 wounded, 750 wounded and captured, and 613 captured out of 5,238 for an average of 45% casualties.

In Pettigrew's Division of 3,373 officers and men, he lost 216 dead, 459 wounded, 223 wounded and captured, 535 captured for a total of 1,433 casualties, 43% of his total strength.

Trimble's brigades entered the fight with a combined strength of 1,724 rank and file and suffered the following losses: 63 killed, 83 wounded, 138 wounded and captured, and 230 captured for a total of 514 casualties or 30%.

By Civil War standards, those casualties were acceptable. Of the 4,323 casualties, 17% were killed, 26% were wounded, and 58% were captured. Normally those casualties would have read 17% killed, 66% wounded, and 17% wounded/captured and captured. The exceptionally high number of captured were rounded up in the Emmitsburg Road where they had taken shelter.

¹² James B. Johnson, "Limited Review of What One Man Saw of the Battle of Gettysburg," in Richard Rollins, ed. *Pickett's Charge: Eyewitness Accounts* (Redondo Beach, CA: Rank and File, 1994), 164.

Recall that the attack front shrank from over 5,280 feet to 2,200 feet, meaning that about 68% for whatever reason did not get close to the Federal line. Armistead's frontage, in the second line, shrank from about 2,100 feet to around 750 feet by the time his brigade reached the Emmitsburg Road, a reduction of 64%.

Pickett: Present 3,197. Casualties: 2,376 (74%). Killed: 442 (14%).
Wounded: 572 (18%). Captured and missing: 1,362 42%

Pettigrew: Present 2,024. Casualties: 1,433 (71%). Killed: 216 (11%).
Wounded: 459 (23%). Captured and missing: 758 (37%).

Trimble: Present 1,034. Casualties: 514 (50%). Killed: 63 (6%).
Wounded: 83 (8%). Captured and missing: 368 (36%).

Union and Confederate accounts clearly state that most of the captured were found in the Emmitsburg Road and in the killing zone between the Road and the Federal line. The fact that captured men outnumbered the killed and wounded indicates that many did not leave the cover of the roadbed. Going back to the third paragraph of this article, when the historical brochure said that the Confederates suffered 75% casualties, they were referring to the men who completed or nearly completed the charge but not to the overall casualties for the number of troops who began the attack.

Seminary Ridge

The Aftermath

Back on Seminary Ridge, General Lee personally ordered Sergeant Billy Young (Company I, 7th Tennessee), who had gone as far as the Stone Wall at the Angle, to rally the men as they walked back. The sergeant screamed at them to halt where they were. Flying into a rage when they refused to comply, he resorted to slamming them with his rifle butt. Unable to stop them, he walked back to Lee, dejected. The general leaned from the saddle, patted the boy on the shoulder and said, "My brave boy, if I had an army like you this would not have happened."¹³ What had Lee seen which did not make the traditional renditions of the charge.

Very shortly thereafter, Lieutenant John H. Moore (Company B, 7th Tennessee) walked over to Lieutenant Colonel Samuel B. Sheppard (7th Tennessee) and bitterly complained, "Colonel, if them damned fellows hadn't broke on the right [Armistead's Brigade] we could have held that ridge."¹⁴

Pickett, rode up to Longstreet, his face streaked with tears. "General, I am ruined," he cried, "My division is gone – it is destroyed." Longstreet bluntly reassured

¹³ F. S. Harris, "From Gettysburg," in the *Lebanon Democrat*, August 10, 1899.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

Pickett that things were really not as bad as they appeared. He reassured Pickett that he would find an impressive number of his men within a few hours.¹⁵

Final Thoughts

Soldiers in many fundamental respects have not changed throughout the centuries. In our current environment, we tend to overcompensate for the deplorable treatment of our Vietnam War Veterans by referring to everyone who enters the service as a “hero” and, in so doing, minimize the real meaning of the word. We also tend to use the word “coward” too freely. The same applies to popular Civil War history. We idolize the men in both armies, but the Confederates disproportionately so, as unwavering men of valor, who never shrank from duty in the face of battle. Nothing could be farther from the truth.

The British poet, Siegfried Sassoon, in “Suicide in the Trenches” wrote, “Pray that you may never know the Hell where youth and laughter go.” The common bond that all combat veterans share is that they have faced death and found it less than desirable. It is easy to call someone a coward from the safety of a comfortable room, without the constant fear of being randomly killed by a stray bullet, or friendly fire much less by the enemy. It is one thing to see a person die on television or in a movie than to be there next to them when it happens, whether it is violently or peacefully in a friend’s arms, knowing that a person can do nothing to reverse the inevitable.

The Confederates going into Pickett’s charge knew what it was like to march into artillery and waiting small arms fire. They had seen it in every battle, in particular at Malvern Hill during The Seven Days Battles in the summer of 1862, where they charged headlong into a hidden line of artillery. In their eyes, they were not cowards but pragmatists. They had reached the limits of their endurance and decided that they would die at the place of their choosing.

¹⁵ William Youngblood, “Unwritten History of the Gettysburg Campaign,” in the *Southern Historical Society Papers*, vol. 37, 317.