

The Battle of Gettysburg, 1863

On June 24, 1863, General Robert E. Lee led his Confederate Army across the Potomac River and headed towards Pennsylvania. In response to this threat President Lincoln replaced his army commander, General Joseph Hooker, with General George Mead. As Lee's troops poured into Pennsylvania, Mead led the Union Army north from Washington. Meade's effort was inadvertently helped by Lee's cavalry commander, Jeb Stuart, who, instead of reporting Union movements to Lee, had gone off on a raid deep in the Union rear. This action left Lee blind to the Union's position. When a scout reported the Union approach, Lee ordered his scattered troops to converge west of the small village of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania.

On July 1, some Confederate infantry headed to Gettysburg to seize much-needed shoes and clashed west of town with Union cavalry. The Union commander, recognizing the importance of holding Gettysburg because a dozen roads converged there, fought desperately to hold off the Rebel advance. Other Union troops briefly stopped some Rebels north of town. During heavy fighting, the Confederates drove the Union troops through the streets of Gettysburg to Cemetery Hill south of the town. Lee ordered General Richard Ewell, now commander of the late Stonewall Jackson's old units, to attack this position "if practicable", a vague order that Jackson normally took to mean launch an all-out attack. Ewell was not Jackson. He decided not to attack once he saw the Union artillery atop the hill. Had he attacked and succeeded, it might have changed the course of the war.

The rest of the armies arrived that first night. The Union army established a defensive position resembling a fish hook, with Culp's Hill and the two Round Tops anchoring each end. Lee decided to attack both flanks the next day. On his right flank, Union troops mistakenly shifted out of position, leaving Little Round Top undefended. At the last moment, a Union general rushed troops in just ahead of the charging Confederates. After a long day of fighting, they barely held the position. The misplaced bluecoats were pushed back through The Peach Orchard, The Wheat Field, and Devil's Den. On the left, Ewell's assault failed due mainly to his poor leadership.

Thinking the Union center had weakened from these attacks, Lee decided the next day to hit it first with artillery, and then an infantry charge led by George Pickett's division. Stuart's late-arriving cavalry was to come in behind the Union center at the same time, but they were held off by Union cavalry led by a young General George Custer. After an hour's duel, Union artillery deceived the Confederates into thinking their guns were knocked out. Then 13,000 Rebels marched across the field in front of Cemetery Hill, only to have the Union artillery open up on them, followed by deadly Federal infantry firepower. Scarcely half made it back to their own lines. In all, Lee lost more than a third of his men before retreating to Virginia. Meade, a naturally cautious man, decided the loss of one-quarter of his men had been enough, and only feebly tried to pursue Lee, missing an opportunity to crush him.

"The rebels are coming!"

Tillie Pierce was born in 1848 and when the battle began, had lived all her life

The North suffered an estimated 23,000 casualties during the battle (killed, wounded and captured) while the South suffered an estimated 31,000.

Photographer Matthew Brady documented the battlefield and exhibited his images in his New York studio. The photos caused a sensation. However, the general public had to wait almost 40 years until the development of photo-engraving allowed printing of the pictures.

Tillie Pierce married Horace Alleman in 1871. She moved to Selingsgrove, Pa. where her husband practiced law. She died in 1914.

in the village of Gettysburg. Her father made his living as a butcher and the family lived above his shop in the heart of town. Tillie witnessed the entire battle and published her observations twenty-six years after the event.

Tillie attended the "Young Ladies Seminary" a finishing school near her home. She was attending school on June 26 when the cry "the Rebels are coming!" reverberated through the town's sleepy streets:

"We were having our literary exercises on Friday afternoon, at our Seminary, when the cry reached our ears. Rushing to the door, and standing on the front portico we beheld in the direction of the Theological Seminary, a dark, dense mass, moving toward town. Our teacher, Mrs. Eyster, at once said:

'Children, run home as quickly as you can.'

"It did not require repeating. I am satisfied some of the girls did not reach their homes before the Rebels were in the streets.

"As for myself, I had scarcely reached the front door, when, on looking up the street, I saw some of the men on horseback. I scrambled in, slammed shut the door, and hastening to the sitting room, peeped out between the shutters.

"What a horrible sight! There they were, human beings! Clad almost in rags, covered with dust, riding wildly, pell-mell down the hill toward our home! Shouting, yelling most unearthly, cursing, brandishing their revolvers, and firing right and left.

"I was fully persuaded that the Rebels had actually come at last. What they would do with us was a fearful question to my young mind.

"Soon the town was filled with infantry, and then the searching and ransacking began in earnest.

"They wanted horses, clothing, anything and almost everything they could conveniently carry away.

"Nor were they particular about asking. Whatever suited them they took. They did, however, make a formal demand of the town authorities, for a large supply of flour, meat, groceries, shoes, hats and (doubtless, not least in their estimations), ten barrels of whisky; or, in lieu of this five thousand dollars.

"But our merchants and bankers had too often heard of their coming, and had already shipped their wealth to places of safety. Thus it was, that a few days after, the citizens of York were compelled to make up our proportion of the Rebel requisition."

July 1: Escape to a Safe House and the first encounter with the tragedy of war

As the sounds of battle increase and the fighting nears her home, Tillie joins a neighbor as she and her children flee to her father's (Jacob Weikert) house three miles south of town near Round Top. Tillie's parents elect to stay in town:

"At last we reached Mr. Weikert's and were gladly welcomed to their home.

"It was not long after our arrival, until Union artillery came hurrying by. It was indeed a thrilling sight. How the men impelled their horses! How the officers urged the men as they all flew past toward the sound of the battle!

Now the road is getting all cut up; they take to the fields, and all is in anxious, eager hurry! Shouting, lashing the horses, cheering the men, they all rush madly on.

"Suddenly we behold an explosion; it is that of a caisson. We see a man thrown high in the air and come down in a wheat field close by. He is picked up and carried into the house. As they pass by I see his eyes are blown out and his whole person seems to be one black mass. The first words I hear him say are: 'Oh dear! I forgot to read my Bible to-day! What will my poor wife and children say'

"I saw the soldiers carry him up stairs; they laid him upon a bed and wrapped him in cotton. How I pitied that poor man! How terribly the scenes of war were being irresistibly portrayed before my vision."

July 2: Officer brutality

During the battle's second day fighting shifts to the area around Little Round Top. Tillie remains in the Weikert home carrying water to passing Union troops while others bake bread for the soldiers. Towards noon she witnesses an incident at the front of the house:

"This forenoon another incident occurred which I shall ever remember. While the infantry were passing, I noticed a poor, worn-out soldier crawling along on his hands and knees. An officer yelled at him, with cursing, to get up and march. The poor fellow said he could not, whereupon the officer, raising his sword, struck him down three or four times. The officer passed on. Little caring what he had done. Some of his comrades at once picked up the prostrate form and carried the unfortunate man into the house. After several hours of hard work the sufferer was brought back to consciousness. He seemed quite a young man, and was suffering from sunstroke received on the forced march. As they were carrying him in, some of the men who had witnessed this act of brutality remarked:

'We will mark that officer for this.'

"It is a pretty well established fact that many a brutal officer fell in the battle, from being shot other than by the enemy."

July 3: The surgeon's work

Lee aims his attack at the center of the Union line. The ferocity of the battle forces Tillie and the others to flee to a farm house farther from the fighting. Late in the day, as the battle subsides, the family decides to return to the Weikert farm:

"Toward the close of the afternoon it was noticed that the roar of the battle was subsiding, and after all had become quiet we started back to the Weikert home. As we drove along in the cool of the evening, we noticed that everywhere confusion prevailed. Fences were thrown down near and far; knapsacks, blankets and many other articles, lay scattered here and there. The whole country seemed filled with desolation.

"Upon reaching the place I fairly shrank back aghast at the awful sight presented. The approaches were crowded with wounded, dying and dead. The air was filled with moanings, and groanings. As we passed on toward the house, we were compelled to pick our steps in order that we might not tread on the prostrate bodies.

"When we entered the house we found it also completely filled with the wounded. We hardly knew what to do or where to go. They, however, removed most of the wounded, and thus after a while made room for the family.

"As soon as possible, we endeavored to make ourselves useful by rendering assistance in this heartrending state of affairs. I remember Mrs. Weikert went through the house, and after searching awhile, brought all the muslin and linen she could spare. This we tore into bandages and gave them to the surgeons, to bind up the poor soldier's wounds.

"By this time, amputating benches had been placed about the house. I must have become inured to seeing the terrors of battle, else I could hardly have gazed upon the scenes now presented. I was looking out of the windows facing the front yard. Near the basement door, and directly underneath the window I was at, stood one of these benches. I saw them lifting the poor men upon it, then the surgeons sawing and cutting off arms and legs, then again probing and picking bullets from the flesh.

"Some of the soldiers fairly begged to be taken next, so great was their suffering, and so anxious were they to obtain relief.

"I saw the surgeons hastily put a cattle horn over the mouths of the wounded ones, after they were placed upon the bench. At first I did not understand the meaning of this but upon inquiry, soon learned that that was their mode of administering chloroform, in order to produce unconsciousness. But the effect in some instances were not produced; for I saw the wounded throwing themselves wildly about, and shrieking with pain while the operation was going on.

"To the south of the house, and just outside of the yard, I noticed a pile of limbs higher than the fence. It was a ghastly sight! Gazing upon these, too often the trophies of the amputating bench, I could have no other feeling, than that the whole scene was one of cruel butchery."

The battle's aftermath

Hearing that her family is safe in town, it is decided that Tillie should remain at the Weikert farm for a few days after the battle. On July 5, Tillie and some friends climb to the crest of Little Round Top and survey the battlefield below:

"By this time the Union dead had been principally carried off the field, and those that remained were Confederates.

"As we stood upon those mighty boulders, and looked down into the chasms between, we beheld the dead lying there just as they had fallen during the struggle. From the summit of Little Round Top, surrounded by the wrecks of battle, we gazed upon the valley of death beneath. The view there spread out before us was terrible to contemplate! It was an awful spectacle! Dead soldiers, bloated horses, shattered cannon and caissons, thousands of small arms. In fact everything belonging to army equipments, was there in one confused and indescribable mass."

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