
History vs. Hollywood

July 2, 1863

1. Confederate general James Longstreet’s conversation with the British observer Arthur Fremantle raises some interesting but also historically ironic thoughts. What are they?
2. In what ways do the scenes with Robert E. Lee capture the burden of command?
3. How is there uncertainty and disagreement among Confederate generals in planning the battle on July 2?
4. Why do you think the July 2 scenes are so heavily focused on the story of Joshua Chamberlain and the 20th Maine? Why is the story appealing?
5. How does the relationship of the Chamberlain brothers demonstrate a revealing component of life in Civil War fighting units?
6. In what ways is the film effective in conveying the desperateness of the struggle for Little Round Top?
7. How do these scenes compare to the fuller story of Little Round Top we discussed?
8. In your view, what were the strengths and weaknesses of the portion viewed today?


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Accompanying primary source:

***Ellis Spears’s account of the 20th Maine at Gettysburg appeared in the July 24, 1863, issue of the* Portland Daily Press:**

“Our brigade came on the [Gettysburg] ground about 4 o’clock in the afternoon, having marched that day and most of the night before. It was stationed on the extreme left of our lines, our regiment being on the left of the brigade. We were placed on a low wooded hill which sloped slightly in front and on the left, and our left wing extended down the hill.

“We immediately threw out a company of skirmishers to the front in the hollow, or rather level space, between our line and a high hill a hundred rods distant. We had not been in position more than fifteen minutes before the enemy came up quickly in large force from the right, and we were soon sharply engaged.

“Disregarding our right they threw their whole force upon our left. The Colonel perceiving that their object was to gain our rear, bent back the left wing until it was nearly perpendicular to the first line and facing the enemy.

“It may seem strange, but one can more easily describe a battle who was not actually in it. There were shells bursting over our heads and about us[,] but we were not then aware of it. I remember that there was noise so loud that the shouted orders could scarcely be heard; that bullets hissed all about; splinters flew from the trees[,] and the men were dropping every second. There was no shelter; the trees were small and the ground smooth, and the men faced the storm of bullets.

 “After awhile there was a lull and we reformed our shattered companies; but the enemy soon came on again more fiercely than before, still concentrating his fire on our left. Our line[,] reduced one-half, had begun to surge back and forth.

“At one time our dead were within the advanced lines of the enemy; but just at this critical moment, in the hottest part of the fight, when it was perhaps uncertain whether we should hold the place assigned us or be driven back, the Colonel ordered a charge!

“Nothing could have been more opportune. It saved the regiment perhaps from defeat and certainly gave it all the success which was gained. The men[,] encouraged by the order, rushed down over the slope with yells and so quickly that the rebels who were concealed amongst the rocks nearest us had no time to escape.

“All who could, ran. A mass fled along the left of the hill in front of us; they passed between the hills and a stone wall where Capt. Morrill[,] who with a company of skirmishers, had been separated from the regiment by the unexpected advance of the enemy from the right, had taken refuge.

“The skirmishers, as the enemy came near, rose up and poured into them a well directed volley. Some [Confederates] dropped, some ran, while others halted and were taken prisoners.

“The Colonel[,] who had been ordered simply to hold his position, discontinued the pursuit, collected and sent to the rear the prisoners, and had the wounded, those of the enemy as well as our own, properly cared for.

“It was dark when an order came that Col. Chamberlain should take the hill which I have before mentioned. The men were worn out with marching and fighting and parching with thirst, but ready and with fixed bayonets we climbed the steep hillside, stumbling in the darkness over rocks and fallen trees, and took the crest! We captured there twenty-five prisoners and one officer—an Aide in Gen. Ord’s staff.

“In the morning we were relieved by the Penn. Reserves. We took in all 308 prisoners, totaling 12 commissioned officers, from four different regts.—the 4th and 5th Texas, and 15th and 47th Alabama. We lost 130 killed and wounded.

“Col. Chamberlain handled the [20th Maine] regt. in a splendid manner. Though constantly exposed to the hottest of the fire, no officer could be cooler or more skillful and prompt to make use of favorable opportunities. He was personally complimented by Brigade, Division and Corps Commanders.

“You will be gratified, I know, to learn that the 20th fully sustained the proud reputation of the State of Maine.”