

BRIGADIER GENERAL
STRONG VINCENT



A HERO OF GETTYSBURG

By
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M

en of Erie have played major roles in American history. Daniel Dobbins - who helped to build Commodore O.H. Perry's fleet, and Captain Charles Gridley, commander of Admiral George Dewey's flagship, USS "Olympia" in the Spanish American War. The most important of them all was Vincent. His skill, dedication, bravery, and sacrifice mark him as a truly important figure of the Battle of Gettysburg, the Civil War, and American history.

Strong Vincent was born June 17, 1837 at Waterford, Pennsylvania. His family moved to Erie, where his father was engaged in business with an iron foundry, and in banking. Strong studied at Erie Academy, 1843-1850. As only a young boy, he went to work in the foundry as an iron-moulder, and then into the foundry office as a clerk. ¹

In 1854, he entered Trinity College, Hartford, Connecticut. Although he was well-liked and doing well in his studies, he was forced to leave Trinity in 1856. ² He was dating his future wife, Elizabeth Carter, who was a young teacher at a nearby private girl's school. During a visit, a watchman or guard made a comment about Miss Carter. Vincent struck him and knocked him out. Although justified as a gentleman, his violence was not acceptable. ³ He entered Harvard College and graduated in 1859. He returned to Erie, and read law (on the job training) until he could pass his bar exam in December 1860. His practice of law was cut short by the beginning of the Civil War in April 1861. After the fall of Ft. Sumter to the Confederates on April 14, 1861, President Abraham Lincoln called 75,000 militia troops into Federal service for ninety days. Vincent enlisted in the Erie Regiment of Volunteers, commanded by Colonel John W. McLane. Before going off to Camp Wilkins near Pittsburgh, he married Elizabeth Carter.

At Camp Wilkins, Vincent was elected second lieutenant of his company, then first lieutenant and regimental adjutant. This temporary service ended when the regiment was mustered out in July, 1861. This respite was shortlived. On July 24, Secretary of War Simon Cameron authorized Colonel McLane to raise a regiment of volunteers to serve for three years or the duration of the war. About one-half of the original regiment reenlisted, and new recruits filled the unit to its full complement by late August. The 83rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Regiment was mustered into Federal service in mid-September, with Colonel John McLane as colonel, and Vincent as lieutenant colonel.

The 83rd wintered around Washington, D.C. Mrs. Vincent joined her husband, and they enjoyed riding horses in the countryside surrounding the capitol. The regiment, along with the 44th New York and 16th Michigan became the third brigade (commanded by Brig. General Daniel Butterfield) of the First Division, V Corps. The famous 20th Maine regiment was added later.

In April 1862, the brigade became part of Maj. General George McClellan's campaign to capture the Confederate capitol at Richmond. The 83rd had its baptism of fire in a minor skirmish at Hanover Court House, northeast of Richmond. In late June, Vincent came down with malaria and was unfit for duty at V Corps headquarters at Gaines's Mill.

On June 27, Confederate General Robert E. Lee struck Union General Fitz John Porter's V Corps at Gaines's Mill. Although Porter held a strong position, the V Corps was outnumbered two to one. Two Confederate brigades finally broke through - the Texas brigade, and Law's Alabama brigade. The two units will later attack Little Round Top at Gettysburg.

In the fierce fighting, the 83rd Pa. lost one-half of the regiment and the brave Colonel John McLane was struck in the heart and killed. As the Federal line retreated, the 83rd Pa., deployed on the far left of the Union position was able to slip away to the rear and safety. Vincent, desperately ill and weak, was able to get away on a horse. He was evacuated to a hospital ship which carried him to New York City. His wife and father brought him back to Erie to recover. He returned to the 83rd Pa. in October. The regiment had gone through bloody action at Second Bull Run in August, and minor service at Antietam in September. It was, by the time Vincent returned as a full colonel and commander, a veteran regiment. Late in the attack on Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg, December, 1862, the brigade was committed and was fortunate to sustain only moderate casualties in this Union defeat.

After Fredericksburg, the brigade went into winter quarters near Potomac Creek, Va. Mrs. Vincent joined her husband until military operations resumed in early May 1863.

At Chancellorsville, Va., General Lee outmaneuvered and defeated Union General Joseph Hooker. The brigade saw only light action. After the battle, Vincent was promoted to command of the brigade.⁴

In early June, General Lee began his movement north out of Virginia, and into Pennsylvania. The roads led to Gettysburg. Covering the Southern advance, Maj. General J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry screened the right flank of the gray army. The Union cavalry corps under Maj. General Alfred Pleasanton tried to break through Stuart's troopers and find out what Lee was up to. In three days of hard fighting, the Northern horsemen defeated Stuart and drove the Confederates back to the Blue Ridge mountains.

Vincent's brigade joined the Union horsemen in the last action, on June 21 at Upperville, Va. Vincent's infantry supported the Northern cavalry division of Brig. General D. McM. Gregg. At Goose Creek, east of Upperville, they encountered the Confederate cavalry brigades of Brig. Generals Wade Hampton and B.H. Robertson. Vincent deployed three regiments to the front, with the 83rd Pa. in reserve. The Confederates retreated through Upperville leaving a disabled cannon behind. It was Vincent's first action as a brigade commander and he handled his regi-

ments with bravery and skill.⁵

Lee's army finally clashed with Maj. General George Meade's Union army at the crossroad town of Gettysburg in southern Pennsylvania. Of the three days at Gettysburg, July 2 was the crucial day. Lee would send his main assault against the Union left flank. The key terrain feature here was Little Round Top. Should the Confederates gain this hill, their artillery could sweep the entire Union line on Cemetery Ridge, and deploy east to the Taneytown Road and north into the Federal rear.

On the morning of July 2, the Union III Corps had occupied the rock-strewn height. Its impetuous commander, Maj. General Daniel Sickles chose to disobey the orders of Meade, the army commander, to hold the vital hill. In early afternoon, Sickles advanced his corps one and one-half miles west to the Emmittsburg Road. Only a small Northern signal detachment held the hill, and Southern troops of Brig. General Evander Law's Alabama brigade, and Brig. General Jerome Robertson's Texas brigade of Maj. General John Hood's division of Lt. General James Longstreet's I Corps, began their advance at 4:30 p.m. Robertson moved across Plum Run to Devil's Den, and Law swept past Devil's Den and over Big Round Top.⁶

While the Confederates were preparing to attack, Meade and his staff rode south down Cemetery Ridge to examine Sickles' new position. Before he turned west towards the Peach Orchard, he directed Brig. General Gouverneur Warren, his chief engineer officer, to continue south to "examine the condition of affairs" on Little Round Top.⁷ Warren reached the hill at about 3:30 p.m. and found the hill unoccupied except for a small signal detachment. Suddenly he realized the importance of the height upon which he stood. He rode down the western face of the hill to Devil's Den and directed Capt. James Smith of the 4th New York Battery to fire a round into the woods west of the Emmittsburg Road, where he suspected that Confederates were massing. The shot revealed "the glistening of gunbarrels and bayonets of the enemy's line of battle."⁸ Warren sent a dispatch to Meade suggesting that a division be sent to the hill immediately.⁹ Meade ordered the V Corps under Maj. General George Sykes to move rapidly to the threatened Union left.¹⁰ The First Division, Brig. General James Barnes, led the corps and halted near the George Weikert house, north of and at the base of Little Round Top. Sykes and Barnes went ahead of the column to reconnoiter the Little Round Top - Wheatfield area. They apparently separated with Sykes riding slightly southwest towards the Wheatfield, and Barnes south towards Little Round Top.¹¹ Warren had sent Lt. Ranald Mackenzie searching for troops for the hill to Sickles, who refused assistance.

Mackenzie found Sykes and asked for a division. Sykes agreed to only a brigade, sending Capt. John Williams to order up the lead brigade of Barnes' division.¹²

Oliver W. Norton, Vincent's bugler and Brigade flag-bearer was at Vincent's side and described the following events and conversation: Capt. Williams rode up to Col. Vincent, asking for Barnes. Barnes, however, had not returned from his reconnaissance. Vincent asked for the orders. Williams answered "General Sykes told me to direct General Barnes to send one of his brigades to occupy that hill (Little Round Top) yonder." Vincent replied, "I will take the responsibility of taking my brigade there," and started his troops for the knob.¹³

Strong Vincent's instant appreciation of the situation and the value of the hill is critical. Law's Confederates were on the move, and any delay would have been fatal. It was a daring decision. Technically, he risked court-martial by moving his brigade without orders from Barnes.¹⁴ Norton clearly summarized the situation by stating, "If Vincent had not taken upon himself the responsibility of taking his brigade to that position without waiting to receive the order from his division commander as soon as he knew that his corps commander had ordered a brigade to be sent there, the arrival of his brigade would have found the enemy in possession of the ground, from which in all probability it could not have been dislodged."¹⁵

Vincent ordered Col. James Rice of the 44th New York to move the brigade, at the "double-quick", to the hill while he and Norton rode to the knob to select the regimental position. They rode up the southwest slope and to the crest and on to the southern end, to a spur of rock, now called Vincent's Spur.¹⁶

Vincent, although not a professional soldier, placed his brigade quickly and skillfully to take full advantage of the height and strength of the hill. Instead of placing his units on the crest where they could be flanked, he ordered his men to hold the middle of the hill, with skirmishers at the base. This would deny the Confederates room to maneuver their regiments. As his men arrived, Vincent directed them to their positions in the line.¹⁷ Confederate artillery shells began to burst among the rocks and troops. The brigade line formed a rough "L". Col. Joshua Chamberlain's 20th Maine faced south. In placing the Maine regiment, his last words to Chamberlain were "hold the ground at all hazards."¹⁸ There would be no retreating today.¹⁹

At the knuckle of the "L" facing south and west was the 83rd Pa., commanded by Capt. Orpheus Woodward. At the request of Col. Rice, the 44th N.Y. formed, facing west, on the right of the 83rd Pa. The two

regiments had fought side by side in earlier battles, and were known in the service as the "Butterfield (previous commander) Twins." Finally, on the right of the 44th N.Y., Lt. Col. Norval Welch's 16th Michigan.²⁰

Within minutes, Confederate skirmishers began to appear from the south and southwest. Law and Robertson's brigades drove in the Union skirmishers, and came on with five regiments.²¹ The 4th Alabama and the 4th and 5th Texas advanced and moved against the 83rd Pa. and 44th N.Y. The 15th and 47th Alabama passed over the crest of Round Top and headed for the 20th Maine.

The Confederates dressed their lines and went forward up Little Round Top over ground strewn with large boulders. The southerners came up to within forty yards of the Union line. Vincent watched the struggle from his command post up behind the 83rd Pa. The Confederates faltered and fell back. But after a short lull, they came on again. The fighting raged on with both sides taking heavy losses and approaching exhaustion.²²

Vincent was a dynamo of energy. He sent off his staff officers, Capt. John Clark for additional ammunition, Capt. (Eugene) Nash to the 20th Maine to watch for threats to their flank, and Capt. Amos Judson for reinforcements.²³ Vincent had placed his men well, and commanded them with skill and determination.

As it neared 6:00 p.m., the Confederates brought up the 48th Ala. and at 6:15 p.m. came on for a third and final assault. As they swept up the hill, the 4th and 48th Ala., and 4th and 5th Texas angled to the left, to push by and get on the right flank of the 16th Mich.²⁴

The 16th Mich. began to fall back toward the crest of the hill. Someone had blundered. Lt. Col. Welch said in his report that a senior officer, possibly General Stephen Weed (whose brigade was arriving to reinforce Vincent) called down from the crest "to fall back nearer the top." A few men began to head up the hill. Lt. Kydd ordered the colors back. At this Welch and about 45 men pulled back.²⁵ The Texans saw the opportunity and pursued the Union troops, intermingling with the fleeing Northerners.²⁶ A breakthrough appeared certain. The crisis had arrived.

Vincent rushed over to rally the confused Michiganers. He strode up "with his wife's little riding whip in his hand."²⁷ He spoke to wounded Sgt. Charles Sprague of the 44th N.Y., saying, "That will do, Sergeant Sprague, I'll take hold (care) of this (situation)..."²⁸

He climbed to the top of a large rock calling for his men to rally. As described by Capt. Amos Judson, ..." Vincent descended from the rock, and with the most superhuman exertions of himself and his officers,

drove the men to the front, and again the onward surge of the rebel host was checked." He climbed off to the front of the boulder, and received his fatal wound.²⁹ As he fell, he murmured, "Don't give an inch."³⁰ He was struck down by a minié bullet, which passed through his left leg, into the left groin, lodging in the right groin. Vincent himself believed that he had been hit by an enemy sharpshooter (sniper). He said "This is the fourth or fifth time they have shot at me, and they have hit me at last."³¹ This may be true. Considering the angle of the wound, another possibility is that he was shot by a Texan, who got as close as fifteen yards away. Vincent was placed on a stretcher and carried to the rear.

Union reinforcements arrived. Col. Patrick O'Rourke's 140th N.Y., of Weed's brigade came up, Lt. Charles Hazlett's Battery "D", 5th U.S. Artillery appeared shortly before Vincent fell, and finally, the remaining regiments of Weed - 91st Pa, 155th Pa, 146th N.Y. Little Round Top, and the nation, were secure. The defense of Little Round Top was bought with the loss of brave officers. Besides Vincent, Warren was wounded, and Weed, O'Rourke, and Hazlett - killed.³²

Vincent was carried to the farmhouse of William Bushman two miles east of the hill. On the morning of July 3, Maj. Gen. Daniel Butterfield, Meade's chief of staff came to see him. Vincent was conscious for a few days, and received Butterfield, who told him that Meade had telegraphed President Lincoln for his commission as a brigadier general. The request was granted and the promotion was received by Meade at 10:05 a.m., July 4. He received his general's star that afternoon. He was conscious when informed of his promotion.

In the days that followed, he grew weaker. On July 7, a courier from the War Department delivered his commission shortly before he died.³³ His sacrifice was not in vain. General Vincent was returned to Erie, and buried in Erie Cemetery. In the Vincent family plot are his daughter Blanche, who unfortunately died before her first birthday, and his wife, who passed on in 1914.

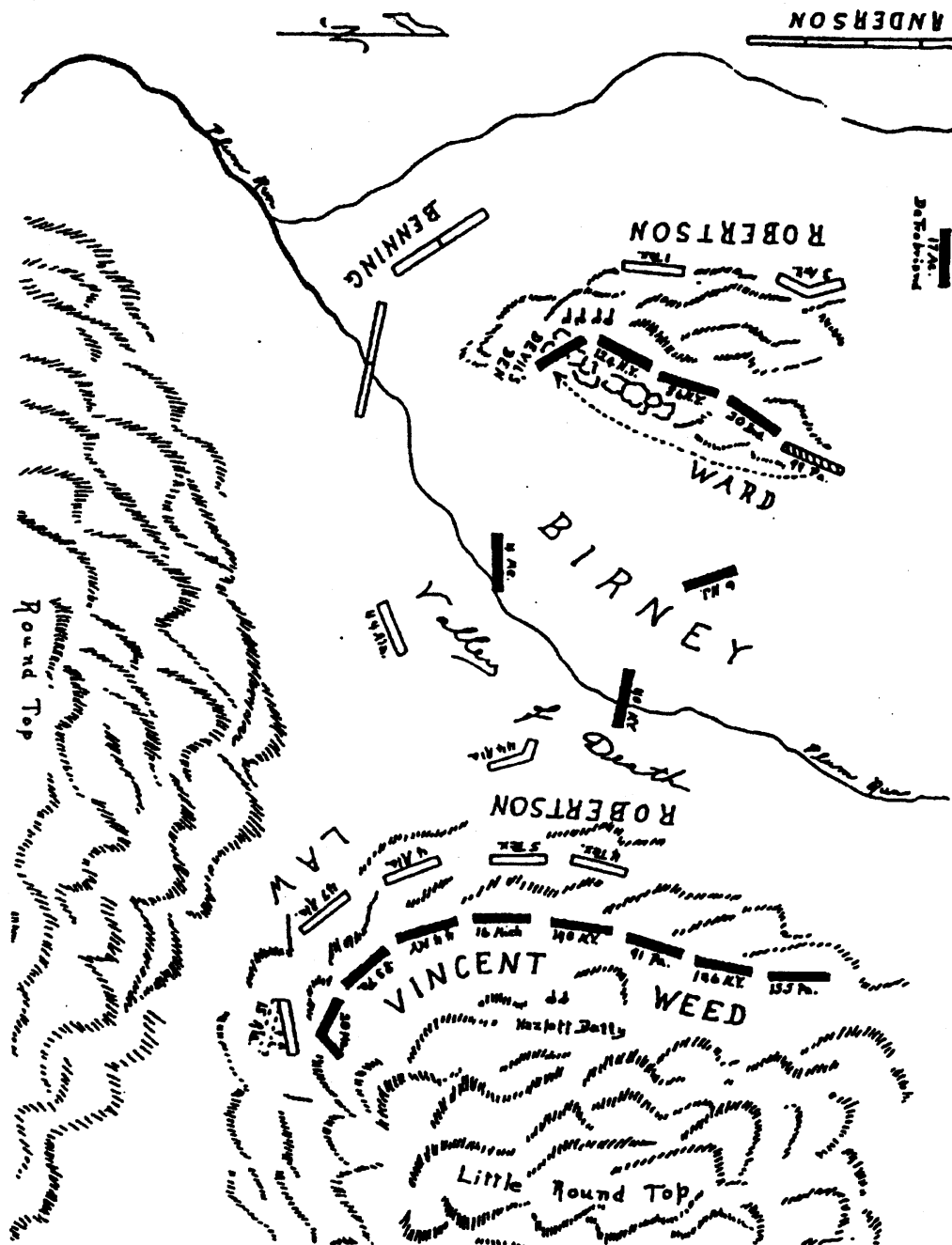
ENDNOTES

1. Norton, The Attack and Defense of Little Round Top, 281.
2. Norton, 285-287.
3. Johnson, "The Short, Heroic Life of Strong Vincent," The Journal of Erie Studies XVII (1988), 5-6.
4. Johnson, 7-9.
5. Stonesifer, "The Long Hard Road: Union Cavalry in the Gettysburg Campaign," Penn State M.A. Thesis, 1959, 72-78.
6. Pfanz, Gettysburg: Second Day, 137, 144, 158-160, 164, 176, 179-180.
7. Taylor, Warren; 119-120, Johnson and Buel, Battles and Leaders, III, 307.
8. Report of Smith, OR, XXVII, 58.
9. Meade, Life and Letters, II, 82.
10. Report of Sykes, OR, XVII, pt. 1, 592-593.
11. Ibid.; Report of Barnes, ibid., 600.
12. Report of Barnes, ibid.
13. Norton, Attack, 64; Vincent, Attack and Defense, 9-10.
14. Stonesifer "LRT Controversy", Pa. History, 229.
15. Norton, Vincent, 5.
16. Pfanz, Gettysburg: Second Day, 209.
17. Norton, Vincent, 7.
18. Report of Chamberlain, OR, XXVII, pt. 1, 623.
19. Coddington, Gettysburg, 390.
20. Norton, Vincent, 8.
21. Pfanz, Gettysburg: Second Day, Map 1, 216.
22. Ibid.; 219-222.
23. Report of Rice, OR, XXVII, pt. 1, 620, Report of Conner, ibid., 630-631.
24. Report of Welch, OR, XXVII, pt. 1, 628; Pfanz, Gettysburg: Second Day, Map 2, 229.
25. Report of Welch, ibid.

27. Letter of Sprague, ibid., 363-364.
28. Ibid.
29. Judson, History of the 83rd Pa., 67.
30. Clark, Gettysburg, 84.
31. Judson, History of the 83rd Pa., 67.
32. Stonesifer, "LRT Controversy", Pa. History, 230.
33. Judson, History of the 83rd Pa., 71-72.

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Vincent's position at Little Round Top, Gettysburg, Norton, Attack and Defense.

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