

The Battle of Gettysburg

COMMENTARY AND SIDEBAR NOTES BY DAVID WALBERT AND
L. MAREN WOOD

Louis Leon, *Diary of A Tar Heel Confederate Soldier* (Charlotte: Stone Publishing Company, 1913), pp. 34–38.

As you read...

THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG

In June 1863, after major victories at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, under General Robert E. Lee, marched into Pennsylvania. On July 1, Confederate and Union troops clashed at Gettysburg in what would be the bloodiest battle of the Civil War. The battle raged for three days, and 51,000 men were killed or wounded. On July 4th, Lee determined that his men could not keep fighting and could not afford to lose any more men. He withdrew his troops from Pennsylvania and returned to Virginia. The U.S. Army of the Potomac, under General George Meade, had lost as many men as Lee's army, and could not pursue the Confederates on their retreat.

Gettysburg is sometimes called the "high water mark of the Confederacy." Lee had hoped that by invading the North and threatening Washington, D.C., he could draw Union troops from the West, where they had laid siege to Vicksburg on the Mississippi River. Lee also thought that by bringing the war to the North, he could generate support for the growing peace movement in the United States. After his invasion failed, Lee was never again able to threaten the U.S. capital. On July 4, Union General Ulysses S. Grant captured Vicksburg, giving the U.S. control of the entire Mississippi River. The momentum of the war had begun slowly but surely to swing to the North.

LOUIS LEON

The day after North Carolina seceded, Louis Leon joined the "Charlotte Grays," Company C of the first North Carolina Regiment. He served six months in Virginia, fighting in the First Battle of Bull Run (Manassas). His regiment disbanded in the fall of 1861, and he returned to Charlotte, believing that his time as a soldier was over.

Five months later, though, he was back in the army, joining the 53rd North Carolina Regiment as a private. In 1863 he fought in the Battle of Gettysburg, which he described in these passages from his diary. A year later, in May 1864, he was taken prisoner and spent eleven months in a New York prison. In April 1865, the war over, Leon took an oath of allegiance to the United States and was released. His diary was published in 1913, sixty years after the events he described.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How many of the men in Leon's company were killed, wounded, or captured?
2. How did Leon describe the scene at Gettysburg? What did he see, hear, and smell?
3. Why do you think troops were not allowed to help wounded soldiers while they were still in battle?
4. Leon talks about sleeping on the battlefield. Do you think you could have fallen asleep in such conditions? Why do you think Leon talked about sleeping during battle or among the dead? What was he trying to explain?
5. According to Leon, why did the Union troops not advance at the end of the battle?

July 1



Figure 1. The Soldier's Memorial at Gettysburg National Military Park remembers the thousands of men from both sides who died at Gettysburg.

We left camp at 6 A.M., passed through Heidelsburg and Middleton. At the latter place we heard firing in the direction of Gettysburg. We were pushed forward after letting the wagon trains get in our rear. We got to Gettysburg at 1 P.M., 15 miles. We were drawn up in line of battle about one mile south of town, and a little to the left of the Lutheran Seminary. We then advanced to the enemy's line of battle in double quick time. We had not gotten more than 50 paces when Norman of our company fell dead by my side. Katz was going to pick him up. I stopped him, as it is strictly forbidden for anyone to help take the dead or wounded off the field except the ambulance corps. We then crossed over a rail fence, where our Lieutenant McMatthews and Lieutenant Alexander were both wounded. That left us with a captain and one lieutenant. After this we got into battle in earnest, and lost in our company very heavily, both killed and wounded. This fight lasted four hours and a half, when at last we drove them clear out of town, and took at least 3,000 prisoners. They also lost very heavily in killed and wounded, which all fell into our hands. After the fight our company was ordered to pick up all straggling Yankees in town, and bring them together to be brought to the rear as prisoners. One fellow I took up could not speak one word of English, and the first thing he asked me in German was "Will I get my pay in prison?" After we had them all put up in a pen we went to our regiment and rested. Major Iredell, of our regiment, came to me and shook my hand, and also complimented me for action in the fight. At dusk I was about going to hunt up my brother Morris, when he came to me. Thank God, we are both safe as yet. We laid all night among the dead Yankees, but they did not disturb our peaceful slumbers.



Figure 2. The view from Little Round Top at Gettysburg Battlefield. On July 2, the 20th Maine regiment under Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain held this strategic location — from which troops could fire down on much of the battlefield — against a Confederate attack. It was a turning point in the battle, and Chamberlain was awarded the Medal of Honor for his heroism.

July 2

Our division was in reserve until dark, but our regiment was supporting a battery all day. We lost several killed and wounded, although we had no chance to fire — only lay by a battery of artillery and be shot at. The caisson¹ of the battery we were supporting was blown up and we got a big good sprinkling of the wood from it. Just at dark we were sent to the front under terrible cannonading. Still, it was certainly a beautiful sight. It being dark, we could see the cannon vomit forth fire. Our company had to cross a rail fence. It gave way and several of our boys were hurt by others walking over them. We laid down here a short time, in fact no longer than 10 minutes, when I positively fell asleep. The cannonading did not disturb me. One of the boys shook me and told me Katz was wounded by a piece of a shell striking him on the side, and he was sent to the rear. We went on to the Baltimore Turnpike until 3 in the morning of the 3d.

July 3



Figure 3. The scene of Pickett's Charge. On July 3, Major General George Pickett and two other Confederate generals led an infantry assault across this open field — three-quarters of a mile — on an established Union position. The Confederates were cut down by artillery and rifle fire, losing half the men who began the charge, and the southern army was unable to recover from the disaster.

When under a very heavy fire, we were ordered on Culps Hill, to the support of Gen. A. Johnson. Here we stayed all day — no, here, I may say, we melted away. We were on the brow of one hill, the enemy on the brow of another. We charged on them several times, but of course, running down our hill, and then to get to them was impossible, and every time we attempted it we came back leaving some of our comrades behind. Here our Lieutenant Belt lost his arm. We have now in our company a captain. All of our lieutenants are wounded. We fought here until 7 P.M., when what was left of us was withdrawn and taken to the first day's battlefield. At the commencement of this fight our Brigade was the strongest in our division, but she is not now. We lost the most men, for we were in the fight all the time, and I have it from Colonel Owens that our regiment lost the most in the Brigade. I know that our company went in the fight with 60 men. When we left Culps Hill there were 16 of us that answered to the roll call. The balance were all killed and wounded. There were 12 sharpshooters in our company and now John Cochran and myself are the only ones that are left. This day none will forget, that participated in the fight. It was truly awful how fast, how very fast, did our poor boys fall by our sides — almost as fast as the leaves that fell as cannon and musket balls hit them, as they flew on their deadly errand. You could see one with his head shot off, others cut in two, then one with his brain oozing out, one with his leg off, others shot through the heart. Then you would hear some poor friend or foe crying for water, or for "God's sake" to kill him. You would see some of your comrades, shot through the leg, lying between the lines, asking his friends to take him out, but no one could get to his relief, and you would have to leave him there, perhaps to die, or, at best, to become a prisoner. Our brigade was the only one that was sent to Culps Hill to support General Johnson. In our rapid firing today my gun became so hot that the ramrod would not come out, so I shot it at the Yankees, and picked up a gun from the ground, a gun that some poor comrade dropped after being shot. I wonder if it hit a Yankee; if so, I pity him. Our regiment was in a very exposed position at one time to-day, and our General Daniels ordered a courier of his to bring us from the hill. He was killed before he got to us. The General sent another. He was also killed before he reached us. Then General Daniels

would not order any one, but called for volunteers. Capt. Ed. Stitt, of Charlotte, one of his aides, responded, and he took us out of the exposed position.

July 4



Figure 4. A dead Confederate sharpshooter lies between two boulders at Gettysburg.

We laid on the battlefield of the first day, this the fourth day of July. No fighting to-day, but we are burying the dead. They have been lying on the field in the sun since the first day's fight; it being dusty and hot, the dead smell terribly. The funny part of it is, the Yankees have all turned black. Several of our company, wounded, have died. Katz is getting along all right. The battle is over, and although we did not succeed in pushing the enemy out of their strong position, I am sure they have not anything to boast about. They have lost at least as many in killed and wounded as we have. We have taken more prisoners from them than they have from us. If that is not the case, why did they lay still all today and see our army going to the rear? An army that has gained a great victory follows it up while its enemy is badly crippled; but Meade, their commander, knows he has had as much as he gave, at least, if not more. As yet I have not heard a word from my brother Morris since the first day's fight.

On the web

The Battle of Gettysburg

<http://www.nps.gov/archive/gett/getttour/main-ms.htm>

An overview from the National Park Service.

The Gettysburg Address

<http://www.loc.gov/exhibits/gadd/>

In November 1863, a national military cemetery was dedicated at Gettysburg. At the dedication, President Lincoln gave the speech now known as the Gettysburg Address.

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Notes

1. A caisson was a two-wheeled wooden cart used to transport ammunition in the Civil War.

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