

Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg

(Music)

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Welcome to Gettysburg. On July 3rd 1863, the third day of this three-day battle, General Robert E. Lee has decided that he wants to attack the Union center. Behind me on Cemetery Ridge, the Union Army of the Potomac is awaiting whatever will happen on this third day.

Lee's original plan was to continue what he had done on the second day, and to attack the flanks on Culp's Hill and Little Round Top. But early action on the morning of the third on Culp's Hill made Lee re-assess his plan. His plan for the third would become one of the most famous pieces of military lore in American history. It will be an attack known best as Pickett's Charge.

Gettysburg still has plenty mysteries to reveal to us as students of history and I guess the secret I want to share with you today is that the field behind me is not the field of Pickett's Charge. Really, Pickett's Charge consisted of two elements. One element was off to our left, and it will include troops from Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, and North Carolina. Pickett's men, the famous division all from Virginia, actually began a good deal off to our right. Nobody started where we are standing right here, where the Park Service brings you to view the scene of the Charge. A lot of people come out here, look across the field of the Charge and say "what was Robert E. Lee thinking?" Well, there's a lot more to the story than that and in the next few minutes, we'll show you the rest of the story.

We are standing here at the Spangler Farm. This is the first time that General Pickett's men will see the battlefield. They arrived here on the evening of the second day of July and they took a position for the evening behind Seminary Ridge, the main Confederate line behind us here. Early on the morning of July 3rd, they marched up the farm lane on which we are standing and they marched through the area of the farm buildings, the farm buildings are war-time buildings, and they came out into this ground where we are standing now.

General Pickett's division had three brigades; General Garnett's brigade of five Virginia regiments came to about where we are right now and they will deploy in this direction. General James Kemper's brigade will follow right behind, when they get to about this spot they will deploy in this direction. The third brigade, under General Louis Armistead will deploy behind us and behind the barn on a little bit of a ridge topped by a fence about 100 yards behind us.

They will arrive here about 9 o'clock in the morning and for the next several hours they will just hunker down, they will rest, they will chew on coffee beans, some of them will try to build fires and make a little bit of hot coffee and many of them will just take a nap. After all, they marched 25 miles to get to the battlefield. It is a hot day, at 2 o'clock in the afternoon; a local professor will tell us that it is 88 degrees. There was very little wind, the fields around here were filled with grain, this was an oat field over here. And with very little wind, lying down in the high grain, the soldiers talked about how stifling hot it was. What they were waiting for, of course, was the next step, the order to charge.

The charge will make them advance up the hills and towards the Union line. When I bring people here, what I usually tell them is that this spot is spectacular not for what you can see, but for what you cannot see. As we'll see, Pickett's men had no idea what it was they would be marching into. The high ground in front of Pickett's line blocks the field of view. They cannot see the Union line, they cannot see Little Round Top, they cannot see the clump of trees, they cannot see the Union line at all. They have no idea what they're marching into until they reach the ridge at the top of the hill. By the time they do that, they are almost to the Emmitsburg Road and only about 400 yards from the Union line.

Unlike the perspective you get from the usual tour stop about Pickett's Charge, it wasn't an advance over a mile-wide open field where every Union soldier had a clear shot at you. It was really a much narrower battlefield, and you have to come down to a position like this to appreciate the true dimensions of this fight.

We are standing on Cemetery Ridge, the main Union position on July 3rd here at Gettysburg. Behind me, you can see Seminary Ridge, the main Confederate position, and on the horizon you can see the white monument that represents the Virginia memorial here at Gettysburg. It is from that position that we saw our first view of Pickett's Charge. On the afternoon of July 3rd, at about 1 o'clock in the afternoon, the Confederate assault on this position where we are right now began with an artillery bombardment. The artillery bombardment lasted about 90 minutes, we think. And this place would have been a living hell to be standing in right at this point. Shells would have been crashing all around us, the Union artillery batteries that were posted here were blown to shreds, and they had to be removed from the battlefield. And the hope was that the Confederate infantry could cross the field behind us and get here before those Union cannons could be replaced.

It wasn't going to happen that way, of course. The Union line had plenty of reserves right behind Cemetery Ridge, including a lot of artillery that could be rolled in to place very quickly. But imagine if you're a Union infantryman, you would have been in position right behind these rock walls right in front of us here and you would have been looking out into this open field. If you had been here in the position of the Philadelphia brigade about 3 o'clock on

the afternoon of July 3rd this is what you would have seen: first of all, you would have seen a large number of Confederates coming out of the woods from over in that direction. Those were the North Carolinians, the Tennesseans, the Alabamians, the Mississippians of Pettigrew's command and it looks like, from this position that they're heading straight for you. You don't see them clearly at first because there is a barn and a farm house on fire, the Bliss Farm, about halfway across that field. You can see shadowy figures as they approach the farm and come through the smoke and the haze. But when they break through that farm line, you will see them as they begin to approach the fence, so you know that you have a threat approaching you from that direction.

Also from this position, you would have seen a second threat emerging. From down in the area of the Spangler Farm, which is beyond this red farm that we see in front of us, this is the Codori Farm, behind the Codori Farm and across the road is the Spangler Farm where we last stopped. Pickett's men have begun their advance, they did not march forward, they marched using left and right turns to come up into view just on the other side of the road.

When we think of Pickett's charge, the traditional image has them coming out of the woods about where the Virginia monument is, and coming straight over to where we are right now. But in reality, the soldiers here saw two attacks coming at them simultaneously. Most of these soldiers focused a bit more on Pickett's men coming across. When Pickett's men come into view about 400 yards away from us, the Union artillery begins to open fire on them. The infantry men are told, "Hold your fire! Hold your fire till Pickett's men get much closer." It must have been a very tough thing for them to do. Many of the men would raise their rifles and want to fire off a shot and release some of that energy, that excitement, their nervousness but their officers were there saying, "Stay low, keep calm, wait until they get much closer."

About the time the Confederate line hits the fences at the Emmitsburg Road, they will have to stop, and they will have to climb over those fences that were still standing. They will have to cross over two sets of fences, one on either side of the road, and down here in the low ground in front of us, they will have to re-form their shattered ranks in order to make the last push. It's only as they begin to come up the hill after they have crossed the road and come over the fences that the Union infantry up here on Cemetery Ridge will open fire on them. The real killing zone for Pickett's Charge is not the entire approach from Seminary Ridge to here; it's really only the last few hundred yards, basically from the road or just on the other side of the road to here.

Just imagine Pickett's men as they are approaching this position; at every step, soldiers fall. At every step, the officers are saying, "Close your ranks." They want to have as solid a front as they possibly can when they get very close here so that their mass fire can blow the Union line open.

As they get closer to the line General Garnett, the leading brigade commander, will fall mortally wounded, he will die, he's out of action. General Kemper, bringing his men across just a little ahead of us here on the other side of the wall will get hit in the leg and he will fall as well. He will lose his leg but he will live.

General Pickett will come across the road and take up position down by the Codori Farm, and from there he will call back for reinforcements, reinforcements that will not come. General Armistead's brigade, the third of Pickett's brigades, will follow to reinforce General Garnett and General Kemper. And with Garnett and Kemper down, it will be Armistead who will command the final push.

General Armistead will come over the wall; he will actually break into the Union line. We do not know the exact spot, but it is somewhere right about where we are standing right now. And as he moves forward into this open area, the Union troops here actually break and run for it. If the purpose of Pickett's men was to break into the Union line, Pickett's men accomplished their mission. But they don't have enough power left in them to push forward and accomplish more. Union reinforcements from farther down the line and Union reinforcements from behind the line will converge on this point, and after about 20 minutes of very bloody fighting they will push the Confederates back across the wall and Pickett's charge will essentially be over.

Pickett's men will lose about 60 percent of their forces, but it was not an easy job for the Union soldiers who were here. The Union regiments that fought right in this area lost 40 percent of their strength. It was not the easy job for the Union soldiers as is often portrayed.

General Pettigrew's men made it across their fences and approached the Union line a little further north from this position where we are standing now and Union rifle fire pushed them back. They never broke the Union line.

Why is this attack called Pickett's Charge? Well, in the aftermath of the fighting, the Southern newspapers who carried most of the stories about this fight were the Richmond newspapers. There were five of them; they competed for readership, they of course wanted to focus on the hometown boys. And even though this attack was made by Pickett's Virginians and Pettigrew's North Carolinians, Alabamians, Mississippians, the press accounts in Richmond newspapers focused on Pickett's men almost exclusively. To the extent that Pettigrew's men showed up, they were called "the supports" they were called "the reinforcements that never showed up," they were cast in a secondary role and they were blamed for the defeat that happened here. Pickett's Charge was over and although no one really quite knew it yet, so was the Battle of Gettysburg.

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