

“Colonel Vincent moved with great promptness...”

“I WILL TAKE THE RESPONSIBILITY”: STRONG VINCENT MOVES TO LITTLE ROUND TOP: FACT OR FICTION?

by James R. Wright

It can be described as panic time. Two armies were facing off for what each knew was to be a decisive conflict on the afternoon of July 2. Just moments before, Maj. Gen. George Meade, the Union commander, had discovered that his left flank was not positioned as he had ordered. On the south end of his line, the Third Corps had moved forward well over a half mile, disconnecting from the corps to its right and creating a major break in the line. The Confederate advance was underway. There was no time to reposition the Third Corps and close the gap. Meade ordered Maj. Gen. George Sykes' Fifth corps, being held in reserve, to move at once to the left front to prevent the threatened breakthrough.

The First Division of the Fifth Corps, commanded by Brig. Gen. James Barnes, hurried across the Baltimore Pike to the Taneytown Road and across the fields towards the George Weikert Farm. From there the division advanced in a slightly southwest direction, following a swale between two wood lines to a point about a hundred yards north of the Millerstown, or Wheatfield Road and just southeast of the John T. Weikert farm and buildings.¹

The Third brigade of Barnes' division, consisting of the 20th Maine, 16th Michigan, 44th New York, and 83rd Pennsylvania regiments, was in the lead. It was commanded by Col. Strong Vincent, a twenty-six-year-old lawyer from Erie, Pennsylvania, who had entered the war with no military training. Less than two months earlier he had been regimental commander of the 83rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry. Oliver Wilcox Norton, age twenty-three, a private in that regiment, was serving as Vincent's brigade bugler and flag-bearer. He survived the war, lived to see his eightieth year, and became the chronicler of Little Round Top.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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This article will not retell the story of Strong Vincent's defense of Little Round Top and of the mortal wounding of Vincent. That story has been told in this magazine and in a number of books cited herein.² It will examine a sampling of reports, speeches, and books over the years following the war and assist in sorting out the facts of how Vincent and his brigade broke off from the division, left the intended route to the front in the Wheatfield, and went instead to the southwest slope of Little Round Top to anchor and preserve the Union left flank.

The First Versions

General Barnes submitted his report of the First Division on August 24, 1863, eight weeks after Gettysburg. He praised Colonel Vincent of his Third brigade for his defense of the hill and mourned the death of Vincent as a loss to the army and the country. In telling of the events of that afternoon, Barnes wrote:

Between 4 and 5 o'clock in the afternoon, orders were received from General Sykes to move toward the left and to the front.... General Sykes and myself, preceding the advance of the column, upon the ground upon which it was to take position, reconnoitered the field, and the position to be held....

Soon after, the head of the column entered upon the field. At the same time [Brig.] General [Gouverneur K.] Warren, of the staff of General Meade, came up, riding rapidly ... urged the

¹ Letters from and to Robert Carter and Oliver W. Norton, April 7 and April 11, 1914, in Oliver W. Norton, *Army Letters 1861 – 1865* (Chicago: O.L. Deming, 1903; reprint, Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1990). These letters were first published in the Morningside reprint.

² Kevin O'Brien, "Valley of the Shadow of Death," *The Gettysburg Magazine* no. 7 (July 1992): 41 – 49.

importance of assistance in that direction [of Little Round Top]. General Sykes yielded to his urgent request, and I immediately directed Colonel Vincent, commanding the Third Brigade, to proceed to that point with his brigade. Colonel Vincent moved with great promptness to the post assigned him.³

According to General Warren, he did not leave the signal station on the crest of the hill at that time and he did not ride to Barnes and Sykes. Barnes did not say that Vincent was present, that he spoke to Vincent, or that he even saw Vincent then. He did not say that he personally gave any order to Vincent. Barnes, then age sixty-one, had been associated with businessmen in his career as a railroad executive and had worked years as a civil engineer after serving as a West Point instructor. As such he would have been comfortable with a degree of preciseness in his speech and writing.

By choosing the words "I immediately directed Colonel Vincent" in his report after weeks in which to reflect, he may have hoped that his superiors, and eventually the public, would infer that he personally met with Vincent, that he gave him his orders, and that Barnes should be credited with the saving of Little Round Top. If they did so infer, and if the credit should fall upon his shoulders, so be it.

Barnes was wounded and quietly spent the remaining months of the war on garrison and prison duty. In 1868 he was appointed to a commission to investigate the building of the Union and Pacific Railroad. He died in February 1869.⁴

Amos Judson was a captain in Company E of the 83rd Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry at Gettysburg. When his term expired in September 1864m Judson returned home and began writing his regimental history. It proved to be one of the earliest, being published in Erie in 1865.⁵ Nothing was said about the detachment of the brigade, either because Judson was not aware of the details, or, if he was, perhaps because he knew his commander well and Vincent's action was what Judson would expect of him.

William Swinton, who had covered the war as a correspondent for the *New York Times* until being stripped of his credentials and expelled from the camps of the Army of the Potomac, had by early 1866 completed his work detailing the campaigns of that force.⁶ While never claiming to have been an eyewitness, he wrote of how Warren hastened to seek some force to occupy Little Round Top, just as Barnes' division reached the vicinity, and added the brief statement:

General Warren assumed the responsibility of detaching from this force the brigade of Vincent, and this he hurried up to hold the position.⁷

Samuel Bates' 1875 history of the battle contains the following statement referring to General Warren:

He saw at a glance what a terrible effect the plunging fire of artillery would have, delivered from this eminence, if guns could once be got upon its summit. [Lt. Charles E.] Hazlett's battery in the neighborhood was immediately ordered up. . . . And now seeing the head of Barnes' division of the Fifth corps approaching on the double quick to reinforce the Third, he assumed the responsibility of detaching Vincent's brigade, and ordering it upon Little Round Top.⁸

Bates also wrote:

As soon as Colonel Vincent had discovered that this assault was coming, he dismounted, and sent an aid to General Barnes requesting immediate reinforcements. "Tell him," said he, "the enemy are coming in overwhelming force."⁹

Neither statement by Bates is verified by an eyewitness account and there is no source quoted for Vincent's alleged quotation.

In an 1882 speech, Huntington W. Jackson of the Sixth Corps' 4th New Jersey Infantry, three companies of

³ United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing office, 1880-1901), series 1, vol. 27, pt. 1, pp. 600-601. Hereafter cited as *OR*. All subsequent citations are from series 1.)

⁴ Ezra Warner, *Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), pp 20-21.

⁵ Amos M. Judson, *History of the Eighty-third Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Erie, Pennsylvania: B.F.H. Lynn, 1865; reprint, Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1986).

⁶ Stewart Sifakis, *Who Was Who in the Civil War* (New York: Facts on File Publications, 1988), p. 637.

⁷ William Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac: A Critical History of Operations in Virginia, Maryland, and Pennsylvania, From Commencement to the Close of the War, 1861-1865* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1866), pp. 346-38.

⁸ Samuel P. bates, *The Battle of Gettysburg* (Philadelphia: T.H. Davis & Co., 1875). Pp 116-17.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 118.

which were present at Gettysburg and assigned as provost guard surmised:

To Warren's surprise there were no troops to guard this all-important [Little Round Top]. It was wholly unprotected. Not a moment was to be lost; and riding furiously down the hill, he met Barnes' division of Sykes' corps on its way to reinforce Birney. Equal to the emergency, he assumed authority, and detaching Vincent's brigade, hurried it round to the base of the hill just in time to meet the Rebel advance."¹⁰

Jackson delivered a detailed version of the entire three days of battle, but his address did not indicate his vantage point or upon what personal observation he based his assertions.

Now the generals began to expound. Maj. Gen. Abner Doubleday, commander of the First Corps, publicized his version in 1882:

He [Warren] saw Barnes' division, which Sykes had ordered forward, formed for a charge, and about to go to the relief of [Col. P. Regis] De Trobriand, who held the center of [Maj. Gen. David B.] Birney's line, and who was sorely beset. Without losing a moment he rode down the slope, over to Barnes, took the responsibility of detaching Vincent's brigade, and hurried it back to take post on Little Round Top.¹¹

The accounts continue to be embellished. Brig. Gen. Henry Hunt, formerly at Meade's headquarters as chief of artillery, in 1884 wrote of what he did not see:

Fully comprehending the imminent danger, Warren sent to General Meade for a division. The enemy was already advancing when, noticing the approach of the Fifth Corps, Warren rode to meet it, caused [Brig. Gen. Stephen H.] Weed's and Vincent's brigades and Hazlett's battery to be detached from the latter and hurried them to the summit.¹²

Two years later, Bvt. Gen. Francis Walker in his *Second Army Corps* published his version of Warren becoming aware of the threatening approach of Brig. Gen. Evander M. Law's brigade toward Little Round Top, and:

. . . darting northward, seeks some casual force that may anticipate the fatal occupation of Little Round Top by the enemy.

It is the head of the column of the Fifth Corps which he meets, hastening to the support of De Trobriand. He takes the responsibility of detaching the foremost troops and hurries them forward to anticipate the arrival of the Confederate line of battle.¹³

Norton's Eyewitness Testimony

On September 28, 1888, Oliver W. Norton, by now a prosperous executive of the manufacturing business he had founded in Chicago, wrote a lengthy letter to Appleton's *Cyclopedia of American Biography* in New York. The letter was in response to a request for the facts in reference to Vincent and his brigade, "knowing that I was with him during that battle and know the facts." Norton first states that "I never heard before that there was any uncertainty or controversy in regard to the position of Vincent's brigade in that battle." He then explained that he had been acting as the brigade bugler and bearer of the brigade flag. As such he was required to ride at the side of Vincent wherever he went, thus having "as good an opportunity as any person living to know the orders given to him and given by him." He then sets out his detailed and carefully worded account of what happened at about 4:30 on July 2, 1863:

Now I come to account of that which fell under my personal observation. As I stated, Vincent's brigade was at the head of the column. Vincent himself was seated on his horse a few yards in advance of the column, and I sat on my horse just behind him. We saw a staff officer coming toward us across the low ground from the direction of the wheat field. Vincent recognized him as one of Genl. Sykes staff and riding to meet him, said, "Captain, what are your orders?" The Captain replied, "Where is Genl. Barnes?" If Vincent knew where Barnes was he did not reply. Barnes ought to have been where Vincent was, but I do not recollect seeing him any time during the day, after the early morning. I was under the impression that Barnes was not in

¹⁰ Huntington W. Jackson, "The Battle of Gettysburg," in Ken Bandy and Florence Freeland, comp., *The Gettysburg Papers* (Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1986), p. 692.

¹¹ Abner Doubleday, *Chancellorsville and Gettysburg* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1882), pp. 168-69.

¹² Henry J. Hunt, "The Second Day at Gettysburg," in Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, 4 vols. (New York: The Century Company, 1884-1887), vol 3, pp. 307-9.

¹³ Francis A. Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887), p. 277.

condition to command a division on the field of battle, and that Vincent knew it, but military etiquette would prevent his speaking of that to the staff officer. When the latter inquired for Genl. Barnes again, Vincent in an impetuous way replied, "What are your orders?" "Give me your orders," the Captain replied, "Genl. Sykes directs Genl. Barnes to send a brigade of his division to occupy that hill yonder," pointing in the direction of Little Round Top. Without an instant's hesitation, Vincent said, "*I will take the responsibility myself of taking my brigade there.*" These words and this action I am positive about. Vincent received no orders from Genl. Warren, and Swinton and Doubleday attribute to Warren in error, almost the identical language used by Genl. Vincent. Undoubtedly Genl. Warren deserves full credit for his sagacity in seeing the necessity of troops occupying that hill, and in providing them through the proper channels. The historians assume that he took the responsibility himself, and acquainted his superior officers with his actions afterwards. I am under the impression that he informed Sykes of the situation and made the suggestion that the troops be sent there, and that Sykes sent the order.¹⁴

Norton pinpointed the site of this encounter by Vincent and the messenger by referring to the lettering on the map in the book by the Comte de Paris published in 1886 and used it to show the route taken from that point just north of the Wheatfield Road around and onto the south and west slope of Little Round Top.

Dedication of the 83rd Pennsylvania Monument

One year later, in September of 1889, the monument of the 83rd Pennsylvania Regiment, topped with a life size statue of Strong Vincent, was dedicated on the 83rd's battle line. Norton delivered the dedication speech on the site surrounded by former members of the regiment. He would certainly have been thinking that his audience of comrades, now middle-aged, would be keenly aware of the battle, as he was when he retold what he related in his 1888 letter, and said:

The incidents of that day ate burned into my memory, and I am glad today of the opportunity of giving you my recollections of it.... Without an instant's hesitation Vincent replied, "I will take the responsibility of taking my brigade there...." The line was held, but at what a cost.

Throwing himself into the breach, [Vincent] rallied his men but gave up his own life.... In the very flower of his young manhood, full of the highest promise, with the love of a young wife filling his thought with the fairest visions, proud, gentle, tender, true, he laid his gift on his country's altar. It was done nobly, gladly.¹⁵

Misinformation Continues

Bvt. Brig. Gen. Thomas W. Hyde, who had been attached to the staff of Maj. Gen. John Sedgwick of the Sixth Corps, and presumably not an eyewitness to Warren and Vincent, declared in his 1892 speech:

Fortunately for our cause, General Warren, engineer-in-chief of the army, happened to ride up and, seeing the gravity of the situation, got hold of Vincent's Brigade of the Fifth Corps and Hazlett's Battery. These gained the summit, dragging the guns up by hand, and were just in time to hurl the Texans back in a bloody hand-to-hand struggle.¹⁶

Col. Edwin Bryant, of the 3rd Wisconsin Infantry, Twelfth Corps, declared in a speech in 1893:

[Warren] saw [Maj. Gen. John Bell] Hood's long line approaching, and he perceived in a moment that the height on which he stood was the key of the battlefield. He acted with the quick decision of the bred soldier. Barnes' Division was the advancing, marching past the northern foot of the hill, to the relief of De Trobriand, who at this time was beset by an overpowering force. Warren rode to him and detached Vincent's Brigade.... from the division and led it back to take post on Little Round Top.¹⁷

Norton Publishes First Book

Oliver Norton, now blind at the age of seventy in 1909, dictated a slim book formalizing his experiences at Gettysburg and restating the details of his 1888 letter and 1889 dedication speech. He personally distributed copies to his friends and former comrades.¹⁸

¹⁵ Norton, *Army Letters*, pp. 342-43.

¹⁶ Thomas W. Hyde, "Recollections of the Battle of Gettysburg," in Bandy and Freeland, *The Gettysburg Papers*, p. 747.

¹⁷ Edwin E. Bryant, "The Battle of Gettysburg," Bandy and Freeland, *The Gettysburg Papers*, p. 860.

¹⁴ Letter was first published in James R. Wright, "Vincent's Brigade on Little Round Top," *The Gettysburg Magazine*, no. 1 (July 1989): 41-44, and was included in the 1990 reprint of Norton, *Army Letters*.

Letters Found

In 1988, the author of this article learned of and retrieved from the Clarke Historical Library of Central Michigan University, a collection of some fifty letters written to and from Oliver Norton from 1910 to 1915. Twenty-three of these unpublished letters were selected for inclusion in the reprint of Norton's book of letters.¹⁹ Four of those pertaining to Vincent detaching his brigade are set out below:

Letter to Norton from Maj. Gen. Charles King,
January 21, 1910:

It was never my good fortune to know Vincent, but he has been for many a year one of my heroes and admirations. A near neighbor and cherished friend and companion here is Major Charles H. Ross, who was aide-de-camp to General Barnes, and who, happening to look back as Barnes led his division down past Devil's Den, saw the rear brigade turning out of column and breasting the slope of Little Round Top. "General," he cried, "Vincent is going away," and received orders to trot back and see what it meant. He found Vincent on the very crest of the height, and from his lips heard the reason and speedily saw the need. Ross and Hazlett were from the same town (Zanesville, Ohio) and boy playmates. They had time to clasp hands and exchange a word – and then the storm broke. I envy you the having been with Vincent at Little Round Top. It was the crisis of the war.²⁰

A letter dated September 7, 1910. Was received by Norton. It was written by Nimrod B. Hofford, Pennsylvania, where he had enlisted in the 83rd Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers. He had survived three years of service and was first sergeant of Company F upon his discharge. Hofford commented on Norton's 1909 booklet:²¹

I have read not less than 20 historical accounts of that battle, and no one fails in giving great credit to "Vincent and his Brigade." While in all these accounts, the laurels were allowed to fall on Vincent, the fight was so fierce, the result so

magnificent, and the glory so great, that several of the generals wanted to pose in the spot-light of Vincent's reflected glory by claiming to have *sent him there*. Had Vincent lived, those writers would have been dumb....

One more little confirmation. Forty seven years ago I saw a picture. Being then 20, with a musket, freckles, red hair, and a bunch of curiosity, I had wandered out of my place in the ranks, while the roar of battle was nearby, and stayed to the front of the brigade where Col. Vincent sat his horse; saw an officer riding rapidly towards us; heard Vincent call to the officer who halted; did not hear the hurried remarks, but one, as to his, Vincent's, wish to go; and before I could reach my company the regiment was in motion. This picture is as vivid to me today as any scene or event of my boyhood or later life. If I could paint on canvas as it is fixed in my memory the picture would contain Gen. Vincent and staff mounted, on rising ground, with an aide-de-camp galloping down the hill towards them, bursting shells and smoke of battle in front and to the right, and in the foreground the Third Brigade, in various shades of interest and repose, tired but expectant. It was a moment of thrilling interest and a day of days, but I did not realize for years that it was historically one of momentous importance to the world, and that I was almost one of you heroes.²²

Porter Farley, who had been captain in the 140th Regiment, New York Volunteers, commanded by Col. Patrick O'Rourke, and present on Little Round Top, wrote to Norton on June 24, 1911:

I base this opinion on what General Warren says in his letter to me. I think his letters show that when he rode down and met and diverted our regiment [the 140th New York on the road at the north base of the hill] he did not believe there was a single man in position to defend Little Round Top. Now if you had been fighting when he was still up on that hill he would have known it. But he does not appear to have been aware of it....

Where I am now writing I have not access to the letters which Warren wrote to me, afterwards published in the Century Magazine, that he discovered the lines of the enemy coming on "entirely unopposed," and I do not believe he knew of the presence of Vincent's Brigade and I think the actual fighting began just the moment after he left the hill top. His point of view was

¹⁸ Oliver W. Norton, *Strong Vincent and His Brigade at Gettysburg July 2, 1863* (Chicago: privately printed, 1909).

¹⁹ Norton, *Army Letters*.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 364.

²¹ Norton, *Strong Vincent and his brigade at Gettysburg*.

²² Norton, *Army Letters*, p. 368.

from the big rocks near the northern extremity of the ridge, and from there he could not have seen your Brigade, but as the wind was toward him he must have heard you fire if it had begun when he left.

I am going to get out those letters and will send you copies or perhaps the originals.

Until I heard from you and got your little book I have always wondered how Vincent came to be there fighting when we arrived, wondered by what route he got there and who sent him; and I wondered all the more because Warren seemed to know so little about it.²³

Norton wrote on July 17, 1911, to Elizabeth Carter Vincent, Strong Vincent's widow, with whom he had corresponded for fifty years until her death in 1914. His enthusiasm over the Warren letters is apparent:

I have secured lately as a loan from Capt. Porter Farley, some very interesting letters relating to Gettysburg and Little Round Top. There are among others a large number of letters from General Warren to Capt. Farley, and others from General Sykes, the Comte de Paris, Capt. [Washington] Roebling, a member of Warren's Staff. These letters are all original letters in manuscript, signed by the writers. I may say that in a general way they fully confirm my statement that the only troops which Warren detached and took to Round Top were the 140th Regiment New York Volunteers, and that Warren says over his own signature that he does not know how or when Vincent's Brigade came to Round Top, but thinks it came after the 140th New York, passing be their rear to take position on their left.

I am having all these letters copied on the typewriter, with Capt. Farley's comments and my own, and will have a copy for you. I would not dare print them, at least without Capt. Farley's consent, as they are personal letters never intended for publication, but they throw a singular light on the way history is made up.²⁴

Attack and Defense Published

Norton's 1903 work proved to be only an overture or prelude to what he would produce and publish. His final contribution to Civil War history, *The Attack and Defense of Little Round Top* appeared in 1913 and remains near or at the top of the list of all written works on Little Round Top, the one most often cited by

historians. John J. Pullen wrote the introduction to the reprint of the book and gave it high praise:

As for the accounts of those who were present, Norton says, "In my comments I shall assume that in general they present the facts according to the best knowledge and belief of the officers who made the reports at the time they were made, except in a few cases where I have good reason to believe that they contain deliberate misstatements made with the purpose of concealing misconduct or of unduly magnifying the importance of the service of the organization under the command of the officer who makes the report. In justice to the truth of history, I think such misstatements should be exposed...."

One can well believe that the history of warfare is a vast ocean of mist which hides thousands of mistakes and mistaken reports which, if revealed, would be cause grief but also, perhaps, for some future improvement. Oliver Willcox Norton's effort to clear away the mist in one small area of history is to be respected and admired – all the more so because the enormous amount of work and correspondence necessary to complete the task was continued after he became blind.²⁵

Norton reviewed the published depictions of the battle by a number of writers, some of whom were present on the field, and some who were not, and gave his evaluation of each version of events. Selected official reports followed, as did Norton's synopsis of the attack and defense.

His account of what he had seen and heard as Vincent's brigade diverted to Little Round Top was verified in a most compelling manner by the letters of General Warren. The irrefutable testimony of that prime witness demolished all prior reports to the contrary.

General Warren's Letters

Brig. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren had an impressive military resume: second in the West Point class of 1850; pre-war years as a topographical engineer and academy professor of mathematics; infantry commander at regimental, brigade, and division level; chief engineer of the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg; and later, commander of the Second Corps, then Fifth Corps. With his engineering background he, like Barnes, would have been at ease with preciseness of speech and

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 371-72.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 372-73.

²⁵ Oliver W. Norton, *The Attack and Defense of Little Round Top, Gettysburg July 2, 1863* (New York: Neale Publishing, 1913; reprint, Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1978), introduction.

writing. Warren enjoyed his well-deserved credit for observing the advance of the Rebels on undefended Little Round Top so as to outflank the left of the Union line, for quickly sending a dispatch to Meade requesting a division to anchor the line and protect the rocky hill, and for personally going down the north slope to intercept and detach O'Rourke's regiment and leading it to the crest in time to reinforce Vincent's brigade just as it was in danger of being overrun and shaken from their crucial defensive position.

Warren's letters to Porter Farley, the letter that led Norton, now age seventy-four, to complete his 1913 work, established that Warren did not claim to have detached Vincent. His statements, written as early as 1872, include:

I did not see Vincent's brigade come up, but I suppose it was about this time they did, and coming up behind me through the woods and taking post to the left (their proper place) I did not see them....

I think General Vincent's brigade, as well as your own, were, as you say, rushed up to Little Round Top after the enemy were seen making for that point.²⁶

If I detached Vincent's brigade I don't recollect it. General Barnes' report to General Sykes I think says something of the sort was done by me, which was Swinton's authority.... I would not have hesitated to take any troops I could get hold of, to maintain ourselves on the hill.²⁷

I do not know who was Swinton's informant, in particulars, if he had one. I did not furnish him any detailed information, first, because it would have been necessarily too personal, and I did not know what the greater part of then Fifth Corps did; nor have I seen any of the detailed official reports. You may be sure if I had given the account of my taking the responsibility of detaching troops and hurrying them at the last moment to the hill top, I would have said it was O'Rourke and his regiment that I detached.... I am willing to award all the praise to the brigade of Vincent that has been given it. O'Rourke and Hazlett, however, I was, and I know they deserve all the praise that could be given them.²⁸

What stronger testimony could be elicited? The man whom others gave credit for having detached Vincent's brigade not only never claimed that honor, he specifically denied it as early as 1872 and contradicted the report of General Barnes and Swinton's book.

The misinformation should have come to a halt with the publication of *The Attack and Defense of Little Round Top*, but it did not. Over the years since the 1913 book, authors and historians have recounted the story with varying levels of accuracy.

A Mixed Bag

The popular and prolific historian, Bruce Catton, winner of a Pulitzer Prize, wrote in his *Army of the Potomac* trilogy,

Up on the hill with the signal men was General Warren, and he spotted the danger just in time and hurried off for help. Just north of the hill he met George Sykes bringing his corps down to reinforce the left as Meade had ordered.... Sykes was sending two brigades down into the flat land along Plum Run to reinforce Birney, and at Warren's request he shot another brigade straight south to defend Little Round Top.

This was the brigade of Colonel Strong Vincent....²⁹

Catton's 1952 account does not jibe with General Warren's description. Warren rode down toward the Wheatfield (Millerstown) Road where he met Colonel O'Rourke and took the responsibility of detaching his regiment, the 140th New York, and sending it to the crest of the hill. Warren did not meet Sykes as described and Sykes did not detach and send Vincent's brigade to the defense of Little Round Top. Warren was unaware of Vincent and his brigade coming onto the south and western slope of Little Round Top.³⁰

Edward Stackpole wrote his 1956 version of General Warren's actions:

It was at this stage that General Warren, Meade's Chief Engineer, established his secure niche in the hall of fame of American arms.... Warren lost no time in plugging the gap.... In the name of Commanding General, Warren detached Vincent's brigade and directed it to the crest of Little Round Top just in time to meet and

²⁶ Gouverneur K. Warren letter to Porter Farley, July 13, 1872, in Norton, *Attack and Defense*, pp. 310-11.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, July 24, 1872, p. 312.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, October 23, 1877, pp. 313-14, copy in Warren papers, manuscripts & Special Collections, New York State Library, Albany, New York.

²⁹ Bruce Catton, *The Army of the Potomac: Glory Road* (Garden City, New Jersey: Doubleday and Company, 1952), pp. 291-92.

³⁰ Gouverneur K. Warren letter to Porter Farley, July 13, 1872, in Norton, *Attack and Defense*, pp. 308-11.

repulse with the bayonet the extreme right regiment of Hood's division...."³¹

No footnote or justification for his fanciful statement was given by Stackpole.

Willard M. Wallace, professor of history at Wesleyan University, in his 1960 biography of Joshua I. Chamberlain, gave Strong Vincent credit for his independent action in detaching his brigade from the division:

At once [General Warren] sent for help to Sykes, who ordered Barnes, his 1st Division commander, to hurry a brigade to Warren. For some reason, Barnes could not be found, but Colonel Strong Vincent, who read the message, said he would take his brigade there without delay.³²

Wallace may be the only writer who referred to the message as being in writing.

Glenn Tucker in the mid-1950s gave proper credit to Strong Vincent in his description of the move to Little Round Top, of how Vincent took the responsibility of detaching his brigade and moving it.³³

John J. Pullen has in the past forty years accurately described the detachment and deployment by Vincent of his brigade in two works. One is a history of the Twentieth Maine in which his words buttress those of Oliver W. Norton.³⁴ In the second, a biography of Joshua Chamberlain, the author states that Norton's *attack and Defense of Little Round Top*

...has been thought of as the most accurate account of the action on Little Round Top, dealing with all the regiments involved. Norton's method was to collect after-action reports by commanders involved, plus accounts of a dozen or so historians, and analyzed all this material – a task he was well fitted to do because he had been there as the bugler accompanying Col. Strong Vincent, the brigade commander. Even so, in the introduction to his book Norton wrote, "There is no part of the battle of Gettysburg... the facts in

³¹ Edward J. Stackpole, *They Met at Gettysburg* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Eagle Books, 1956), pp. 204-5.

³² William M. Wallace, *Soul of the Lion: A Biography of General Joshua L. Chamberlain* (New York: Thomas Nelson & Sons, 1960), p. 89.

³³ Glenn Tucker, *High Tide at Gettysburg: The Campaign in Pennsylvania* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1958; reprint, Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1983), pp. 257-62.

³⁴ John J. Pullen, *The Twentieth Maine: A Volunteer Regiment in the Civil War* (New York: Fawcett, 1962; reprint, Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1984), pp. 109ff.

regard to which have been less understood, because more misrepresented, than the struggle for the possession of Little Round Top." One of the reasons, he thought, was that both brigade commanders of the dominant Union brigade were killed – Colonel Vincent at Gettysburg and his successor, Col. James C. ["Crazy"] Rice, ten months later – so they never had the opportunity to write their reminiscences after the war. As for the historians whose accounts Norton examined, he wrote that "no two of them agree in their descriptions of what took place on Little Round Top."³⁵

Edwin B. Coddington gave ample credit to Vincent for his decisive actions in his 1968 study of command at Gettysburg:

Back on Little Round Top Warren, waiting impatiently for the arrival of reinforcements, decided to go himself and locate Sykes and his Fifth Corps. He found Sykes reconnoitering behind the Third Corps lines in the woods west of the Wheatfield, and he quickly explained to him the need of sending a force immediately to protect Little Round Top.... Sykes responded quickly to Warren's call for help by dispatching an order to Barnes, who had gone off to another part of the lines, to send a brigade to Little Round Top. As luck would have it, Colonel Strong Vincent....spied one of Sykes' aides galloping along in search of Barnes. Hailing him, Vincent demanded to know what was up, for he was preparing to go into action with his brigade of four regiments. The messenger said he could not find Barnes.... At Vincent's insistence he reluctantly revealed the contents of the order for one of Barnes' brigades to occupy "yonder hill," the name of which he did not know. Vincent recognized at a glance the strategic importance of the hill and with no further ado said he would hurry there with his men. It was a bold decision, for he risked court-martial by taking his brigade away from the division without Barnes' permission.

Vincent sprang to his saddle, ordered his bugler to sound the advance, waved his sword in the direction of Little Round Top, and went off at a gallop.³⁶

³⁵ John J. Pullen, *Joshua Chamberlain: A Hero's Life & Legacy* (Mechanicsburg, Pennsylvania: Stackpole Books, 1999), p. 136.

³⁶ Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968; reprint, Dayton, Ohio: Morningside, 1979), p. 389.

Some of these statements do not coincide, however, with the facts as given by the principals, Sykes and Warren.³⁷ Warren did not ride to the woods west of the Wheatfield. Warren did not Sykes, and did not have any conversation with Sykes at any time and place. It is difficult to imagine that Vincent had dismounted, or that he waved his sword. Norton related that the sword remained on the saddle when they arrived on Little Round Top and Vincent then took he wife's riding crop in his hand. It is equally difficult to visualize Norton, his brigade bugler, bearing the large brigade flag and sounding the call to advance, all while galloping off at Vincent's side.

Harry W. Pfanz, a veteran park historian at Gettysburg, after ten years of service and study on the field, produced in 1987 his monumental work depicting the events of that July 2 of 1863.³⁸ He also recognized the validity of the version of facts surrounding Vincent's removal and deployment of his brigade given by Norton, and drew upon the words of Norton:

As the aide approached Vincent and Norton, Vincent, "with eyes ablaze," trotted forward to meet him and called out: "Captain, what are your orders?... Give me your orders.... I will take the responsibility of taking my brigade there."³⁹

In his recent history of the 20th Maine and the Gettysburg campaign, Thomas A. Desjardin recognized the accuracy of Norton's description of Vincent's actions as set out in his *Attack and Defense of Little Round Top* and included a succinct corroboration of Norton's testimony.⁴⁰

The first book-length biography of Strong Vincent was published just three years ago. The authors set out a clearly detailed account, much as a professional investigator would do immediately after interviewing an eyewitness, of the events that occurred in the space of a few minutes on that hot, humid, and terrifying afternoon on the southern end of the battlefield. Writers James Nevins and William Styple gathered their facts carefully and examined the ground to firm up their understanding of what happened and just where it happened. Their

final report coincided with and verified Norton's words over a century earlier.⁴¹

Conclusions

Despite the report by General Barnes, the early writings and speeches of veterans of Gettysburg who did not witness the incident, and historians who have since repeated and perpetuated the error, General Warren did not detach Vincent's brigade. Strong Vincent exercised independent judgement and took the responsibility. He detached his brigade of some 1,200 men, one third of Barnes' division, and instead of marching with the division towards the relief of the Third Corps as had been ordered, led his brigade to the left rear and to undefended Little Round Top. His actions can be proven by the words of Oliver Norton, the only known witness to the meeting of Vincent and the messenger. Norton's testimony stands uncontradicted. If it stood alone it would be proof enough. The disclaimer of credit by General Warren, and his denial of any knowledge of how Vincent came to be on Little Round Top, is even more powerful and incontrovertible.

There was no single hero or savior of Little Round Top. Warren and Vincent have their memorials on that hill to remind us of what they did. They both, together with every man who fought on that rocky prominence, deserve credit for defending the left flank of the Union Army that July 2, a major turning point of the day, of the battle, and of our history.

The men of Little Round Top, all the men of Gettysburg, deserve to have the record of their deeds preserved accurately. Those who prepare such accounts, and those who read them, must carefully separate the hearsay from the history.

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<sup>37</sup> OR, vol. 27, pt. 1, pp. 592-95; Warren Farley, July 13, 1872, Norton, *Attack and Defense*, pp. 308-11.

<sup>38</sup> Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg: The Second Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas A. Desjardin, *Stand Firm Ye Boys From Maine and the Gettysburg Campaign* (Gettysburg, Pennsylvania: Thomas Publicationsm 1995), p. 36.

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<sup>41</sup> James H. Nevins and William B. Styple, *What Death More Glorious: A Biography of General Strong Vincent* (Kearney, New Jersey: belle Grove Publishing Co., 1997), pp. 67ff.

