

~~~~~ one and a half hours ~~~~~

# TIME ON LITTLE ROUND TOP

by James R. Wright

On the afternoon of July 2, 1863, the Third Brigade of the First Division, Fifth Corps, moved across the low ground north of the Wheatfield Road in a southwesterly direction. The brigade was led by its recently appointed commander, twenty-six-year-old Col. Strong Vincent. Less than four years earlier, this civilian-turned-soldier had finished his studies at Harvard and returned to his home in Erie, Pennsylvania, to begin his law practice.

The division was halted as the head of the column reached a small rise at the lane south of the J. Weikert farm buildings. Colonel Vincent demanded the orders of the officer that raced to the division looking for Brig. Gen. James Barnes. Vincent, upon hearing the orders directing General Barnes to detach a brigade to occupy and protect Little Round Top, realized there was no time to locate General Barnes. Taking full responsibility for detaching his brigade from the division without direct orders, and sensing that the next few moments were crucial, Vincent turned the brigade to the left rear. The brigade was led around by way of the wooded east side of the rocky hill and into position on the south and west slopes of Little Round Top.

The events of the next few hours would never be forgotten by the survivors. Oliver W. Norton, bugler and color bearer for Vincent's Brigade, and author of the eye witness account of that time and place, wrote fifty years later: "My recollection of what I saw and heard that day is as clear and distinct as that of any event in my life."<sup>1</sup>

The story of what happened on Little Round Top on that afternoon of July 2, 1863, has been told over and over by combatants who were there, by soldiers who imagined they were there, and historians who wished they had been there. We know what happened. How much do we know about exactly when the events occurred?

This article will be concerned about the references to specific times as recorded by those who were there, those who fought on both sides of the line. Little attention has been given to reports by commanders or others who were not on the spot. The recollections of men who were in the thick of the fighting, memories recorded hours, days, or even years after the event, should deserve the most serious consideration.

Two things must be remembered about the chronology that follows. (1) Probably there was no single person on the scene who had the duty of observing what happened and noting the exact time of each event for the benefit of

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Attorney James R. Wright lives in Columbiana, Ohio, and is an amateur photographer and student of the Civil War. He is a Navy veteran of the Korean era and a member of the Mahoning Valley Roundtable at Youngstown State University.

He and his wife, Myra, have a special interest in Strong Vincent, Oliver Norton, and the men of the 83rd Pennsylvania, and corresponds with members of the Vincent and Norton families. Myra was active in the successful fund raising for the restoration of the 100-year-old 83rd Pennsylvania and 145th Pennsylvania monuments at Gettysburg.

Jim is responsible for the introduction to and indexing of Norton's "Army Letters" and the selection of letters added to that new reprint by Morningside.

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students, writers, and buffs who might ponder the question over a century and a quarter later. (2) All times cited are standard time, not our present daylight savings time. One hour should be added to the cited times to represent the daylight savings time familiar to us.

Most historians and writers ignore or pass quickly over the question of specific times. Perhaps it will be impossible to reconcile to any extent the times recollected and recorded in various sources.

With that in mind, let's look at some of the available references to time.

Col. Strong Vincent's Brigade, with the rest of the First Division, Fifth Corps, "arrived on the field early in the morning of July 2 and was massed in rear of the right of the line."<sup>2</sup>

About 3:00 o'clock, Maj. Gen. John B. Hood's Division arrived at a point on the Emmitsburg Road, south of the Peach Orchard.<sup>3</sup>

Brig. Gen. J. B. Kershaw, of McLaws's Division, on the left of Hood's Division, reported: "About 3 p.m. the head of my column came into the open field in front of a stone wall, and in view of the enemy."<sup>4</sup>

Maj. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren arrived at the signal station on the crest of Little Round Top sometime before 3:30 p.m.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Attack and Defense of Little Round Top* (ADLRT), 1913, reprinted by Morningside, 1983, p. 14.

<sup>2</sup> Oliver W. Norton: *Strong Vincent and His Brigade at Gettysburg*, 1909, (SVBG) p. 6, included in *The Gettysburg Papers*, Morningside, 1988.

<sup>3</sup> ADLRT, p. 253.

<sup>4</sup> O.R., XXVII, Pt. 2, pp. 367-68.

<sup>5</sup> ADLRT, p. 240.

According to Norton, Hood's and McLaws's Divisions were in position on Emmitsburg Road by 3:00 or shortly after.<sup>6</sup> Batteries of the two divisions opened a cannonade on the line of Maj. Gen. David Birney's Division of the Third Corps (between Devil's Den and the Wheatfield) about 3:30 o'clock.<sup>7</sup> After 30 minutes of bombardment, Hood's infantry advanced.<sup>8</sup>

This is confirmed by Col. William C. Oates of the 15th Alabama who wrote in his account of the battle that both battalions of artillery opened fire about 3:30 p.m. and within a few minutes his regiment advanced.<sup>9</sup>

Brig. Gen. E. M. Law's recollection or watch did not coincide with that of most other writers. According to him, it was near 5:00 (not 4:00) when his brigade moved to the attack after the artillery of both sides had been engaged for about 15 minutes.<sup>10</sup>

The reports from the Federal line are in agreement. In Norton's narrative he wrote that about the middle of the afternoon the Fifth Corps moved to the left to reinforce the Third Corps when the attack by Lt. Gen. James Longstreet's Corps became heavy.<sup>11</sup> Col. Joshua L. Chamberlain of the 20th Maine is more specific. He reported that the division made a sudden and rapid move to the sound of a cannonade in the left and front at near 4:00.<sup>12</sup>

Lt. Col. Norval Welch of the 16th Michigan wrote that Vincent's Brigade moved to the extreme left of the line at 4:00 o'clock, and that his regiment took its place on the right of the brigade under heavy fire from enemy infantry.<sup>13</sup> The second half of his statement is disputed by Norton and is not verified by other writers.

Lt. Col. Freeman Conner of the 44th New York also reported that his regiment was placed in position on the right of the 83rd Pennsylvania and left of the 16th Michigan about 4:00 o'clock. Company B was immediately thrown out as skirmishers. When they had advanced about 200 yards, they met the enemy force.<sup>14</sup>

Norton's narrative includes the statement that Brig. Gen. J. H. Hobart Ward's Brigade at Devil's Den was hit by the 1st Texas and 3rd Arkansas Regiments of Brig. Gen. J. B. Robertson's Brigade followed by the brigades of Brig. Gens. George T. Anderson and Henry L. Benning. Ward's Brigade withstood the assault and held its position for nearly an hour.<sup>15</sup>

General Law reported that the battery on top of Devil's Den was taken less than an hour after his brigade had moved forward.<sup>16</sup>

It was past 5:00 when the 44th Alabama had changed front from east to north, captured the guns of Smith's Battery, and resisted efforts to retake the guns with the help of Benning's Brigade.<sup>17</sup>

According to General Ward, his brigade met the enemy onslaught and, "In this manner for the space of one and a half hours did we advance and retire. . . ."<sup>18</sup>

A short distance to the east, near the southwesterly base of Little Round Top, the men of Vincent's Brigade were being hit. Capt. Orpheus S. Woodward, commanding the 83rd Pennsylvania, reported that about 45 minutes after being ordered into position, the skirmishers of his regiment were engaged by the enemy and driven in. He described the fighting as lively for almost three hours until the enemy fell back.<sup>19</sup>

In his paper<sup>20</sup> and again in his book,<sup>21</sup> Norton described the fatal wounding of Colonel Vincent while the commander was trying to rally the faltering right of his line. Vincent's death is described also in the letters by Norton dated September 28, 1886, August 31, 1911, and August 3, 1914, all included in the news appendix to Norton's 1903 book.<sup>22</sup>

According to the report of the 44th New York, Colonel Vincent was wounded after his brigade had been engaged for about one hour.<sup>23</sup>

Col. James C. Rice of the 44th New York assumed command of the brigade when Strong Vincent fell with a mortal wound. In his brigade report Rice related that Hood's forces hit the center of the brigade line, the portion held by the 44th New York and 83rd Pennsylvania regiments. After trying in vain for an hour to break the center, the Confederates attacked the extreme right of the line and forced back a portion of the 16th Michigan. Colonel Vincent was hit at this time. The enemy then hit the center of the line again and then pushed toward the left of the line, held by the 20th Maine.<sup>24</sup>

Colonel Welch claimed that the 16th Michigan remained in place for nearly half an hour.<sup>25</sup> This part of Welch's report is also disputed by Norton.<sup>26</sup>

Norton was of the opinion that Vincent's Brigade had been fighting in its position on the south and west slopes of Little Round Top for at least half an hour before Ward's Brigade was driven back from above Devil's Den, thus allowing the Confederates to advance north along Plum Run and to turn southeast towards the summit of Little Round Top, and to hit the right of Vincent's line.<sup>27</sup>

Colonel Rice stated that the enemy attack shifted to the left of the brigade line, and that for more than half an hour, the struggle was desperate. Colonel Chamberlain at that time ordered the left wing of his 20th Maine to swing back to meet the attempted flank attack, and later ordered the wheeling charge.<sup>28</sup>

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⁶ ADLRT, p. 31.

⁷ ADLRT, p. 255.

⁸ ADLRT, p. 255.

⁹ *The War Between the Union and the Confederacy*, 1905, reprinted by Morningside, 1974, p. 207, and ADLRT, p. 78.

¹⁰ *Battles and Leaders*, vol. 3, p. 318.

¹¹ SVBG, p. 6.

¹² Report dated July 6, 1863. *O.R.*, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 622-26.

¹³ Report dated July 6, 1863. *O.R.*, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 627-28.

¹⁴ Report dated July 6, 1863. *O.R.*, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 630-31.

¹⁵ ADLRT, p. 34.

¹⁶ *Battles and Leaders*, vol. 3, p. 318.

¹⁷ Report of Colonel William F. Perry, dated August 8, 1863. *O.R.*, Vol. XXVII, p. Pt. 2, pp. 693-94.

¹⁸ *O.R.*, XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 493-94.

¹⁹ Report dated July 6, 1863. *O.R.*, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 632.

²⁰ SVBG, p. 8.

²¹ ADLRT, pp. 259-260.

²² *Army Letters*, reprinted by Morningside, 1989.

²³ Report by Lt. Colonel Conner, July 6, 1863. *O.R.*, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 630-31.

²⁴ Report dated July 31, 1863. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 616-20.

²⁵ Report dated July 6, 1863. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 627-28.

²⁶ SVBG, p. 53.

²⁷ ADLRT, p. 35.

²⁸ Report dated July 31, 1863. *O.R.*, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 616-20.

Colonel Chamberlain recalled how he extended his line and refused the left wing of the 20th Maine, bending it back at a right angle to the rest of the line. The enemy, the 15th Alabama, burst upon the left of his line. The assault was renewed on his entire front and severe fighting lasted for an hour.²⁹

James L. Sheffield, colonel of the 48th Alabama, a month after the battle, remembered that his regiment advanced east, the north along Plum Run between Devil's Den and Little Round Top, and that the 48th was brought to the front three times in the hour and a half of struggle.³⁰

Norton mentions several specific times in his book. He gives the opinion, the opinion of one who was on the line near the right center of the brigade, that the attack on Vincent's Brigade must have commenced between 4:30 and 5:00 o'clock.³¹ The 140th New York, which had come onto the crest of the hill and into place on the right of the 16th Michigan just as that part of the line was in danger of being overrun, had been fighting and taking heavy casualties for half an hour before the other regiments of Brig. Gen. Stephen H. Weed's Brigade arrived on the scene. By then the battle was dwindling to an exchange of long range shots.³² He places the end of the fight against Vincent's Brigade somewhere between 6:00 and 7:00 o'clock.³³

In a moving letter to the father of young Lt. Eugene L. Dunham, written just four days later, Orcel C. Brown of the 44th New York described how his friend had been killed instantly by a shot in the head while urging his men on at 6:00 that day.³⁴

Several references are made to dusk. On the second day of every July since time was first recorded, the sun touches the top of South Mountain at 7:29, standard time. During the fading light that lasts for the next thirty to forty minutes, it is possible to make out a human figure in the area of Devil's Den from the crest of Little Round Top. When the sun disappears, the three or four blue and gray ridges on this side of South Mountain turn to dark green. The breeze freshens as it moves over this hill from the south and the west, carrying with it the sweet smell of honeysuckle. The few tall pine trees begin to sway and the leaves of the oak trees rustle. Blackness spreads from among the trees and boulders to the open ground. By 8:25 it is dark.

At dusk, Colonel Chamberlain learned that Strong Vincent had been wounded and that the brigade of Col. Joseph W. Fisher had arrived.³⁵ Norton said that Fisher's Brigade had been sent to assist at dusk but did not arrive in time to assist in the repulse, and at dusk Norton was sent by Colonel Rice to the rear to secure ambulances for the wounded.³⁶

Colonel Rice's Brigade report continued to say that prior to 8:00 the enemy had been repulsed on the brigade's left and front. Detachments of the 44th New York and 83rd Pennsylvania had been ordered forward to "secure all the fruits of this hard-earned victory."³⁷

Norton made a final reference. Brig Gen. Samuel Crawford's attack across Plum Run and north of Little Round Top ended at dark, meaning about 8:25 standard time.³⁸

Colonel Rice reported that before 9:00 the brigade had possession of the enemy's ground and had brought in the wounded of both sides.³⁹

Colonel Chamberlain recounted that at 9:00 a small force of 200 men started climbing up Big Round Top to secure the mountain.⁴⁰ The event and the time are confirmed by Nash.⁴¹

On the morning of July 3 prisoners of the brigade buried the Union dead and most of the enemy dead, according to Colonel Rice.⁴²

Colonel Chamberlain reported that about noon on the 3rd, the brigade was sent to the center of the Union line.

The men of both sides who were caught up in the fight for Little Round Top and the surrounding area understandably did not give priority to noting and recording the exact time of the events. To some, a hard fight of 30 minutes must have seemed to have lasted hours. Someone once wrote that while under fire he wondered why the sun was not moving in the usual manner, why it was hanging motionless over him so as to bring no end to that horrible day. The reports listed here were made by men who were on the scene. Most were recorded within a short time after the battle. Others that were written in later years also deserve consideration.

With some give and take necessary, it is possible to reasonably reconcile the times and duration reported by those engaged in the battle for Little Round Top.

RECAP OF APPROXIMATE TIMES

4:00 E.S.T	The infantry of Longstreet's Corps and George Sykes's Fifth Corps moved toward each other after a 15 to 30 minute exchange of artillery fire.
4:30	Vincent detached his brigade and directed it to Little Round Top. Confederate infantry hit Ward's Brigade and Smith's Battery of the Third Corps above Devil's Den.
4:45	The center of Vincent's Brigade was hit within minutes of taking its defensive position.
5:15 / 5:30	Ward's Brigade was driven back. Confederates were able to move up Plum Run.

²⁹ Report dated July 6, 1863. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 622-26.

³⁰ Report dated August 7, 1863. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 395-96.

³¹ ADLRT, p. 246.

³² ADLRT, p. 247.

³³ ADLRT, p. 250.

³⁴ Nash: *History of the 44th New York Volunteer Infantry*, p. 295. Reprinted by Morningside, 1988.

³⁵ Report dated July 6, 1863. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 622-26.

³⁶ ADLRT, pp. 239 and 244. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 616-20.

³⁷ Report dated July 31, 1863. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 616-20.

³⁸ ADLRT, p. 248.

³⁹ Report dated July 31, 1863. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 622-26.

⁴⁰ Report dated July 6, 1863. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 622-26.

⁴¹ Nash: *History of the 44th New York Volunteer Infantry*, p. 148. Reprinted by Morningside, 1988.

⁴² Report dated July 31, 1863. *O.R.*, Series I, Vol. XXVII, Pt. 1, pp. 622-26.

5:45 Confederates scaled west face of Little Round Top and hit the right of Vincent's line.
Colonel Vincent was hit. (He died on July 7).
140th New York took position on right of line.
Colonel Rice assumed command of the brigade.

6:00 Attack extended to the left. 20th Maine engaged.

6:15 Left wing of the 20th Maine was refused to meet the anticipated flank attack by the 15th Alabama.

6:45 Colonel Chamberlain ordered the charge to wheel forward and to the right.

7:00 The Confederates had been swept from the front and fighting had diminished to long range fire.

7:29 The sun dips to South Mountain and dusk begins.

8:00 Detachments were sent out in front of Vincent's Brigade to gather arms and the wounded.

8:25 The area is in total darkness.

The four regiments of Vincent's Brigade; the 20th Maine, 83rd Pennsylvania, 44th New York, and the 16th Michigan, together with the 140th New York of Weed's Brigade, went to the defense of Little Round Top with a total of about 1,400 men. Official reports list 157 of those men who never knew that the defense of Little Round Top had been a success. Those 157 men saw the darkness come early that day. It was the final darkness for them.

Hundreds more of those 1,400 men saw only a few more sunsets, or lived to spend their remaining years moving at a slower pace imposed by disabling wounds.

This was the personal high water mark for the hundreds of men of the South who went no farther than this place. There are no monuments on the slopes of Little Round Top to memorialize the men of Alabama and Texas who spilled their futures onto the rocky soil of this Pennsylvania hill. How long will the memories of those men remain in this place?

The last hours of life spent by men on Little Round Top fighting for two opposite causes should be remembered and honored.

Reader's Notes: