

“They are firing at the flag.”

VINCENT’S BRIGADE ON LITTLE ROUND TOP

By James R. Wright

Twenty-five years after the fighting on Little Round Top, a detailed account of the movement and fighting of Colonel Strong Vincent’s Brigade (Third Brigade, First Division, Fifth Corps) in the late afternoon of July 2^d was prepared by a man at the focal point of the action. Oliver W. Norton, the brigade bugler and color bearer, wrote a 15-page letter relating what he saw and heard while serving at Vincent’s side.

Norton continued writing on the subject over the next thirty years and exchanged letters with other veterans of that blood-soaked rock pile, the extreme left of the entire Union line. He wrote the paper “Strong Vincent and his Brigade at Gettysburg” contained in *The Gettysburg Papers* (Morningside, 1988) and produced the 1913 classic *Attack and Defense of Little Round Top* (Morningside, 1983).

Morningside is now reprinting Norton’s *Army Letters* (1903) and has added to that work an extensive introduction and biography of Norton, along with a collection of letters between Norton, Chamberlain, Spear, Farley, Sprague, and others, all published for the first time. These letters contain detailed eyewitness accounts of Vincent’s detaching his brigade from the division commanded by General Barnes, the hurried advance up the east slope, the posting of the brigade (20th Maine, 83rd Pennsylvania, 44th New York, 16th Michigan) just in time to meet the onslaught of Hood’s Division, the near collapse of the right wing, the fatal wounding of Vincent, and the final dramatic sweep of the hillside by the left wing. The reader will find much food for thought and discussion.

Norton makes very specific references to the landmarks listed on the map contained in the book by the Comte de Paris to indicate the exact position of the division when Vincent detached his brigade, the route to the summit, and the position taken by the brigade. When he wrote his 1888 letter he had not yet heard of any controversy about the position of Vincent’s Brigade in the battle.

The author of the letter, for reasons unknown, makes an assumption that Gen. James Barnes was not in a position to command the division. Subsequent letters do not clarify or substantiate this allegation. Official reports indicate that Barnes was involved in posting his other brigades at the Wheatfield, and that he was wounded to some extent.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

James R. Wright lives in Columbiana, Ohio, and describes himself as a small town lawyer and a late blooming student of the Civil War. His hobby is photography and some of his most enjoyable days have been spent prowling about the battlefield of Gettysburg with video and still cameras.

He and his wife, Myra, have developed a special interest in Strong Vincent, Oliver W. Norton, and the men of the 83rd Pennsylvania. They have researched the families of Vincent and Norton. Myra is now active in the raising of funds for the renovation of the 100-year-old monument of the 83rd Pennsylvania on Little Round Top.

Jim is responsible for the introduction to and indexing of “Army Letters” and the selection of letters added to the new reprint by Morningside.

Vincent is described as leaving his horse behind the summit with his sword still strapped on the saddle. Other letters tell how Vincent used his wife’s riding crop to rally the men on the right wing. The statue of Vincent atop the 83rd Pennsylvania monument fortunately shows Strong Vincent reaching for his sword rather than a riding crop.

Norton’s 1888 description of Little Round Top, which is reprinted here in full, is also included in the new Morningside reprint of his *Army Letters 1861-1865*. Historian Kathy Georg Harrison of the Gettysburg National Military Park is responsible for bringing this letter to light.

Chicago, Sept. 28, 1888

Mr. Frank Huntington,
Office of Appleton’s Cyclopedic of American
Biography,
63 Bleeker St., New York,

Dear Sir,

Rev. Dr. Vincent of Pittsburgh, sends me your letter to him of the 20th inst. asking for a statement of the facts in reference to the action of General Vincent and his brigade in the battle of Gettysburg, knowing that I was with him during that battle and know the facts.

I never heard before that there was any uncertainty or controversy in regard to the position of Vincent’s brigade in that battle, but if I can make the matter clear to you in such a way to give due honor to the memory of General Vincent, I shall be very glad indeed.

First a word as to myself and the opportunity I had for knowing the facts. I was a private soldier of the 83rd Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers, but acting at that time as brigade bugler and color bearer with Genl. Vincent. You are probably aware that in the Army of the Potomac, each corps {,}division and brigade had a special headquarters flag: a triangular affair, bearing in the center the corps badge, and by a peculiar arrangement of the color red, white and blue, indicating the number of the brigade or division. On the march and on the field of battle the bearer of this flag accompanied the General wherever he went, as a guide to direct to him any staff officers who might be seeking him with orders. I carried the headquarters flag of Vincent's brigade, and of course was mounted and followed wherever he went, and had as good an opportunity as any person living to know the orders given to him and given by him. With this preamble I will give you my recollections of that eventful day.

I have no doubt you have consulted the principal accounts of the battle, and I have just gone over them myself and find that three which I have agreed substantially in their account of Vincent's action, and the part taken by his brigade in the defense of Round Top. In Swinton's Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac, on page 342 is a very fair map of the field and the general position of the troops, and on pages 346 and 347 an account of the defense of Little Round Top. In Doubleday's "Chancellorsville and Gettysburg," one of the Scribner's Campaign Series, is another account, on pages 168 to 170, which is substantially the same, and evidently copied to some extent from Swinton. In the History of the Civil War by Comte de Paris, Vol. 3, page 615 and following, is a very full account of the matter. I have made in a very crude way, some rough pencil sketches of the positions. The map of the field in the Comte de Paris history is a very good one, so far as indicating the roads, streams, buildings, etc., but gives little idea of the surface of the ground. As stated by all the authorities, Barnes' division of the 5th corps consisted of Sweitzer's, Tilton's, and Vincent's brigades. This division after having been held in reserve for several hours in rear of the right and center, behind Cemetery Hill, was moved off to the left and sent to the front to support the 3d corps, which about this time was heavily engaged on the Emmitsburg road, and in the vicinity of the peach orchard. The division was halted and standing in the fields not far from the spot indicated on the Comte de Paris map as the buildings belonging to J. Weikert. Vincent's brigade was in advance; the other two brigades following, and the column had been halted to await further orders. If you look at this map and note the position of the name "J. Weikert," and suppose that to represent a division of troop prepared to march by the flank toward the wheat field and peach orchard, you will have as near as I can recollect, the position of Barnes'

division when the movement of Vincent's brigade began. *I have always felt that General Vincent by his soldierly comprehension of the situation, and the promptness of his action, saved to our army the field of Gettysburg that day, and I think sufficient credit has never been given him. Had he hesitated a moment, or waited for orders to reach him through the ordinary channels, when his brigade arrived on Little Round Top he would have found it already in possession of the enemy.* Swinton and Doubleday say that General {Gouverneur K.} Warren who had observed the movement of the Confederates toward Round Top, which was occupied at that time only by a squad of the Signal Corps, left the hill and took the responsibility of detaching Vincent's brigade from its division and sending it to occupy the hill; and Comte de Paris says on page 615, after speaking of the danger which menaced Little Round Top: "It was necessary to hasten in order to find defenders for it. Following in the wake of {George} Sykes, who had just crossed the hill on foot with Barnes' division, he had found him near the wheat field completing the reconnaissance of which we have spoken. The commander of the 5th corps {Sykes} had immediately ordered Col. Vincent, who was in command of Barnes' 3d brigade, to proceed to occupy the foot of Little Round Top. Hazlitt's {Hazlett} battery was to cooperate with him." I think where in this account the Comte de Paris differs from Swinton and Doubleday, the former is right.

I notice by looking at the map again, that there are two groups of buildings marked J. Weikert. One is just east of Little Round Top on the road; the other is some half mile north of it, near the wheat field. It is the latter group and name that I refer to as indicating the spot where Barnes' division halted. I think Genl. Warren left the Signal Station on Little Round Top and went directly north down the rocky face of the mountain, in the direction of the point between the Weikert buildings and the road along the wheat field, seeking Genl. Sykes. Sykes had left Barnes' division at the place indicated by me, and gone forward on foot to select a place to put in this division. Warren found him somewhere in that vicinity, explained to him the necessity of defending Round Top, and Sykes ordered that one brigade of Barnes' division be detached and sent there.

Now I come to the 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. {James} 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

at any time during the day, after the early morning. I was under the impression that Barnes was not in 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 to 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 the 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 action afterward. I am under the impression that he informed Genl. Sykes of the situation and made the suggestion that the troops be sent there, and that Sykes sent the order.

The leading regiment of Vincent's brigade was the 44th New York, commanded by Col. {James C.} Rice. As soon as he learned from the staff officer what the orders were, he turned to Col. Rice and said, "Colonel, bring the brigade as quickly as possible on to that hill. Double quick where the ground will permit." He sent his two staff officers down the line to repeat the orders to the colonels of the other regiments, and then started at full speed for the hill, in advance of the troops. From where we stood near the Weikert buildings, looking toward Little Round Top, the face of the hill was a confused mass of broken stone. On the Northern slope there was scarcely any vegetation, and the ascent was not practicable for a man on horseback. When Vincent started I followed him of course. We did not follow any road. There is on the map a by-road, leading from the Weikert buildings, to and across the Taneytown Road. I think our position must have been somewhat to the east of this road and that we crossed this road, avoiding the rocky face of Little Round Top. Passing to the east of the hill we climbed the east acclivity, going up from the low ground in the neighborhood of the buildings marked on the map, "L. Bricker," a little to the south of the spot designated as the Signal Station. We came out on the top of the hill to an open place among the rocks, which overlooked the whole country toward the Emmitsburg road. Vincent sat there on his horse a moment and I sat beside him holding the flag. We had been there but a few seconds when a shell exploded close beside us and in a moment two or three other shells came in quick succession. Vincent turned to me and said, "They are

firing at the flag." "Go behind the rocks with it." I obeyed his order, and the rocks were so numerous there that it was little trouble to find a sheltered spot. He remained on this knob for a few moments, and then rode round where I stood, dismounted from his horse, and gave me the bridle to hold. His sword was strapped on the saddle. After leaving his horse he returned to the front, and I have no doubt in the few minutes which intervened between this and the arrival of the head of the column, he had selected the position for the brigade. He heard them coming and returned to where I stood with the horses.

Col. Rice rode up in advance of the head of the column, accompanied by his staff and Vincent's mounted orderlies, two cavalry men I think, who had been detailed to serve as orderlies at headquarters. Vincent directed one of the orderlies to take his horse, and alighting from my horse I gave him to the orderly and followed Vincent on foot over the crest of the hill with the flag. He directed Col. Rice to go to the right, intending to form the line of battle on a line which would be indicated by a line commencing at the Signal Station on the Comte de Paris map, and running directly south facing west. Col. Rice said to Vincent, "Colonel, in every battle the 44th has always fought by the side of the 83^d; I wish it might be so today." Vincent replied, "It shall be. Let the 16th pass you." The 16th Michigan passed in rear of the 44th, and on toward the Signal Station. The 83^d followed next and formed a line on the left of the 83^d, making the extreme left of the brigade and of the whole line of battle. I have indicated the positions on the rough pencil sketch which I enclose. The first diagram gives the outline of the surface of the ground. On our left was the high peak of the Round Top proper, which was not occupied. Between this and the lesser peak of the Little Round Top, is a depression of several hundred yards in width. From the summit of Little Round Top where Vincent formed the right of his line, the ground descended very abruptly, was exceedingly rough and covered with boulders and broken stone.

Most of the accounts speak of the signal flags remaining until Vincent's brigade arrived. My impression is that they did not, as when I reached the spot with the General, we saw no one on the hill. It may be that the flag which I carried was mistaken for the signal corp flag, as this flag remained there a short time before the troops came up. I have indicated in a crude way, by a dotted line in the second diagram, the route which Genl. Vincent took from the Weikert house to the top of the hill, passing to the rear of the hill, and ascending it from the east. The brigade followed by the same route. They had scarcely got in position before a tremendous assault was made by a very heavy force directly in front. The attack is very well described in all the accounts I have mentioned, and I can add nothing special to it. Vincent was passing along the line, encouraging his men, and for some little time I kept near him.

The enemy directly in front of the brigade, were held in check by our fire, but they continued to swarm along the slopes of the hill more to the north of us, and were beginning to overlap the right of the 16th Michigan, which seriously threatened our position. It was just at this juncture that the 140th New York of {Brig. Gen. Stephen H.} Weed's brigade arrived. I am under the impression that Genl. Warren, after visiting Genl. Sykes near the wheat field, returned by the shortest route to the top of the hill again, and was there for a few moments while Vincent's brigade was passing along the eastern foot of the hill, out of sight entirely from this position. Warren had evidently expected that the troops sent to hold that place, would come directly up the face of the rocky hill. Seeing none, he went again in great haste and found Weed's brigade near where Vincent's brigade had been. Meeting Col. {Patrick H. O'Rourke} O'Rourke, a personal acquaintance and former subordinate in command of the 140th New York, he directed him to the spot. O'Rourke obeyed, and led his regiment directly up the northern slope of the hill, then hearing the tremendous firing from the attack on Vincent, he advanced in line of battle along the slope of the hill toward the west. This regiment arrived in range just in time to check the advance which was threatening to flank Vincent's brigade. Vincent's men were well sheltered behind the rocks and never moved from their position from the beginning to the end of the engagement, But O'Rourke's men coming to their assistance, and climbing over the rocks, were very much exposed, and quailed before the terrific fire which met them. They began to fall back and Vincent was endeavoring to encourage them to sustain the line at the critical moment, when he was struck by the ball which ended his life. O'Rourke was also killed further down the slope of the hill. Hazlett's {Hazlett's} battery was drawn up the hill by hand over a route about the same as that followed by Vincent's brigade. I think it did not reach the position where it commenced firing, until after Vincent fell.

Colonel Rice of the 44th New York assumed command of the brigade as soon as Vincent was shot. There was little to do except to encourage the men to maintain their position, and they needed but little encouragement. The attack in the immediate front never stood any chance of success, but our force was very small and the left flank of the brigade stopped in the air in the low ground between the Little Round Top and Round Top. The Confederates finding they could not drive off the brigade by an attack in the front, moved a considerable force over toward Round Top, and succeeded in flanking our line and got quite a large force entirely in rear of our brigade. As they approached, Col. {Joshua L.} Chamberlain, who commanded the 20th Maine, drew back the left wing of his regiment, so as to continue presenting a front to the advancing foe. They

came on in considerable disorder, following each other through the woods, and threatening to capture our whole force. Instead of retreating, Chamberlain ordered an advance of his regiment. Advancing directly toward Round Top, with the center of the regiment well in front, and the two flanks refused, his compact column passed like a wedge through the scattered Confederate troops. Those in front retreated in disorder. A large part of those who had succeeded in reaching our rear, finding themselves cut off, threw down their arms and surrendered. The capture was all made by the 20th Maine Regiment. It included two colonels, fifteen line officers and five hundred men, with more than a thousand muskets. The prisoners numbered many more than their captors. There were probably two thousand men who had passed our line, but a large part of them by throwing away their arms and running up the slope of Round Top, managed to escape and regain the main body.

Some of the accounts speak of the reinforcement of the position by a brigade of the Pennsylvania Reserve Corp. The brigade did come on to the ground after the fight was all over. The 20th Maine returned to its old position on the left of the 83rd, and the Pennsylvania brigade formed in line so as to prolong our line nearly to the summit of Round Top, but I think they did not fire a shot during the battle, the enemy having retired before they reached the position.

I remained with the brigade on the spot where it had fought, until after dark, and obtaining permission from Col. Rice to go to see Col. Vincent, I left the hill and went in company with an orderly who had gone with him when he was carried off to a farm house marked on the Comte de Paris map, Diener, on the road running southeast from Little Round Top. We did not know until the battle was over that Vincent was mortally wounded. When I went into the room where he lay, he seemed very pale and unable to speak, but he looked the question he could not utter. I said to him, "The boys are still there, Colonel," and his face lighted up with a smile which showed his gratification. That was my last sight of one of the most gallant heroes of the war.

You will scarcely care to put all this detail in your account, but if you can convey to your readers the thought that Vincent by his prompt action and gallantry saved to our country the battle of Gettysburg, you will do him no more than justice. His services were recognized by General Meade, who telegraphed the President asking a Brigadier General's commission for him before his death a few days after.

Very Truly Yours,
O.W. Norton