

July 3, 1863 Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

Ewell began fighting on Culp's Hill at first light. Lee rode to Longstreet's headquarters only to find Longstreet had misunderstood his orders. He was planning a turning movement against the Union left. Now, with no hope of a coordinated attack, Lee changed the plan. Longstreet was to attack the Union center on Cemetery Ridge. Ewell's forces failed in their counterattacks and were forced to withdraw from Culp's Hill by about 11:00 a.m. Lee pinned all his hopes on Longstreet's attack on the center. Longstreet had the last fresh division in Lee's army. It was made up of three brigades, commanded by generals James L. Kemper, Richard B. Garnett, and Lewis A. Armistead, led by Pickett.

Cannons

First, a bombardment by about 140 Confederate cannons on the Union lines was ordered. The bombardment started about 1 p.m. About 80 Union cannons returned fire. The cannons duel lasted for between one and two hours, depending on the source (most say about an hour). The Confederate artillery chief, General Edward Porter Alexander, had only intended it to last for about 25 minutes. But he then realized it had done little damage to the Union line so he continued. But he also had to worry about running out of ammunition and not have enough to support the charge that was Pickett was about to make. When the Union guns fell silent, Porter thought he had knocked them out. But it was a trick by the Union artillery chief. His guns were waiting for the charge the Union forces knew was coming. Alexander sent word to Pickett he could start his attack.

The cannonade could be heard as far away as Philadelphia. The noise was so loud the gunner's ears bled. It was probably the loudest noise that had ever been heard on the North American continent up to that time. In the end the Confederate cannons may have killed as many as 200 Union soldiers in the area that would later become known as the "bloody angle". But the Union guns may have killed more Confederate troops.

Pickett's Charge

Calling the Confederate attack on the Union center "Pickett's Charge" is misleading for two reasons. First, Pickett commanded only one of the three units in the assault. The other two were commanded by Major General Isaac R. Trimble and Brigadier General J. Johnston Pettigrew. Secondly, it was not a charge, which is a rapid advance towards the enemy, it was an attack which moved forward more slowly and over a longer distance.

These Virginia units were joined by several smaller units of Confederates (some from North Carolina, Tennessee and Alabama) whose numbers had been reduced by the fighting over the first two days. When the cannons stopped, Pickett went to Longstreet to ask permission to begin the attack. Longstreet, sure the attack would fail, silently nodded his head and gave a wave of his hand. Longstreet had tried to get Lee to call off the attack, but Lee would not listen.

Over 12,000 Confederates stepped from the tree line and formed up for the long march forward. Waiting for them behind a low stone fence on Cemetery Ridge were about 5,000 Union troops, most of whom belonged to General Winfield Scott Hancock's II Corps. Depending on the source, this was between 2:00 and 3:00 p.m.

As they marched forward across the 1 mile (1.6 km) distance, Union artillery killed large numbers of troops. Rifle fire from the Union line was intense. The Union troops used four lines of soldiers. As the line in front fired, they moved back to reload while the next line moved up to fire. Only a few hundred of the Virginians reached the Union line. Within minutes they were dead or dying. Some were captured. The attack lasted about an hour with over 7,000 Confederate soldiers killed. As the remaining Confederate troops retreated, Lee was seen riding his horse saying "this was all my fault". He then told Pickett to rally his division. Pickett famously replied, "General, I have no division."

At about the same time as the main attack, Stuart's cavalry attacked the Union rear but the attack also failed.

