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At All Costs: The Stand of the 16th Maine at Gettysburg

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At All Costs: The Stand of the 16th Maine at Gettysburg

Abstract

The order to hold to the last, to continue fighting, to refuse to break no matter the cost, is often held to be a noble and heroic concept, especially in the Victorian context of the nineteenth century and the American Civil War. The most famous action of this kind at the Battle of Gettysburg is of course the stand of the 20th Maine on Little Round Top on July 2, 1863, which has been popularized through the writings of Michael Shaara and the 1993 film *Gettysburg*. The 20th Maine's commanding officer, Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, reflects upon this unique brand of orders in the film, philosophically wondering what "to the last" can mean, even as his men prepare to receive the enemy. Paradoxically, such a stand only becomes glorious when it is not forced to fulfill the true measure of its orders. Gallant reinforcements arrive to stem the tide; the enemy is broken before the can succeed; the defenders lose hope and retreat rather than being annihilated. Indeed, seldom is the occasion on which men have truly stood "to the last." One is the case of the 16th Maine at Gettysburg. [*excerpt*]

Keywords

The Gettysburg Compiler, Civil War, Battle of Gettysburg, 16th Maine, Col. Tilden, Oak Ridge, 20th Maine, Col. Joshua Chamberlain

Disciplines

History | Military History | United States History

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THE GETTYSBURG COMPILER

ON THE FRONT LINES OF HISTORY

At All Costs: The Stand of the 16th Maine at Gettysburg

SEPTEMBER 17, 2013

By Bryan Caswell, '15

The order to hold to the last, to continue fighting, to refuse to break no matter the cost, is often held to be a noble and heroic concept, especially in the Victorian context of the nineteenth century and the American Civil War. The most famous action of this kind at the Battle of Gettysburg is of course the stand of the 20th Maine on Little Round Top on July 2, 1863, which has been popularized through the writings of Michael Shaara and the 1993 film *Gettysburg*. The 20th Maine's commanding officer, Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, reflects upon this unique brand of orders in the film, philosophically wondering what "to the last" can mean, even as his men prepare to receive the enemy. Paradoxically, such a stand only becomes glorious when it is not forced to fulfill the true measure of its orders. Gallant reinforcements arrive to stem the tide; the enemy is broken before the can succeed; the defenders lose hope and retreat rather than being annihilated. Indeed, seldom is the occasion on which men have truly stood "to the last." One is the case of the 16th Maine at Gettysburg.



As a member of Paul's Brigade, Second Division, I Corps, Army of the Potomac, the 16th Maine saw heavy action on July 1, 1863 as the men of the I Corps attempted to delay Confederate forces to the north and west of the small town of Gettysburg. Initially held in reserve, the regiment and its brigade were soon thrown into line along what is commonly known as Oak Ridge, the northernmost extension of the I Corps' line. The Union soldiers on Oak Ridge held off repeated assaults by the Confederates of Maj. General Robert Rodes' division, and in fact held for so long they soon found themselves dangerously exposed as their comrades in the I Corps to their left fell back from positions around the Lutheran Seminary and the men of the XI Corps to their right and rear were routed back through town by Maj. General Jubal Early's Confederate division. The commander of the men on Oak Ridge, General Robinson, finally sounded the withdrawal. Turning to Colonel Tilden of the 16th Maine, Robinson ordered the regiment to remain behind as a rearguard to allow the rest of the division to escape. Tilden protested, but Robinson was adamant, firmly telling him to "hold at all costs." This order was not a glorious statement of resolve, but a condemnation, a sacrifice. Lt. Abner Small, the adjutant of the regiment, recorded the colonel's reaction:

"You all know what that means," said Colonel Tilden, turning to us, and in the same breath he gave the commands that sent us scurrying back towards the Mummasburg Road again.

With calm acceptance and quiet courage, the men of the 16th Maine carried out their orders. Facing the resurgent might of Rodes' division, the regiment was slowly pushed back along Oak Ridge until they arrived at an unfinished railroad cut. Finally offered a means of protection against Rodes' men to the north, the 16th Maine took refuge in the cut, only to discover a second Confederate column bearing down on them from the west: Junius Daniels' brigade, which had anchored the right of Rodes' division. Surrounded, the men from Maine resolved not to allow the regiment's colors to be captured, tearing them into pieces and distributing the scraps amongst themselves.



Those who could escape did so, while the rest fought on. Over one hundred and fifty men were eventually taken prisoner, including Colonel Tilden. The next morning, only thirty-eight men and four officers remained from a regiment that had boasted over two hundred effective soldiers just twenty-four hours previously, a casualty rate of nearly eighty-three percent. Yet the 16th Maine had served its purpose: the remainder of Robinson's brigade had been allowed to withdraw intact to the Union positions east of town, due in no small part to the unquestioning determination of the 16th Maine to truly hold at all costs.

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