

Storming Little Round Top: The 15th Alabama and Their Fight for the High Ground, July 2, 1863

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Review

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Tucker, Phillip Thomas *Storming Little Round Top: The 15th Alabama and Their Fight for the High Ground, July 2, 1863*. Da Capo Press, \$30.00 ISBN 306811464

Vicious Fight

Book follows regiment's struggle at Gettysburg

At approximately 4 a.m. on July 2, 1863, Colonel William C. Oates prepared his regiment, the 15th Alabama, for a 25 mile march to Gettysburg, a small Pennsylvania crossroads town where General Robert E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia faced Union General George G. Meade's Army of the Potomac. Twelve hours later, hot, tired, and lacking water from the arduous march, Oates' regiment began a desperate three hour assault that ended in a bitter hand-to-hand fight against Colonel Joshua L. Chamberlain's 20th Maine on the far left of the Union's line that, according to Phillip Thomas Tucker, held the best opportunity for Confederate victory at Gettysburg. A historian at the Air Force History Support Office in Washington, D.C., Tucker is the author or editor of nearly a dozen books, including *The Confederacy's Fighting Chaplain: Father John B. Bannon*, for which he received the Douglas Southall Freeman Award, and *Burnsides Bridge: The Climatic Struggle of the 2nd and 20th Georgia at Antietam Creek*, which is a History Book Club selection. Arguing that the 15th Alabama's often overlooked struggle on Little Round Top represents the true high water mark of the Confederacy because it held the best chance for Confederate success at Gettysburg, Tucker uses diaries and memoirs from the battle's participants, as well as previously published sources, to reveal the story of the regiment's assault on Little Round Top.

According to Tucker, the failure of Oates' attack on Little Round Top was largely due to the inability of the Confederate high command, particularly Generals Lee and James Longstreet, to recognize the changing tactical situation of the battle's second day. Ordered to attack the Federal flank via the

Emmitsburg Road early in the day, a reluctant Longstreet delayed his assault until late in the afternoon, allowing Meade to shift his forces further south. What had once been a planned attack on Meade's left flank became an attack on his center by the time Longstreet finally ordered his troops to advance. Despite mistakes and mismanagement from Confederate high command, Tucker asserts that Oates' regiment fought bravely and almost snatched victory from the maws of defeat against nearly impossible odds. According to Tucker, studying the fight for Little Round Top from the 15th Alabama's perspective casts a different light on the battle's events. Writing on page 9, Tucker asserts, The reality that Chamberlain's own versions of Gettysburg were self-serving and exaggerated has been conveniently overlooked and ignored by most historians. Contrary to Chamberlain's claims, Tucker asserts that the 20th Maine was not outnumbered. After suffering high casualties from five all-out assaults, Chamberlain considered withdrawing his unit, which, Tucker writes on page 257, would have acted as the first in a series of dominoes with one Federal unit after another falling to a steam-rolling flank assault of the regiments of Hood's division. Hood's hard-fighting brigades would then roll-up General Meade's battle lines until the name Gettysburg would be immortalized forever across the South.

However, the fight for Little Round Top did not become a glorious southern victory. After his fifth attack, Oates realized that he would not receive reinforcements and ordered what remained of his regiment to retreat before it was completely isolated. In need of ammunition and seeking to aid wounded comrades lying between the lines, the center of the 20th Maine's line moved forward, sparking a general advance of the regiment that was unknown and unorderd by Chamberlain. Tucker writes on page 290 that, The 20th Maine's bayonet attack' little resembled today's highly romanticized and popularized versions of a glorious charge which swept aside all resistance and achieved decisive victory.

Storming Little Round Top describes the 15th Alabama's effort in one of the most vicious small unit fights of the war. Told from the Confederate perspective, it certainly seems that historians should reexamine earlier accounts of the battle. However, Tucker's latest book suffers from several weaknesses. Understanding the swirling movements of the day's battle would have been much easier if more than one map had accompanied the text. Having only one picture of Colonel Oates in the book is also disappointing. Including photographs of some of the 15th Alabama's other officers and enlisted men would allow readers to connect more forcefully with the men who charged up Little Round

Top. The reasoning Tucker applies to claim that the entire Union position at Gettysburg would have collapsed had Oates been able to take Little Round Top seems based more on wishful thinking rather than military reality. With dusk fast approaching, it is difficult to imagine Hood's division, already heavily involved in conflict, being able to effectively exploit the tactical advantage that would have been gained by Confederate possession of Little Round Top. In short, **Storming Little Round Top** is a respectable effort to understand the Confederate attempt to seize Gettysburg's high ground, however, like Oates and the 15th Alabama at Little Round Top, Tucker's latest book falls short of complete success.

Stephen A. Ross holds a master's degree in public history from North Carolina State University.