



# “Do you see those colors?” “Then take them!”

By Charlie Stuart

IF YOU KNOW ABOUT THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG, you know about Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain and the stand the 20th Maine Volunteers made on Little Round Top. It is said that their stand saved the battle for the Union, and quite possibly the war as well.

But have you heard of the charge of the 1st Minnesota Volunteers? Probably not. It happened on the same day just minutes after the fight on Little Round Top reached its climax. President Calvin Coolidge, speaking at the dedication of a memorial to Colonel William Colvill, who commanded the 1st Minnesota that day, said to an audience of 20,000,

*“So far as human judgment can determine, Colonel Colvill and those eight companies of the 1st Minnesota are entitled to rank as saviors of their country. In all the history of warfare this charge has few if any equals and no superiors. It was an exhibition of the most exalted heroism against an apparently insuperable antagonist.”*

Colonel Chamberlain, when walking the ground of the 1st Minnesota’s action years later said, “They had it much tougher.”

This is the story of what happened on that hot day in July that, while heroic and important, is still so little known.

On April 15, 1861, just three days after the surrender of Fort Sumter, President Abraham Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to put down the insurrection. Minnesota’s Governor Alexander Ramsey happened to be in Washington City that day, and became the first state to commit troops, pledging 1,000 volunteers. Twelve days later ten companies reported for duty in Minnesota and formed the 1st Minnesota Volunteers.

It is interesting to note that these volunteers came from “the west,” as it was known at the time. They came from a “free state” that did not have slavery - and quite likely very few, if any, of the volunteers had even seen a Negro. Yet they responded to the call without hesitation because the Union, their Union, was in peril.

This regiment fought with the Army of the Potomac in the First Battle of Bull Run (July 21, 1861), the Battle of Fair Oaks (May 31-June 1, 1862), the Battle of Savage Station (June 29, 1862), the Second Battle of Bull Run (August 28-September 2, 1862), the Battle of Antietam (September 17, 1862) the Battle of Fredricksburg (December 11-15, 1862), the Battle of Gettysburg (July 2-3, 1863), and was sent to quell the draft riots in New York City (August 15-September 6, 1863). During this fourteen month period, the regiment lost in dead, wounded and missing more than

80% of its original 1,000 volunteers. The 1st Minnesota's Civil War record stands as testament to the spirit these western men had for preserving the Union.

## Late afternoon, July 2nd, 1863 – Gettysburg, Pennsylvania

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The commanding generals on both sides knew each other well. They had served together before the war, many in Mexico, and most were graduates of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point. They knew the principle of concentration of force, and they knew that offensive success depended on getting a 3-to-1 advantage at the point of attack, and that defensive success depended on being able to move reserves to a point of attack to change the ratio and move into a counter attack.

General Robert E. Lee, commanding the Confederate forces, ordered a general assault on this day on two fronts hoping to find the weak spot and exploit it. One of the fronts began on the southern end of the line against two hills overlooking the field - Big & Little Round Tops. It was here that the assault nearly succeeded - but for the stubbornness of fishermen and farmers from Maine. As the assault moved along the line, shifting toward the north and aiming at the center of Cemetery Ridge, Lee's strategy was positioned for the Army of Northern Virginia's best chance to split the Federal Army of the Potomac.

General Winfield Scott Hancock, corp commander and the senior officer on Cemetery Ridge, saw the developing assault, but also saw an undefended section caused by the rashness of General Dan Sickles' movement of his division forward. Sickles' men, fighting for their survival, slowed the Confederate advance, but now the gap offered a chance for victory or defeat. Hancock had already lost a staff officer by his side to rifle fire coming from the 1,600 man assault force led by General Cadmus Wilcox, and sent a messenger riding hard to hurry reserves to this place. Hancock also knew that in five minutes the assault would overwhelm the gap, roll up the sides of the gap, and cause havoc behind the Federal lines - in a word, disaster was five minutes away.

As he looked back, the first group arriving over the hill was the vanguard of General Gibbons' division, eight companies of the 1st Minnesota Volunteers. Seeing the enemy fast approaching, Hancock knew that in five minutes there would be another 5,000 men plugging the gap - but where to get those five minutes?

The 1st Minnesota was commanded by Colonel William Colvill. At 6' 5" he was the tallest man in the army, and had served with the regiment since the beginning. He was originally elected Captain of Company F which was composed of local men that knew him well, and he knew them well, too. Over the year, Colvill had distinguished himself eventually rising to Colonel (the highest rank in a regiment) on May 6, 1863. Now it was just under two months since he took command, and here he was, at the front of these eight companies hurrying toward General Hancock. With him, Colonel Colvill had just 261 men.

## Do you see those colors? Then take them!

Knowing full well the consequence of his order, General Hancock rode up to the column and asked, "What regiment is this?" Colonel Colvill replied, "The 1st Minnesota!" Hancock, looking back over his shoulder and pointing at the Alabama flag in the front rank of the charging enemy fast closing the distance to the gap . . . and disaster, called out for all to hear, "Do you see those colors?" "Yes, sir!" Colonel Colvill responded.

"Then take them!" is all General Hancock said, or had to say.

Immediately Colonel Colvill gave the orders that turned his column into a battle line of two ranks, took his place in the center just behind the men, and ordered the charge.

Pause now and put yourself in the minds of those men. Everyone could see what was coming toward them - more than five times their number in a line twice their width. Everyone heard the General's command and knew that it meant most of them would not be coming back.

They also trusted their colonel, knew this charge must be made, and they were the only ones who could make it. It is a testimony to their unit cohesion and spirit that every one of them did their duty - they fixed bayonets, got into line, and on the command leveled their rifles and ran toward the enemy.



The next 300 seconds would tell whether their sacrifice would be in vain.

Could they get there in time? Would the enemy stop to engage them, or slip around them and continue their charge toward the gap? Would Hancock's call for more troops be in time to plug the gap even if they were able to hold back the enemy for a precious few minutes?

Without even pausing to fire, the 1st Minnesota men kept running even as the fire of the attackers began to find the range. Some rebels were stopping to fire and reload - each time buying a few more seconds with the blood of a Federal wounded or killed.

Colonel Colvill, shepherding his men, his "boys", as best he could saw them begin to fall. In his words,

*"I was immediately behind the colors . . . I saw a number of our men lying as they had fallen . . . Then came a shock like a sledge hammer on my backbone between my shoulders. It turned me partly around and made me 'see stars'. I suppose it was a piece of shell. Just then I perceived Captain Coates, who said, 'Colonel, are you badly hurt?' I said, 'I don't know. Take care of the men.'"*

“Take care of the men.” Colonel Colvill’s first thought after a Minie’ ball tore through the top right shoulder, across his upper back, clipped off a part of a vertebra, and lodged under his left shoulder blade - “Take care of the men.” In the next instant a bullet smashed his right ankle, sending bone fragments out the other side of his foot, spinning Colvill around before he fell. He fell into a slight gully that shielded him from view and further injury, but he also was left on the field until later that night when a party of “his boys” found him and carried him to the rear, where he kept insisting that “his boys” get treatment before he did.

The 1st Minnesota did not waiver. They did not stop until they crashed into the rebel line. All three regimental officers had fallen during the attack leaving it to a captain to gather those still standing and get back to the gap, now plugged by Federal troops prepared to defend the line.

Hancock had his five minutes, and five more - but the cost was frightful. 262 men charged, and 47 came back. 215 were killed or wounded - 82% of those who made the charge fell, the highest percentage of any Federal regiment in the war.

General Hancock spoke later of his decision to send the 1st Minnesota to almost certain doom.

*“I knew they must lose heavily and it caused me pain to give the order for them to advance, but I would have done it if I had known every man would be killed. It was a sacrifice that must be made. The superb gallantry of those men saved our line from being broken. No soldiers on any field, in this or any other country, ever displayed grander heroism.”*

“No soldiers on any field...ever displayed grander heroism.” High praise, especially coming from someone so qualified by experience, command and his own heroism - but, the 262 men who charged did it not for the praise, or medals, or even recognition. They did it because they were there, it needed doing, and their Colonel led them.

The 1st Minnesota Volunteers - men who “died to make men free.”