The First Minnesota and the Battle of Gettysburg

The three-day Battle of Gettysburg was the largest, bloodiest battle ever fought on the American continent and the single most important battle of the Civil War. Over 167,000 Americans fought at Gettysburg and over 51,000 fell—roughly one out of every three engaged. It turned the tide against the Confederacy, but for the First Minnesota Regiment, it was a costly victory indeed.

"Charge of the First Minnesota" by Don Troiani.

The Battle

The Battle of Gettysburg was an act of fate. Largely unplanned and uncontrollable, it sprang from decisions that men under pressure make in the light of imperfect knowledge. It marked a watershed for both sides, but also symbolized the war itself—full of blunders and heroism and blinding devotion to fellow soldiers and patriotic ideals.

Background

Confederate General Robert E. Lee was desperate for a decisive victory that could force the North to negotiate a peace that guaranteed the South’s nationhood. Buoyed by his recent victory at Chancellorsville, Lee decided for the second time to invade the North (the first time resulted in the Battle of Antietam, in Maryland, September 1862). He moved his Army of Northern Virginia into southern Pennsylvania in June 1863. Lee was shadowed along the way by the Union's Army of the Potomac, but due to poor reconnaissance, neither side knew exactly where the other army was until June 30 when, essentially by accident, they encountered one another at a small crossroads town called Gettysburg.

Day One — July 1, 1863

Fierce fighting erupted in the morning northwest of town. Lee pressed hard and two Union corps—Howard's and Doubleday's— collapses by the afternoon. Union survivors retreated toward high ground south of town and took up good defensive positions there. Contrary to Lee's request, Confederate General Richard Ewell failed to attack one such key position, Cemetery Hill. Openly vulnerable that night, it soon became the foundation of the Union line on the right flank.
Day Two — July 2

Union forces formed a 2-1/2 mile defensive line from Culp's Hill on the right, through Cemetery Hill, down Cemetery Ridge and ending at Little Round Top.

Much of the second day's fighting occurred on the left flank. Dan Sickles, who commanded the Union's III Corps, decided (without orders) to move forward to slightly higher ground in front of Cemetery Ridge, isolating him from the rest of the Union line.

Day Two — July 2 (evening)

Ewell's Confederates nearly took Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill on the right flank, but were driven back. Meanwhile, Southern forces under Longstreet had widened the gap between Sickles and the Union's II Corps, commanded by Winfield Hancock. About 7:00 p.m., under unrelenting attack, Sickles' men suddenly began to retreat in disarray. An Alabama brigade of 1600 - 1800 men advanced unopposed, threatening to split the Union line at its center. Hancock hastily began to shift his forces toward the empty gap.

**Charge of the First Minnesota on Cemetery Ridge**

The First Minnesota, commanded by Col. William Colvill of Red Wing, was being held in reserve nearby. Companies C and F had been detached for duty elsewhere and the regiment numbered only 262 on the field. Compelled to buy time until Union reinforcements could fill the breach, Hancock galloped up to Colvill and ordered the Minnesotans to "Charge those lines!" The seriousness of the situation was instantly evident to every man in the regiment, but without hesitation and vastly outnumbered, they fixed bayonets and charged forward—first at a walk, and then a run.

The startled Confederates hesitated in the face of Colvill's onrushing soldiers, and then fell back behind their own second line. Their advance stopped as the two forces converged in a chaotic melee of close-in gunfire around the low banks of a dry brook (Plum Run) at the foot of a slope. The episode lasted less than 15 minutes, but it was enough time for reinforcements to arrive. The Confederates retreated and the
The First Minnesota achieved lasting fame by throwing back a crucial attack that came dangerously close to a breakthrough. But the price was high. Most the regiment lay dying or wounded on Cemetery Ridge.

That night, George Meade, the newly appointed commander of Union forces at Gettysburg, decided to defend rather than attack on the next day. He figured that Lee, having failed to turn either Union flank, would now try for the center.

**Day Three — July 3**

Meade proved correct. Lee launched a massive frontal assault, now known as Pickett’s Charge, on the Union center on Cemetery Ridge. The attack began with a two hour artillery barrage. At 3:00 p.m., with three fresh brigades from George Pickett's division in the lead, 15,000 southerners emerged from the woods and in three lines began a mile-long, 20 minute march toward Cemetery Ridge. As they neared the Union lines, they broke into a run and let out a sustained, high pitch “Rebel yell.”

Union artillery opened fire on the assaulting Rebels, tearing great gaps in their ranks, but they held their formation until within range of withering Yankee rifle fire. The Confederate flanks soon collapsed, but their spearhead managed to drive through the Union lines and into a clump of trees and stone walls that was later referred to as the “Angle.” Battle lines became intermingled amid a vast, deafening tumult of shouting men, exploding shells, and musket fire.

Union reinforcements soon swarmed into the breach and the Confederates withdrew. By 4:00 it was all over. Meade judged his Union forces too battered to launch a counterattack.

**The First Minnesota and Pickett's Charge**

The decimated regiment—which now included its Companies C and F—was posted only 300 yards from the “Angle” when Pickett's Charge began. At the height of battle they drove squarely into the flank of the Confederates who had pierced the Union line, fighting with the same fierce determination that marked their charge the evening before. Amidst the chaos, Pvt. Marshall Sherman captured the colors of the 28th Virginia Infantry and later received a Medal of Honor for his heroic feat. The regiment sustained 45 more casualties.

**July 4**

It rained, “washing blood from the grass,” while both armies rested and tended to their dead and wounded.

**July 5**

Lee's shaken army began a long, painful retreat back to Virginia. Meade pursued slowly, catching up at the Potomac, but Lee's troops dug in and Meade decided not to attack his entrenched enemy.
July 13

Lee crossed back into Virginia, leaving his dream of victory in the North behind.

The First Minnesota—Casualties and Aftermath

During the Battle of Gettysburg, in less than 24 hours, the First Minnesota suffered 224 casualties (64 killed and 160 wounded) out of approximately 335 men in the regiment. During its brief, epic charge on the evening of July 2, 82 percent of those engaged fell— purported to be the highest casualty rate suffered by any Union regiment in a single action in the entire war.

The regiment’s survivors, along with some replacements, participated in a variety of minor campaigns before moving to winter quarters near Culpeper Courthouse, Virginia. In February 1864, the regiment was recalled to Fort Snelling and, two months later, officially disbanded. Some men re-enlisted and, with new recruits, formed the First Minnesota Infantry Battalion. They returned to serve with the Army of the Potomac until the end of the war.

The significance of the First Minnesota at Gettysburg—especially its charge on July 2—remains undimmed by time. The regiment’s respected place in American military history will last for as long as we remember the Civil War.

Gettysburg became synonymous with all the agony of war. The cost in lives was enormous: Of 90,000 Union troops engaged, 23,000 were casualties. The South lost 28,000 of 77,000 deployed.

Lee blamed himself for the Southern loss and submitted his resignation to Jefferson Davis, but it was refused. The conflict between North and South lasted for nearly two more years, but Lee was never able to achieve the momentum needed to ultimately win the war for the Confederacy.

The First Minnesota was reorganized after the war to once again become part of the Minnesota National Guard. Today’s 135th Infantry Regiment, 34th “Red Bull” Infantry Division, traces its lineage directly to the First Minnesota. The 135th’s motto, “To The Last Man,” was Col. Colvill’s reply to Gen. Hancock’s order to “charge those lines.”