

CHAOS

By James Collins.

The Maine 20th Regimental Infantry settled in for the night. It was June of 1863 with hot days and cold nights. The rows of white tents were spaced in an orderly manner making streets and squares. The small peaked two-man tents were in the majority, while larger eight-man tents for officers and headquarters were in the center. At three in the morning, only the sentries were awake. Two dozen Confederates on horseback rode down the turnpike alongside the encampment.

The sentry on duty shouted, "Halt! Who goes there?"

The lead rider in the slouch hat was only a silhouette in the dark. He never slowed but answered, "We are New Yorkers -- the 77th."

"That accent doesn't sound like New York. Halt and dismount."

The second man on horseback fired a shotgun, and the sentry flew back and hit the ground. Twenty cavalymen turned their horses to the left, gave out a rebel yell and rode through the camp firing at anyone who moved. They were using carbines and when they ran out of ammo, they switched to Colt revolvers and wreaked havoc throughout the camp. Several of them threw hand grenades made from black powder with short wicks, that they lighted using cigars. One hit the supply tent containing kerosene, and immediately a ferocious blaze was evident. As the Confederates cleared the other side of the camp, they rode into the woods and disappeared.

Chaos was rampant. Men in all forms of undress were stumbling out of the tents carrying rifles and trying to find out what was going on and where to hide. The blinding smoke was everywhere. Col. Chamberlain was the coolest man in the camp. He ordered the camp drummer, to rattle a tattoo on his drum that indicated 'reform ranks'. At the same time, he had the bugler order 'to arms'. At this point, the officers took charge of their companies. Everybody went back, got their bucket, and formed a bucket brigade from the stream that passed through the camp to the blazing tents. The lines of men raced to the flame as if drawn by a magnet. In a relatively short time, their efforts extinguished the fire and the officers doubled sentries all around the encampment. This event energized the Regiment, and the training for responses in combat intensified. In the following months, the 20th Maine became a potent fighting force in the union army.

On July 3, 1863, 358 men of the 20th Maine Regiment under Col. Lawrence Chamberlain met and defeated the 15th Alabama infantry at Little Round Top at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania while suffering horrendous losses. This was crucial to the union victory at Gettysburg. Chamberlain received the Medal of Honor and later became the Governor of Maine and the President of Bowdoin College in Maine. He received the honor of commanding the Union troops that received the surrender of the Confederate armies at Appomattox, Virginia.

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