



To Sherman it was unclear which side was taking the most punishment, but he could see that the Union line was looking dangerously thin and the number of men in blue uniforms lying dead outnumbered those standing. To him the 20th Maine, particularly G Company, seemed to be taking the worst of it and he started to wonder just how long they could hold out. The left had been hit repeatedly and it was no secret that the Rebels were making an all-out attempt to flank their position.

Just then Sherman saw Chamberlain off in the distance. At the sound of a bugle, Spear and every other company commander converged on Chamberlain's location. Exhausted and painfully parched, Sherman and other soldiers of the regiment could only watch as the colonel and his standard-bearers became enveloped in a circle of captains.

After a very brief meeting the group disbanded and immediately began shouting orders. Sherman looked for Spear. The wiry captain soon emerged and hollered commands for his men to get to their feet and extend the line farther to the left. The worn-out warriors in blue hustled along at the prodding of their sergeants. Using his lieutenants as position-markers, Spear extended G Company and skillfully redeployed his men at sharp angles to match the Confederates' flanking maneuvers. The other companies fell into place and soon a new line was formed. The Federals now had

the position they wanted, but did they have the manpower to hold it? The line was despairingly weak—just one man deep in many places. Suddenly, as if matters weren't bad enough, a far more serious problem revealed itself through the desperate voices of many Union soldiers.

"I don't have anything left," cried out a private, his hands frantically rummaging through his leather cartridge box.

"I got three shots. Only three!" replied another after checking his ammunition supply.

"The Rebs just keep coming. How can we stop 'em all? The whole damn Confederacy is trying to take this hill! We got nothin' but sticks and rocks to throw at 'em now," yelled another panicked soldier upon realizing his cartridge box was empty too.

Spear gave an order for his men to scavenge ammunition from the dead and wounded. Other officers followed suit and soon the soldiers holding the thin line were again ramming bullets down the muzzles of their muskets.

"Lord in Heaven please spare me an extra shot or two," implored Sherman as he searched every pocket he had in hopes of finding additional paper cartridges to supplement the five remaining in his dog-eared cartridge box. His search came up empty.

"Here they come again!"

Sherman looked up and saw a muddled formation of Rebel troops attempting to assemble into a firing line. At first they appeared to be a harmless menace, more like a disorganized rabble than a spirited fighting force, but as the sounds of drumbeats married up with authoritative voices of southern commanders, the soldiers in gray quickly transformed into a formidable threat. They had endured a solid hour of punishment and were as exhausted as their northern counterparts, but they still had a lot of fight left in them—and more importantly, plenty of ammunition.

The air was split with a piercing Rebel yell that sent eerie chills shooting through Sherman's body. It was an almost indescribable war cry that personified southern resolve and morale on the battlefield. Suddenly, amidst all their shrieking and howling, the Rebels charged. They raced forward with all the force and tenacity their hearts and souls could muster. It was as if the fate of the entire Confederacy rested on the success or failure of this one attack against the farmers, loggers, and fishermen of the 20th Maine regiment.

The Rebels stormed forward with untethered ferocity. Their attack was met with a torrent of fire from every 20th Maine musket fortunate enough to have a Minié ball tamped down the barrel. Some southerners were hit while others took cover and returned fire, inflicting more damage on the already tenuous Union position. Both sides exchanged a massive volume of lead, hoping to deliver the knockout blow that would decisively end the battle. The Confederates brutally hemorrhaged their manpower with repeated flanking assaults aimed at the Union left. The Federals continued to maneuver and match the Rebel movements in a desperate attempt to keep them in check, but the cost in blood was high and many Federal soldiers were cut down.

“Keep up your fire! Pour it on, boys! Pour it on!” shouted a sergeant before two Confederate balls slammed into his chest. He toppled over and into Sherman, knocking him out of his firing position. Two more volleys ricocheted off a rock near Sherman’s head. Stunned, he got back into his crouch and fired off his last shot. As the gun discharged, the bearded and butternut-clad Rebel in its sight dropped and fell dead. Sherman could tell he was an officer and wondered how many Rebels he had killed today. Sadly he had lost count a long time ago. More distressingly, the young private was now out of ammunition. He pounced on the cartridge box of every corpse near him. The ground was littered with Union dead and he prayed he would not be joining his fallen comrades.

He reached into a mortally wounded sergeant’s cartridge box and discovered one remaining paper cartridge. He bit open the paper with his black, powder-stained teeth and began reloading his gun. Suddenly a terrifying sight caught his eye. Through the thick haze of dirty black powder smoke, a line of thirty Confederates standing shoulder to shoulder appeared from behind some trees. They raised their muskets in unison and let off a murderous barrage of fire toward Sherman’s position. His legs gave out in an involuntary act of self-preservation. As he dropped, several shots whizzed past. Bullets nicked his uniform at the shoulders and waist while another knocked his kepi clean off his head. Miraculously, however, no bullet tore into his flesh or shattered his bones.

As he hit the ground, the thin line of men around him seemed to evaporate. A gaping hole was effectively shot out of the Union line, and the Rebels exploited it without delay. With another ear-splitting Rebel yell emanating from their parched throats, the Confederates charged.

Their officers encouraged them forward by waving their swords and shouting, “Give ‘em the cold steel, boys! That’s the style!”

In an instant, Sherman found himself alone. He was the only man standing amidst a sea of blue-uniformed casualties. His nearest help was a disorganized mass of troops several yards to his right. To his left was nothing but a graveyard of fallen men. Blind instinct again took over as Sherman was overcome with a wave of adrenaline that willed him to fight and not flee. He reached for the bayonet dangling on his belt and quickly affixed it to his gun barrel just as the first Confederate reached him. He swung his musket like a club and caught the gray-clad Rebel with the butt end. The impact fractured his skull and sent him reeling backward just as another Rebel charged. Sherman thrust his bayonet forward, jamming the pointed blade into the chest of his attacker. He jerked it out and violently slashed at another Confederate trying to take him down. This time he slipped and hit the ground hard. His musket fell out of his hands and—more alarmingly—out of his reach.

“You rotten son of a bitch,” Sherman madly shouted as a Rebel jumped on top of him and tried to strangle the life from his body. The two thrashed on the ground, kicking, scratching, and clawing at one another, each trying to get in a solid blow that would lead to the eventual kill. Sherman was able to break the Confederate’s grip on his throat and land a punch squarely on the man’s chin. As he broke free, another Rebel grabbed him from behind and went for his throat. Just then, shots rang out and men in gray dropped all around Sherman. Several Union soldiers rushed over and jumped into the melee, trying desperately to plug the holes in the line. The remainder from the last Rebel assault wave soon joined what few Confederates had made it to the top. An all-out bloody hand-to-hand brawl ensued. Men leaped at each other, hollering and screaming, trying desperately to kill one another with whatever weapon was handy. Guns fired at point-blank range while bayonets and Bowie knives plunged and slashed their way through forward-driving soldiers from both sides.

Sherman fought hand to hand, armed only with his fists. In the close-quartered confusion of the scuffle, many soldiers on both sides had unexpectedly dropped or lost their weapons. Sherman, tackled to the ground twice, was able to punch or kick his way free and force his attackers to retreat or be killed by a comrade in blue fortunate enough to

have a loaded revolver or bayonet handy. Sherman choked the life out of another Confederate before a timely volley of Union fire compelled the shattered force of Rebels at the top of the hill either to evacuate downward to safety or throw up their hands and surrender. Before long, the Rebels had again completely withdrawn to a safe distance away from the Union 3rd Brigade.

Sherman picked up a discarded musket and looked around in disbelief. The 20th Maine was in shambles and he estimated that half of the regiment was either dead or wounded. He could only guess that the rest of 3rd Brigade was not any better off. All around him wounded and suffering men screamed out in agony, slowly dying and unable to defend themselves. Those who were lucky to still be standing were not much better off. Dazed, tired, afraid, and quickly losing the motivation to fight, they faced a far greater problem—their ammunition had finally run out.

The remaining soldiers of the 20th Maine began frantically looking for ammunition wherever they could. They scoured the ground for discarded muskets in hopes that they were still loaded. They ransacked the pockets and cartridge boxes of the dead, praying for just one shot to be found. Almost all were thrust into despair as they came up empty. Sherman was no better off. He grabbed a musket, attached the bayonet, and dolefully waited for the wickedness yet to stream back up the hill.

The Union men staggered back into some semblance of order, forming a pitiful line of defense. There were gaping holes everywhere and no chance to stave off another Rebel attack if the Confederates returned in force. Sherman looked around in despair as the sounds of the Rebels reforming echoed up the rocky hill. As his eyes scanned back and forth looking for an officer, Sherman waited for what he assumed would be his final orders. Glancing to the right, the young private once again caught sight of Colonel Chamberlain. His face and uniform were filthy, covered in sweat and dust from intense fighting. It was readily apparent he had not held back from the action. He hobbled along with his pistol in one hand and his sword in the other. He was injured, and winced in pain with each step he took using his sword more like a cane than a weapon. His bugler sounded the assembly, and every able officer surrounded the commander of the 20th Maine awaiting his orders.

Sherman observed the meeting with trepidation as the foreboding sounds of yet another Rebel drive grew in intensity. He looked to

his right, then down the hill, then back to his right again. He convinced himself that the only reasonable course of action was retreat. He was sure the regiment and possibly the entire brigade would pull out. It was the only way to prevent its total destruction. They'd fall back to a rear position while fresh troops from units farther down the battlefield and not yet engaged in the fighting would replace them. It was logical and practical. The 20th Maine had done its job and held its position. It hadn't been flanked and had preserved the Union left at great cost. Now it was appallingly short on manpower and out of ammunition. What else could it do? Retreat was the only option aside from total obliteration. Chamberlain had to know this. Sherman impatiently waited for the bugler to blow retreat. What he witnessed next shocked him beyond all comprehension.

Captain Spear burst out of the meeting like a madman on the loose. He yelled at the top of his lungs, calling for what remained of the left to stand and get in formation. Sherman leapt to his feet and found himself shoulder to shoulder with what few troops in blue were left. He looked behind him and tried to identify the nearest escape route his regiment would employ for their hasty withdrawal march. Instead, he heard a mighty voice bellow out, "Bayonets forward!"

Instantly Sherman realized the order had come directly from Chamberlain. His sword was gallantly raised and pointed staunchly downhill. Spear drew his own sword and commanded, "Fix bayonets!" The brave soldiers realized what was about to happen, but didn't disobey the order. Every man reached for his bayonet and affixed it to his musket. Some started to pray out loud while others stood silent in a state of near shock. The Confederate line emerged from behind the bullet-riddled trees and through the smoke, stepping over scores of their own dead, poised to break the Federals and finally conquer the little rocky hill for which they had sacrificed so much and gained nothing. Their guns fired one by one as they advanced. It now seemed inevitable that they would win this bloody engagement. Just as all seemed lost, and while Sherman waited for the regiment to defy the commander's orders and break apart with a cowardly and chaotic scramble to escape, Spear gave the order that would change everything.

"Charge bayonets!"

The men assumed an aggressive attack stance with their bayonets sharply pointed at the approaching enemy. Spear followed his previous order with an audacious, "Right wheel! Charge!"