

In this clip, from "Gettysburg," General Longstreet instructs Colonel Alexander and General Pettigrew on the details for an attack which has since been known as "Pickett's Charge."

It was a ghastly event in which the Confederacy sustained massive casualties.

William Faulkner - the Nobel-Prize-winning author from Oxford, Mississippi - once wrote about the futility of Pickett's charge (and the impact it still had on Southerners, decades later) in his 1948 novel, *Intruder in the Dust*:

*For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it's still not yet two o'clock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods and the furled flags are already loosened to break out and Pickett himself with his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand probably and his sword in the other looking up the hill waiting for Longstreet to give the word and it's all in the balance, it hasn't happened yet, it hasn't even begun yet, it not only hasn't begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin against that position and those circumstances which made more men than Garnett and Kemper and Armstead and Wilcox look grave yet it's going to begin, we all know that, we have come too far with too much at stake and that moment doesn't need even a fourteen-year-old boy to think This time. Maybe this time with all this much to lose and all this much to gain: Pennsylvania, Maryland, the world, the golden dome of Washington itself to crown with desperate and unbelievable victory the desperate gamble... (From *Intruder in the Dust* by William Faulkner, quoted by William Van O'Connor in *The Tangled Fire of William Faulkner*, at page 140.)*

How did Pickett's Charge come about?

General Robert E. Lee was hoping to get to Washington, D.C. His route of travel was via Pennsylvania. Gettysburg is situated in southern Pennsylvania.

This was a different plan of attack for the Confederates to take. Before this point—in July of 1863—they were defending their own territory which Union generals and soldiers had invaded. Now, however, Lee was proposing for *his* troops to be the invaders.

Events were going fairly well for the Confederates when the battle started on July 1. Lee thought this momentum might work in his favor, so he made a plan to capitalize on the Union's retreat.

Lee's plan was to penetrate the center of the Union's forces which were located at a place, on the Gettysburg battlefield, known as Cemetery Ridge. It was an audacious plan.

Did anyone object to General Lee's idea?

General Longstreet, whose name has ever-after been associated with the events which ensued on the third day of battle, July 1st, told his commander he didn't think the plan was a good one. Lee overruled the man he called his "Old Warhorse."

This phase of the three-day battle at Gettysburg began during the early-morning hours of July 3. General Lee instructed General Longstreet to get General Pickett's soldiers ready for an assault.

Despite Longstreet's misgivings—he didn't think the advance would be successful—Lee ordered heavy bombardment of the Union's defenses along the Ridge to be followed by the charge of Pickett's men.

Initially, it seemed as though General Lee's plan was working.

Following two hours of constant and heavy shelling, the Union troops began to withdraw. Colonel Alexander, a Confederate, sent word about that event to General Pickett. Alexander also urged Pickett to quickly send-in his troops.

Pickett sent a note to Longstreet, requesting permission to charge the Union forces. Despite his reservations, Longstreet knew Lee's orders. He approved Pickett's charge.

During the attack, only one Confederate brigade—led by Brigadier General Lewis Armistead—was able to reach the top of Cemetery Ridge. Historians later called that achievement the "high watermark of the Confederacy."

Armistead's success was not sustainable, however. The Union's withdrawal was just temporary. Events turned-out exactly as Longstreet had feared as Union troops pushed-back the Confederate attack.

The day after the failed charge—the 4th of July, 1863—General Pickett wrote to his fiancé:

*It is all over now. Many of us are prisoners, many are dead, many wounded, bleeding and dying. Your soldier lives and mourns and but for you, my darling, he would rather be back there with his dead, to sleep for all time in an unknown grave.*

The result of the battle was not merely a loss for the Confederates. It was a disaster since casualties approached sixty percent. And Lee ... instead of marching on to the Union's capital city ... was forced to retreat with considerably fewer troops in his Army of Northern Virginia.

Stephen Vincent Benet—in his 1928 work called *John Brown's Body*—paints a word picture of the Confederate retreat:

*Army of Northern Virginia, haggard and tattered,  
Tramping back on the pikes, through the dust-white summer,  
With your wounds still fresh, your burden of prisoners.  
Your burden of sick and wounded,  
"One long groan of human anguish six miles long."* (See Stephen Vincent Benet, *John Brown's Body* [Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran, 1928], page 316—and—the penultimate verse of Benet's work online via "[Gettysburg Discussion Group](#).")

Lee's forces were not only reduced by the number of casualties. Many Confederate soldiers were captured during Pickett's Charge. Some of them—like John H. Robertson—survived to live a long life. Around seventy years later, Robertson recalled his time as a prisoner-of-war:

*I was captured at the battle of Gettysburg in Longstreet's charge and was taken to Fort Delaware, an island of 90 acres of land where the Union prisoners were kept. We were detailed to work in the fields and our rations was corn bread and pickled beef.*

*However I fared better than some of the prisoners for I was given the privilege of making jewelry for the use of the Union soldiers. I made rings from the buttons from their overcoats and when they were polished the brass made very nice looking rings. These I sold to the soldiers of the Union Army who were our guards and with the money thus obtained I could buy food and clothing.*

*The Union guards kept a commissary and they had a big supply of chocolate. I ate chocolate candy and drank hot chocolate in place of coffee until I have never wanted any chocolate since.* ("John H. Robertson" oral interview, conducted in Marlin, Texas, by Miss Effie Cowan, interviewer, circa 1936-40. Online via [American Life Histories: Manuscripts from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936-1940](#).)

What were the total losses over this three-day battle when Americans killed Americans? The Library of Congress tells us that:

- 28,063 Confederates were killed or wounded
- 23,049 Union soldiers were killed or wounded

Some months later—on the 19th of November, 1863—President Lincoln delivered his famous "Gettysburg Address" when he dedicated the battlefield at Gettysburg.

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[Pickett's Charge at Gettysburg](#)

[General Armistead and the End of Pickett's Charge](#)

Credits:

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**Directed by:**

Ronald F. Maxwell

**Produced by:**

Moctesuma Esparza

Robert Katz

**Screenplay by:**

Ronald F. Maxwell

**Starring:**

**Martin Sheen** - General **Robert E. Lee**

**Tom Berenger** - Lieutenant General **James Longstreet**

**Jeff Daniels** - Colonel **Joshua Chamberlain**

**Stephen Lang** - Major General **George Pickett**

**Joseph Fuqua** - Major General **J.E.B. Stuart**

**George Lazenby** - General **Johnston Pettigrew**

**James Patrick Stuart** - Colonel **Edward Porter Alexander**

**Musical Score by:**

Randy Edelman

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/Pickett-s-Charge-Plan-of-Attack>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

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