



Barksdale's Charge: The True High Tide of the Confederacy at Gettysburg, July 2, 1863 by Phillip Thomas Tucker.

Philadelphia: Casemate, 2013. Pp. 313. ISBN 978-1-61200-179-1.

Review by Ciarán Dean-Jones, The University of Virginia (ctd8eh@virginia.edu).

In *Barksdale's Charge*, Phillip Tucker (PhD, St. Louis Univ.), a former historian for the US Air Force, reexamines the Battle of Gettysburg (1-3 July 1863). Southern mythology has traditionally given Gen. George Pickett's Charge (3 July) pride of place in its remembrance of the pivotal battle of the Civil War. Tucker offers a different view:

In truth, Gettysburg was decided not on the famous third day of the battle, but on the previous afternoon.... [T]he charge of General William Barksdale and his 1,600-man Mississippi Brigade ... came closer to toppling the Army of the Potomac than any other Rebel offensive effort of the war.... [I]n one of the great inequities of American history, Barksdale's Charge has long remained in the shadow of "Pickett's Charge," thanks largely to the dominance of the Virginia School of history. (1, 3)

Starting with the Battle of Ball's Bluff, Barksdale and the yeomen farmers under his command were an elite force in Gen. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. One key to Barksdale's success as a leader, Tucker writes, was his egalitarianism. "He was on familiar terms with the common soldier in the ranks, treating him fairly.... [H]e often intimately mingled freely with his men," his status as a Mississippi congressman notwithstanding. Barksdale was one of the few politician-generals on either side who proved to be an effective combat leader. "Continuing to gain respect throughout the army" after Lee's Seven Days campaign, "Barksdale gained a hard-earned brigadier general's rank on August 12, 1862 ..., a relative rarity for a Southern politician without formal military training." But it would be wrong to assume Barksdale's easy familiarity with his men undercut military discipline: "from beginning to end, perfection in drill and discipline was always Barksdale's foremost priority in creating a crack brigade" (17).

Tucker outlines Lee's strategic goals in his invasion of Northern soil after the Battle of Chancellorsville—to relieve pressure on the Shenandoah Valley's depleted resources and draw Union forces away from other beleaguered points in the Confederacy. Lee wanted to achieve these things before the Union could bring its overwhelming advantages in men and material fully to bear against the South. He wrote to Confederate President Jefferson Davis that "Conceding to our enemies the superiority ... in numbers, resources, and all the means and appliances for carrying on the war, we have no right to look for exemptions from the military consequences of a vigorous use of these advantages" (41). Civil War historians emphasize Lee's worst tactical blunder at this critical moment—granting his ranking cavalry commander J.E.B. Stuart permission to encircle Gen. Joseph Hooker's defeated Army of the Potomac. Without Stuart's five thousand seasoned troopers, "Lee was thus blinded, without his cavalry to inform him of Union movements" (43).

Gen. Richard Ewell has been excoriated for failing to take Cemetery Ridge following Lee's ambiguous order to do so "without bringing on a general engagement" on 1 July (46). This ridge became the Mississippi Brigade's main objective the next day; its seizure would have doomed the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg. But Tucker defends Ewell, stating that "he received no firm order" to attack the crest of Cemetery Ridge. Union general Henry Hunt insisted that such an assault "would not have

been justified ... without the positive orders of Lee, who was present, and wisely abstained from giving them” (47). Historians have also faulted Gen. James Longstreet for failing to vigorously execute Lee’s 1 July order “to attack up the Emmitsburg Road” (48). Longstreet, too, suffered from the absence of Stuart’s troopers and the vital reconnaissance they might have provided before the Mississippians’ assault.

By the time Barksdale’s men took positions opposite the Union’s Third Corps fronting the Peach Orchard and Emmitsburg Road, the fight had acquired personal dimensions for the Mississippians. As Gen. Ulysses S. Grant came ever closer to taking Vicksburg in spring and early summer 1863, the men of Barksdale’s brigade began receiving news of dispossessed families and damaged property. “In his diary on February 5, 1863,” notes Tucker, “an incensed Private Moore, 17th Mississippi, penned how ‘heard [sic] from home this evening [and the invading] abolitionists have left Pa an old blind mule,’ while taking practically everything else from his family’s middle-class Mississippi farm” (57). A private in the Thirteenth Mississippi wrote “we have all been in agony of suspense [sic] to hear of the final result of the conflict which has been going on in Miss.” That “By the time of the showdown at Gettysburg, Lee’s army contained more Mississippi infantry regiments than defended Vicksburg” (58) attests to the importance the Confederate leadership placed on the eastern theater.

After Gen. Daniel Sickles moved the Union Third Corps to a defensive position in front of the Peach Orchard on 1 July, leaving a gap in the Union’s left-center, “the promise of decisive victory for Barksdale hinged upon a two-part tactical formula: first, overrunning the foremost high ground position of the Peach Orchard and along the Emmitsburg Road Ridge to set the stage for continuing the attack farther east to capture the other and most important key to the battlefield, Cemetery Ridge” (70), where the Union defenders included several regiments of Pennsylvania infantry. Hence, “The struggle was guaranteed to be tenacious because the Pennsylvanians now defended their home state” (65).

Before launching his assault, Barksdale and his Mississippians sustained withering cannon fire, as his superiors at the corps and division levels, Longstreet and Gen. Lafayette McLaws, delayed the Mississippians’ advance as brigades on either side of them engaged the enemy. The immobility was not the fault of Barksdale, whose fighting blood stayed up throughout the engagement. McLaws later wrote, “Barksdale had been exceedingly impatient for the order to advance, and his enthusiasm was shared in by his command” (79). Meantime, he gave orders that had a devastating effect on Union defenders during the following assault. He issued his men twenty extra rounds of ammunition each and ordered them to place percussion caps on their rifles so that, as they charged across the open ground before the Peach Orchard, they “would not be tempted to halt and return fire too early in the assault” (87).

Once the attack began, Col. Benjamin Grubb Humphreys detached his Twenty-First Mississippi from the three other regiments in Barksdale’s brigade, in order to capture reserve artillery pieces, as Tucker puts it, “on their own hook.” After the other regiments routed the Union Third Corps along the Wheatfield Road, “Humphreys and his men embarked on one of the most devastating of all Confederate attacks at Gettysburg and a special mission in which the priority was ‘to do a little battery busting,’ but on a scale unsurpassed during the three days of fighting at Gettysburg” (131–32). Barksdale’s men quickly overcame resistance along the Emmitsburg Road, but “The rounding up of Yankee prisoners took time, delaying the resumption of [their] attack northeast up the Emmitsburg Road” (138). Barksdale’s decimated regiment further delayed their move eastward to confiscate clothing and supplies from the Union dead.

[T]he Mississippians’ dual attacks of widely separated wings promised to shortly run into difficulties because of the loss of so many good men and the great distance yet required to reach Cemetery Ridge’s strategic crest.... In addition, aside from the brief, but important few minutes when Barksdale and Wilcox’s Alabamians had cooperated to crush the remnants of Sickles’ Second Division, the Mississippi Bri-

gade had no other infantry supports in sight. [After Barksdale seized Emmitsburg Road,] the Army of the Potomac's real left flank, because of the Third Corps' absence, was now located to the left of the Second Corps far to the east on Cemetery Ridge, where Sickles' Corps should have been positioned had not the New Yorker advanced to the Peach Orchard. [Barksdale] fully realized that he was not moving toward Meade's exposed left flank but only smashing through the Third Corps' right, not yet gaining eliminating [sic]¹ any possibility of inflicting a decisive blow. (154, 164).

As Humphreys and the Twenty-First Mississippi continued to capture artillery pieces on Barksdale's right, he turned directly east, pursuing the scattered Third Corps toward Plum Run and up Cemetery Ridge.

Barksdale's men lacked reserves and "the Rebel artillery provided relatively little close-range support for [his] attackers, who surged ahead on their own" (172). Tucker stresses that all the men of Barksdale brigade, not just the Twenty-First Mississippi, were "fighting on their own hook"—"in the bid to capture Cemetery Ridge's crest, an ever-decreasing number of Mississippi infantrymen had to eliminate resurgent Union batteries on their own" (184).

Tucker indicts Longstreet and Lee for not supporting Barksdale's troops. "Longstreet, who had never wanted to launch the tactical offensive this afternoon, was not only more pessimistic but outright defeatist. He ordered no troops to follow up behind Barksdale" (176). Lee's overconfidence in his corps commanders compounded the problem, since he "failed to closely supervise and manage the offensive effort, especially in supporting Barksdale's dramatic breakthrough.... Lee possessed no strategic reserve to follow-up [sic] on Barksdale's success, or any other that might be achieved that day" (176). By contrast, Meade and his artillery chief Henry Hunt made good use of their reserves during the Second Corps' retreat up Cemetery Ridge. "Unfortunately for the Mississippi Brigade, the Army of the Potomac ... benefitted from the availability of a powerful artillery reserve, unlike Lee's Army, which had made the fatal error of abolishing its artillery reserve corps just before invading the North" (213).

Captain John Bigelow's Ninth Massachusetts Light Artillery stymied the Mississippians' onslaught long enough for a New York brigade to assemble along Plum Run and push Barksdale's depleted ranks away from Cemetery Ridge. Ordered by Lt. Col. Freeman McGilvery to sacrifice his battery in order to protect the Third Corps' retreat from the Emmitsburg and Wheatfield roads, Bigelow lost six of seven sergeants and three of four officers to Humphreys' sharpshooters, a testament to their brave resilience in the face of overwhelming odds (206). Tucker is evenhanded in his description of the exploits that took place during the battle.

The book culminates with the arrival of Col. George Lamb Willard's New York brigade, which, like the Mississippians and Pennsylvanians, had a personal stake in the outcome of the battle. After their recent humiliation at Harpers Ferry, they were eager to redeem themselves on Cemetery Ridge—"Unfortunately, for the breathless Mississippians, now exhausted, low on ammunition, and with many leading regimental and company officers cut down, they could not have encountered more highly-motivated soldiers than these New Yorkers" (217). This change in circumstances made Longstreet even warier of trying to exploit the tactical advantages gained by Barksdale's offensive. "Tragically, hundreds of Mississippi Brigade soldiers had already been cut down in part because of the lack of unity in tactical thinking between the offensive-minded Lee and the defensive-minded Longstreet" (223). Longstreet admitted as much when he remarked to Gen. John Bell Hood on 2 July that "[Lee] wishes me to attack; I do not wish to do so without Pickett. I never like to go into battle with one boot off" (224).

1. One of many blemishes left by careless proofing of Tucker's book.

Barksdale's Charge tells a tale of immense valor at the brigade level frustrated by the ill-coordinated tactical decisions of division and corps commanders: “while the army’s commander and his top lieutenant had been badly outgeneraled on July 2, the Mississippi Brigade had not been outfought by any unit on either side” (244). Hood wrote after the war, “Thus it was that the 21st Mississippi Regiment bore the Stars and Bars to the very farthest point reached in the enemy’s line on the bloody field of Gettysburg” (243). Meade wrote in his after-battle report that “Sickles’ unauthorized advance to the Peach Orchard was ‘an error which nearly proved fatal in the battle’” (259). Phillip Tucker has demonstrated in detail the truth of these judgments.