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# “I Told Him It Was Then Too Late”

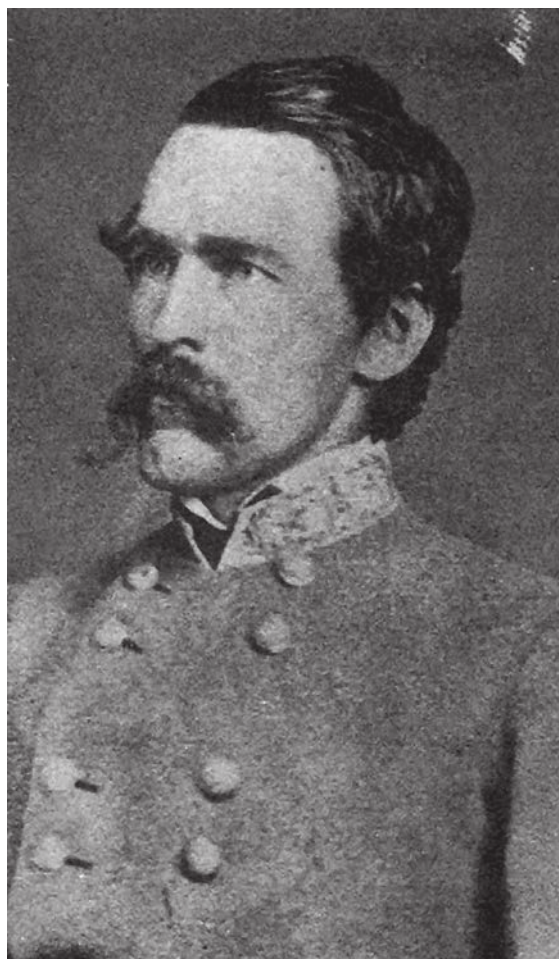
Maj. Gen. Robert Rodes’s Failed Night Attack on Cemetery Hill

ROBERT WYNSTRA

By early in the morning on July 1, 1863, Maj. Gen. Robert Rodes’s troops were on the move from Heidlersburg toward the nearby town of Gettysburg. That division formed part of Lt. Gen. Richard S. Ewell’s newly reorganized Second Corps, which also included the troops commanded by Maj. Gens. Jubal A. Early and Edward “Old Allegheny” Johnson. Rodes had emerged at Chancellorsville as one of the biggest heroes in Robert E. Lee’s army, earning him promotion as permanent head of the division. His command included the brigades led by Brig. Gens. Dodson Ramseur, Alfred Iverson, George Doles, Junius Daniel, and Col. Edward O’Neal. Early’s troops trailed closely behind Rodes’s division, while Johnson’s troops remained on the western side of South Mountain near Scotland village.

The action around Gettysburg began earlier that day, when Henry Heth’s division from Ambrose Powell Hill’s Third Corps encountered some enemy troops just northwest of town. Those men were first thought to be nothing more than a small militia force. They instead were veteran troopers from Brig. Gen. John Buford’s division, part of the Army of the Potomac. Using delaying tactics, Buford’s dismounted cavalymen slowed down Heth’s advance long enough for the infantry from the Federal First Corps to arrive on the field. Within a short time, the men from Henry Heth’s and Dorsey Pender’s divisions were engaged in a fierce and growing battle along both sides of the turnpike leading into town from Chambersburg.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> For detailed accounts of the fighting on the morning of July 1, see David G. Martin, *Gettysburg July 1* (Conshohocken, PA: Combined Books, 1995), 59–202; and Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg: The First Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 51–130.



Maj. Gen. Robert Rodes. National Archives and Records Administration.

Rodes’s men arrived within three miles of Gettysburg at about 10:00 a.m. The general quickly led his men to the right along the main ridge line toward “a prominent hill” that overlooked the area northwest of town. “On arriving on the field, I

found that by keeping along the wooded ridge, on the left side of which the town of Gettysburg is situated, I could strike the force of the enemy with which Gen. Hill's troops were engaged upon the flank, and that, besides moving under cover, whenever we struck the enemy we could engage him with the advantage in ground," Rodes stated in his official report.<sup>2</sup>

The soldiers pushed on for almost a mile before arriving about noon in the area around Oak Hill. Doles quickly deployed his Georgia troops on the "open plain" to the left of the hill. Colonel

O'Neal moved his Alabama brigade into place on the eastern slope of the ridge. With Iverson's troops in the lead, the three North Carolina brigades proceeded into the woods that covered most of Oak Hill at the time. Iverson's brigade immediately formed on the southwestern side of the summit, while Daniel's brigade took up a position behind and slightly to their right. The soldiers from Ramseur's brigade halted near the rear of the hill.

After conferring with Ewell, Rodes decided to launch an assault with O'Neal's, Iverson's, and Daniel's brigades against the Federal troops posted along nearby Oak Ridge. Doles's brigade would hold off another enemy force moving forward from town on his left until Jubal Early's division could arrive on the field from Heidlersburg along Har-



Brig. Gen. Stephen Dodson Ramseur. United States Army Heritage and Education Center.

risburg Road. The men from Ramseur's brigade would serve as the reserve force. Those troops would be called on to provide needed support for any of the other brigades if they ran into major trouble during the advance.<sup>3</sup>

The initial attack just north of town against the troops from the Federal First Corps began to unravel almost as soon as it got underway. O'Neal's command quickly fell back in disarray after moving forward on the left of the line. Without a screen of skirmishers along their front, Iverson's men blundered ahead on their right and into a deadly

trap that resulted in one of the worse slaughters in the entire war. Daniel's men faced some stiff resistance before finally dislodging the enemy troops around an unfinished railroad cut north of Chambersburg Pike. The tide of battle only turned decisively when Ramseur's troops moved onto the field and pushed the enemy off Oak Ridge.

The results went more smoothly on the other end of their line, where Doles's troops, together with those from Early's division, overran the Federal Eleventh Corps in the area north of Gettysburg. After arriving on the field late in the afternoon, Brig. Gen. John Brown Gordon's brigade quickly dislodged the Federal troops in a near rout around some high ground known as Blocher's Knoll. The men from Harry Hays's and Isaac Avery's brigades soon joined with Doles's troops in sweeping the rest of the enemy from the field. The soldiers from

<sup>2</sup> United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), 27.2:552.

<sup>3</sup> OR, 27.2:553.



Heth's and Pender's divisions enjoyed equal success during some fierce fighting with the Federal First Corps on the far right of the Confederate line.<sup>4</sup>

By late in the afternoon, the entire Federal force was on the run through the narrow streets of Gettysburg in a panicked flight toward Cemetery Hill on the south side of town. To the surprise of many in the attack, Rodes suddenly ordered his men to stop in the middle of town. For whatever reason, the order from Gen. Ewell to resume the attack against Cemetery Hill never came. "Receiving no orders to advance, though my superiors were upon the ground, I concluded that the order not to bring on a general engagement was still in force, and hence placed my lines and skirmishers in a defensive attitude, and determined to await orders or further movements either on the part of Early or of the troops on my right," Rodes stated in his report.<sup>5</sup>

While Rodes's exhausted soldiers rested in town, Lee evaluated the stunning results on July 1 and determined how best to capitalize on them. His army held a long exterior line, which was not an ideal position. The three divisions from A. P. Hill's bloodied Third Corps occupied Seminary Ridge west of Gettysburg, while Ewell's Second Corps wrapped through town to the north, directly opposite Cemetery Hill and Culp's Hill. By noon on July 2, both John B. Hood's and Lafayette McLaws's divisions from James Longstreet's First Corps had also moved into place on the south end of the Confederate line. The primary question Lee faced that day was whether to continue the battle or maneuver his army elsewhere in search of more favorable conditions.

Lee eventually concluded that resuming the offensive was his best option because Gen. George Meade's army appeared to be badly damaged and not fully united. With two of the three divisions from Longstreet's corps now on the field, Lee decided to launch an assault against what he believed was the vulnerable left flank of the Federal line running south from Cemetery Hill along the main ridge line. The attack would roll northward from

there across A. P. Hill's front. Lee ordered Ewell to await Longstreet's main assault and then "make a simultaneous demonstration upon the enemy's right to be converted into a real attack should opportunity offer."<sup>6</sup>

Ewell quickly moved ahead with the plans for the three divisions under his command. After first calling for only an artillery demonstration, he eventually ordered Edward Johnson's division to attack Culp's Hill. Early's division on Johnson's right was poised to follow up with an assault on the eastern heights of Cemetery Hill. The corps' commander ordered Rodes to provide support by threatening the Federal position on the western side of the hill. The final plan called for him to join the fight on Early's right "as soon as any opportunity of doing so with good effect was offered." Ewell expected Rodes's men to exploit any breaks in the enemy lines.<sup>7</sup>

Iverson's, Ramseur's, and Doles's brigades would lead Rodes's assault, while Daniel's and O'Neal's brigades would follow closely behind in support. Rodes informed Ramseur that the entire division would be guided by the movements of his brigade during the attack, thus placing him in *de facto* command of the operation. Iverson remained in such disfavor following his disastrous performance on the previous day that the division commander failed to tell him directly about the plans. "I had received no instruction, and perceived that General Ramseur was acquainted with the intentions of the major-general commanding, I raised no questions of rank, but conformed the movements of my brigade to that of Brigadier-General Ramseur," Iverson complained in his official report.<sup>8</sup>

The plans began to fall apart when Longstreet's attack on the south end of the line failed to get underway until the late afternoon. Despite the late start, the Confederate troops enjoyed some initial successes. The assault quickly caved in the salient created by Maj. Gen. Daniel Sickles's Third Corps around the Peach Orchard and swept across the slopes of Little Round Top. Once both of Longstreet's divisions were fully committed, several brigades from A. P. Hill's Third Corps joined in the

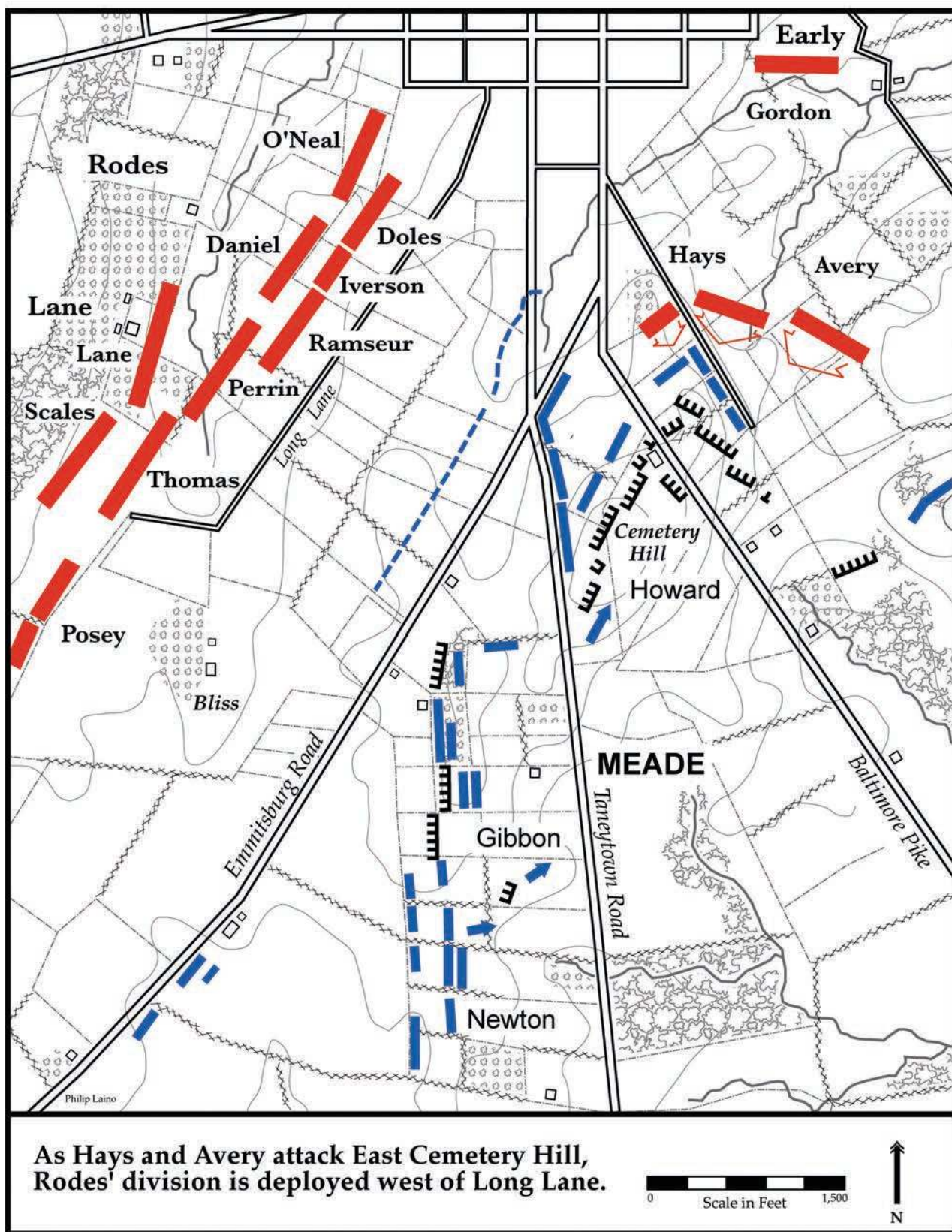
4 OR, 27.2:554. Colonel Avery from the 6th North Carolina temporarily commanded his brigade after Brig. Gen. Robert Hoke was severely wounded at Chancellorsville during early May.

5 OR, 27.2:555; For a detailed account of the decision not to attack Cemetery Hill, see Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg: Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 76–80.

6 OR, 27.2:446.

7 OR, 27.2:446–47.

8 OR, 27.2:580.



Rodes's position during the attack on Cemetery Hill, July 2, 1863. Phil Laino.

action by storming Cemetery Ridge. The effort eventually broke down along that part of the front. Hill remained strangely inactive and was probably ill. As the fighting drew to a close, Lee's battered troops finally fell back to Seminary Ridge, leaving the final outcome to be decided on the following day.<sup>9</sup>

Ewell had no better luck in coordinating the action on the northern part of the front. Although Johnson failed to make much headway against Culp's Hill, two of Early's brigades assaulted Cemetery Hill just before dark and began scaling its heights. Prior to the advance, Rodes "sought out General Early, with a view of making an attack in concert with him." The two generals quickly worked out a plan of action. "He agreed with me as to the propriety of attacking and made preparations accordingly," General Rodes explained in his official report. "I hastened to inform, the officer commanding the troops on my right (part of Pender's division), that, in accordance with our plan, I would attack just at dark, and proceeded to make my arrangements."<sup>10</sup>

Rodes's efforts to cooperate with Early's division in the attack on Cemetery Hill ran into trouble almost immediately. Rodes was soon running so far behind schedule that his troops did not even begin moving out of town until the early evening. The men in his division immediately encountered some major difficulties navigating through the crowded streets of Gettysburg. The soldiers first had to move by the right flank to the west until they cleared the outskirts of town. Once that was complete, they changed front to the left and marched south. Due to all that maneuvering, the three leading brigades consumed more than an hour to cover the 1,200 to 1,400 yards to their new position.<sup>11</sup>

While his troops shifted into place, Rodes dispatched Maj. Henry A. Whiting from his staff with a request for Dorsey Pender's division, which had pulled back to the area on his right, to support his advance. Brig. Gen. James H. Lane, who had assumed command of the division earlier in the day after Pender suffered what turned out to be a mortal wound, initially seemed unsure of how to proceed. "I did not give him a definite answer then," Lane

admitted. His stance changed when a message from the Second Corps commander reached him. "On being notified, however, by General Ewell that his whole command would move on the enemy's position that night, commencing with Johnson's division on the left, I told Major Whiting that I would act without awaiting instructions from General Hill," Lane remarked.<sup>12</sup>

The three brigades assigned to the front of Rodes's attack eventually halted a few hundred yards west of a sunken dirt road known as Long Lane, which extended about a mile from town along the western flank of Cemetery Hill. O'Neal's and Daniel's brigades took up position about 200 yards farther in the rear after arriving from the areas around the Lutheran Seminary and the unfinished railroad bed just north of Chambersburg Turnpike. By the time preparations were finally completed, the two brigades from Early's division under the command of Brig. Gen. Harry Hays and Col. Isaac Avery from the 6th North Carolina were already more than a half-hour into their bloody attack on the eastern side of the hill.<sup>13</sup>

Early's assault began just "after sunset," when those two brigades "moved forward on the low ridge in their front and across a hollow beyond to the base of the hill, while exposed to a severe fire from the enemy's batteries." Early noted that they "then commenced ascending the steep side of the hill in gallant style, going over fences and encountering bodies of infantry posted in front of the main line on the slope of the hill behind stone fences which they dislodged." From there, they continued "their advance to the crest of the hill, when by a dash upon the enemy's works Hays's brigade and a portion of Hoke's succeeded in entering them and compelling the enemy to abandon his batteries."<sup>14</sup>

While Early's men struggled to hold on to their gains, Rodes attempted to make up the time lost while maneuvering his troops into position. With dusk fast approaching, he now faced the daunting prospect of making a night attack on Cemetery Hill. The final arrangements called for his men to move forward to the foot of the hill under the

<sup>9</sup> For a detailed account of the action on July 2, see Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg: The Second Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

<sup>10</sup> OR, 27.2:556.

<sup>11</sup> OR, 27.2:556

<sup>12</sup> OR, 27.2:666. For details on the fighting on the east side of Cemetery Hill, see Pfanz, *Gettysburg: Culp's Hill and Cemetery Hill*, 235–283.

<sup>13</sup> OR, 27.2:556.

<sup>14</sup> Jubal A. Early, *Autobiographical Sketch and Narrative of the War between the States* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1912), 273.





Brig. Gen. Junius Daniel. United States Army Heritage and Education Center.

cover of darkness. Once everyone was in position, they would commence the main assault “just as the moon arose.” To avoid detection in the night, Rodes ordered the troops at the front of the attack to use only bayonets. Maj. Eugene Blackford from the 5th Alabama, who commanded Colonel O’Neal’s sharpshooter battalion, noted that the guns of the men assigned to this “bayonet affair” were “all inspected to see that none were loaded.”<sup>15</sup>

The brigade commanders provided at least some of the troops with passwords that would allow them to identify each other once they finally broke through the enemy lines. “Along with the order came the announcement that when we had driven back the enemy and had gained the crest of the hill amidst the darkness and confusion in order that we

<sup>15</sup> Eugene Blackford, “Memoirs,” in Noah Andre Trudeau, ed., “5th Alabama Sharpshooters: Taking Aim at Cemetery Hill,” *America’s Civil War*, 14, no. 3 (July 2001), 50.

might recognize friend from foe, we were to cry out ‘North Carolina to the rescue,’” Lt. Edward Tripp from the 4th North Carolina recalled as the instructions for the men in Ramseur’s brigade. The other Tar Heel troops in the attack presumably received the same instructions.<sup>16</sup>

Despite the careful preparations, many of the soldiers expressed shock when the command finally came for them to press ahead against the Federal lines. “I thought surely our leaders must be mad or ignorant of the enemy’s position, or else they think our little brigade of 900 can accomplish impossibilities,” Capt. John C. Gorman, who served with the 2nd North Carolina in Ramseur’s brigade, grumbled in a letter home. “In front of us stood this frowning eminence crowned with artillery thickly parked.” The Tar Heel further pointed out that “between its base and its summit, two lines of stone fence ran parallel with the summit, and behind those rock walls stood two lines of battle with musket and rifle in hand awaiting our approach.”<sup>17</sup>

For Capt. James Harris from the 30th North Carolina in the same brigade, the worries about how well Junius Daniel’s green troops, who had joined the division little more than a month earlier, would hold up in the night attack were nearly as strong as his concerns about the enemy’s entrenched position on Cemetery Hill. That left him with little real hope for the success of their planned assault. “Daniel was in our rear to support us,” the Tar Heel confided to a friend. “To tell the truth, I dreaded his men equally as much or more than I did the Yankees, for the day before was the first engagement they had ever been in, and you know how much men become excited under fire in the day, much less in the night.”<sup>18</sup>

As skirmishers from the three lead brigades finally began moving forward about 8:00 p.m., the difficulty of the conditions they faced became increasingly obvious. “It was cloudy and the moon

<sup>16</sup> Edward Tripp, “North Carolina to the Rescue,” in Pamlico Chapter of the Daughters of the Confederacy, *The Confederate Reveille: Memorial Edition* (Raleigh, NC: Edwards and Broughton, 1898), 41.

<sup>17</sup> George Gorman, ed, “Memoirs of a Rebel: Being the Narratives of John Calvin Gorman, Captain, Company B, 2nd North Carolina Regiment, 1861–1865, Part II: Chancellorsville and Gettysburg,” *Military Images*, 3, No. 6 (May–June 1982), 25; The Gettysburg portion of his memoirs is based on a letter to his mother that was originally published as “Battles of Gettysburg,” in *North Carolina Standard*, Aug. 4, 1863. Although his original account was written soon after the battle, Gorman wrongly places the night attack on July 3.

<sup>18</sup> James I. Harris to Dear Friend Burton, August 24, 1863, in Michael W. Taylor, ed., “Ramseur’s Brigade in the Gettysburg Campaign: A Newly Discovered Account by Capt. James I. Harris,” *The Gettysburg Magazine*, 17 (July 1997), 35.

had not yet risen, consequently it was quite dark,” Captain Harris complained. “In our front was a gently rise of some eminence, just beyond a ravine down which ran a road leading out of town and now about parallel to our lines.” This was a reference to the Emmitsburg Road, which extended south from Gettysburg. “On either side of this road was a stone wall behind which was posted Yankee infantry,” Harris added. He noted that “still after this another small hill was to cross and yet another narrow ravine before the hill—on which was planted the enemies batteries—could be reached.”<sup>19</sup>

Major Blackford admitted that the first movements in their attack also left him dreading the outcome. “When the column was formed we moved silently with bayonets fixed close up beneath the enemy’s works,” he explained. “There in two lines we gave our instructions to the men. I well remember what feelings I had as I fastened my saber knot tightly around my waist. I knew well that I had seen my last day on earth.”<sup>20</sup> The reaction was much the same among the other troops in the attack. Capt. William Norman from the 2nd North Carolina in Ramseur’s brigade summed up the feelings of many in the line of battle when he declared that “the idea of charging strong fortifications in the nighttime was an awful thing.”<sup>21</sup>

Despite those trepidations, they continued to advance until the sharpshooters began to encounter firing from the entrenched Federal troops on their front, which included some artillery and parts of three brigades from the Eleventh Corps. “Our skirmishers about 20 yards in our front have reached the summit of the first eminence and have drawn the fire of those of the enemy,” Captain Harris commented. “Our orders are to charge them at the point of the bayonet without firing a gun and the word is ‘North Carolina to the rescue.’ You can just discern our skirmishers in our front.” He noted that “they have commenced firing on them—away to our left the ball has opened.”<sup>22</sup>

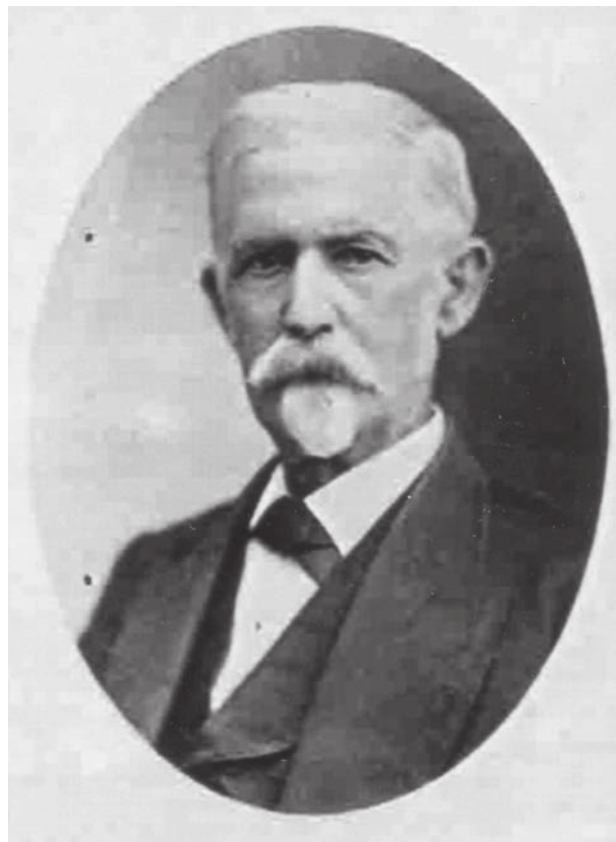
According to Cpl. Benjamin B. Ross from the 4th North Carolina in Ramseur’s brigade, “every man responded with a will to do or die” as they

<sup>19</sup> Harris to Burton, “A Newly Discovered Account,” 35..

<sup>20</sup> Blackford, “5th Alabama Sharpshooters,” 50.

<sup>21</sup> William M. Norman, *A Portion of My Life: A Short & Imperfect History Written while a Prisoner of War Johnson’s Island, 1864* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair Publishing, 1959), 187.

<sup>22</sup> Harris to Burton, “A Newly Discovered Account,” 35.



Col. Edward O'Neal. United States Army Heritage and Education Center.

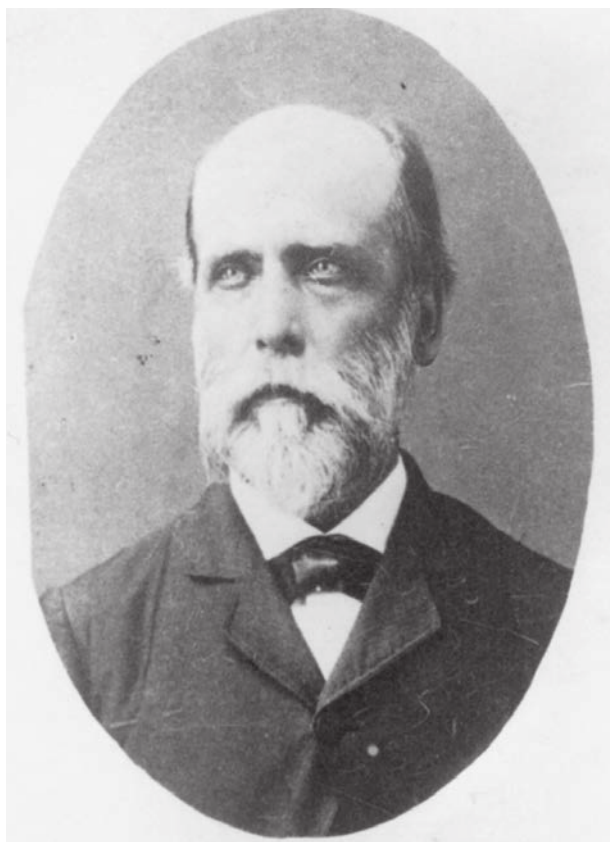
pressed forward with the attack along the west side of Cemetery Hill. One of the first obstacles they encountered was a wooden fence that extended along the east side of Long Lane. “We had been ordered to make as little noise as possible in crossing this fence,” Ross said. “We advanced to the crest of the hill, where the Yankees were posted with infantry and artillery.”<sup>23</sup> Capt. Gorman, meanwhile, cautioned his men “to stick together and to pay attention to orders, not to fire, but to make for the enemy with all possible haste as soon as ordered.”<sup>24</sup>

While all that was going on, Doles’s men on the far left of the line also moved ahead toward the Federal positions on the hill. “We advance up to the enemy’s pickets and they open fire upon our skirmishers,” Capt. James Beck from the 44th Georgia reported in a letter to his hometown newspaper. “Soon a raking fire of grape and canister opened upon us. Steadily we advance. Not a thing can be

<sup>23</sup> Benjamin B. Ross, “Experiences of B. B. Ross,” Robert L. Brake Collection, United States Army Heritage and Education Center, Carlisle, Pennsylvania.

<sup>24</sup> Gorman, “Memoirs of a Rebel,” 25.





Brig. Gen. Alfred Iverson. Library of Congress.

seen in our front but the dark frowning hill, and the blaze of the cannons and the flash of the musket.” He added that the Georgians continued to “move our line until we get our proper position.”<sup>25</sup>

At the same time, Daniel’s and O’Neal’s troops in the second line pushed forward from the rear. “A little after sunset, I received orders to form in the open field in front of and below the hill and to support Generals Doles, Iverson, and Ramseur in an advance upon Cemetery Hill,” Daniel stated in his official report. The general noted that his troops “moved to the rear of General Ramseur for a distance of about three-quarters of a mile.” The men from O’Neal’s brigade advanced directly alongside them on the left as they proceeded toward the enemy positions on the hill. An officer from Daniel’s brigade complained that the two brigades in this line were “a part of the time under a severe fire of sharpshooters.”<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> J. W. B. to Editor, Aug. 12, 1863, *Augusta Weekly Chronicle and Sentinel*, Sept. 5, 1863.

<sup>26</sup> Georgia Historical Society, Savannah, Georgia.

Once the skirmishers from the three lead brigades approached within about 200 yards of the enemy lines, Ramseur ordered a halt in the attack while he personally carried out a detailed reconnaissance along their front. “As we near the base, a low command halts us within the pale of a graveyard with marble monuments that seem typical of our fate,” Captain Gorman remarked. “The enemy seem aware of our approach and their commands can be heard as they prepare to receive us.” He noted that they were “ordered to lie down, and our hearts thump and beat as if they would leap out of our bosoms, while noble Ramseur and scouts creep forward to reconnoiter.”<sup>27</sup>

By then, Ramseur’s men on the right of the front line had moved close enough to draw intense fire from the enemy’s skirmishers, which caused many of them to seek shelter in the sunken road. The 14th North Carolina’s Col. Risden T. Bennett claimed that even from their position at the bottom of the slope along the dirt road “you could almost hear the movements of the enemy’s men” at the top of the hill. “I recall the perilous position in that road, and how we had to hug the ground,” he remarked. “I was shot while giving an example to my men. Standing up full height, I was shot through my hat six times—then through my left hand—then through the groin.”<sup>28</sup>

Iverson’s troops on Ramseur’s left encountered similar problems as they pressed ahead toward the looming hill. Iverson recalled that his men “advanced in line of battle so close to the position of the enemy as to receive the fire of the picket line and the canister from the batteries in our front without other signs of our presence than the tramp of many feet.” Just as for Ramseur’s troops, that move placed them within easy earshot of the Federal soldiers lying in wait on the nearby heights. Iverson noted, in fact, that he “could distinctly hear the remarks made inside their works.”<sup>29</sup>

As the men from the three brigades waited in “dire suspense” at the bottom of the hill, Ramseur proceeded with his reconnaissance. He quickly determined that the enemy’s batteries were “in po-

<sup>27</sup> Gorman, “Memoirs of a Rebel,” 25.

<sup>28</sup> R. T. Bennett to Fred Phillips, May 28, 1891, Stephen D. Ramseur Papers, North Carolina State Archives, North Carolina Office of Archives and History, Private Collection, Raleigh, North Carolina (hereafter cited as NCOAH).

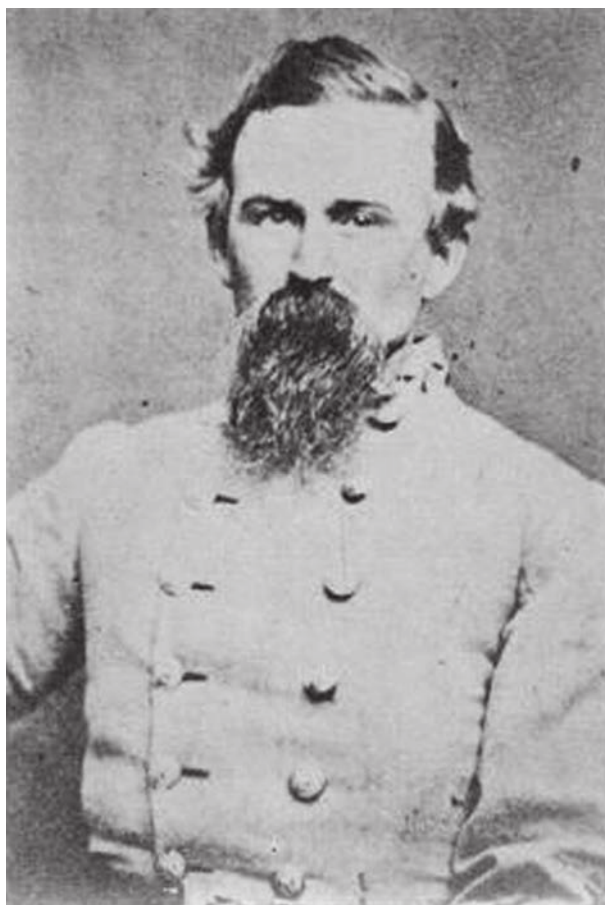
<sup>29</sup> Alfred Iverson to M. S. O’Donnell, June 27, 1894, William P. Palmer Collection, Library and Archives, Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

sition to pour upon our lines direct, cross, and enfilade fires.” The general further discovered that “two lines of infantry behind stone walls and breastworks were supporting these batteries.” The extent of the enemy defenses proved too daunting even for the supremely gallant Ramseur. After concluding that the Federal positions along their front were nearly impregnable, he hurried back to confer with Doles. About that time, the general also received word that the two brigades from Early’s division had already withdrawn from their attack on the other part of Cemetery Hill.<sup>30</sup>

Within about ten minutes of Ramseur’s return, the firing from both sides suddenly ceased. “Messengers are sent down the line, and instead of the dismal death-knell sound of ‘forward,’ the gladly obeyed command of ‘fall back without noise’ is given, and soon we are again back in our old places in line,” Captain Gorman stated. That order came as a major relief for the war-weary veteran. “Our General saw the foolhardiness and madness of the attempt, and being unwilling knowingly to sacrifice his command, he, on his own responsibility ordered us back; and for that act there are many Carolina mothers, wives, sisters and children who should pray blessings on his head,” the captain declared.<sup>31</sup>

Captain Harris remained just as pleased with the decision to halt the night attack. He admitted that “many a heart was made glad” when the command finally came for his brigade to fall back. “A careful reconnaissance had sufficed to demonstrate the impracticability of a successful issue to our contemplated charge,” Harris explained. “Hence the order for the retrograde movement. We dropped back about 150 yards to a small or narrow road running parallel with our lines.” He noted that, following the halt, the men “lay down on our arms, and rested for the remainder of the night.”<sup>32</sup>

Their withdrawal did not come without some continued dangers from the troops on the hill. Corporal Ross recalled that Ramseur’s troops advanced so close to the enemy’s position before turning back they “could hear the Federal officers commanding their men to reserve the fire until we approached nearer, but in the meantime there came an order from our commander to retire as quietly as possi-



Brig. Gen. George Doles. United States Army Heritage and Education Center.

ble.” The retreat over a fence in their rear quickly turned into a mad rush during which “every soldier seemed to get on the fence at the same time, thus splitting the posts, tearing down rails, and making a considerable noise, which the Federal officers heard, and ordered their men to fire.”<sup>33</sup>

Doles’s brigade also pulled back after stopping short of the main Federal position. “We had not advanced more than half a mile before we came upon the enemy’s pickets, who fired upon us, when we retired a short distance, and lay down,” Col. John Mercer from the 21st Georgia remarked. “Soon the brigade was ordered to retire to the cover of a fence some quarter of a mile to the rear.”<sup>34</sup> Lt. Irby G. Scott reported to his father that the troops in the 12th Georgia “approached within one hundred yards of the enemy’s line of battle” by the time the attack was called off.<sup>35</sup> Pvt. Edwin Sharpe from the 4th Georgia

<sup>30</sup> *OR*, 27.2:588.

<sup>31</sup> Gorman, “Memoirs of a Rebel,” 25.

<sup>32</sup> Harris to Burton, “A Newly Discovered Account,” 35–36.

<sup>33</sup> Ross, “Experiences,” Brake Collection.

<sup>34</sup> *OR*, 27.2:585.

<sup>35</sup> Irby G. Scott to Dear Father, July 8, 1863, in Johnnie Perry Pearson, ed.,

noted in his diary that the men moved “so near the yankees line we could hear them talking plainly.”<sup>36</sup>

Their retreat drew an immediate response from the Federal soldiers around the hill. Sgt. Charles Timothy “Tim” Furlow, who served as a courier on Doles’s brigade staff, complained in his journal that the enemy began “pouring a galling fire into us just as we left.” Within moments, the troops broke into a hasty withdrawal to the rear. “I never saw our men the least bit frightened before or since that night but it was with difficulty that the men could be kept from retreating double quick,” the Georgian acknowledged. Their reaction came as no surprise to the war-weary veteran. He pointed out that “these night attacks will demoralize any body of troops in the world and it is seldom one prays.”<sup>37</sup>

From their position in the rear, the men from O’Neal’s made even less headway before finally coming to a halt. “They discovered our approach, and kept quietly waiting for us to get nearer, so as to play the Vicksburg game on us,” Pvt. Oscar Whitaker from the 12th Alabama in O’Neal’s brigade told his mother. “Presently the officers began whispering about and we were soon moved out by the left flank, and I was glad of it.”<sup>38</sup> Major Blackford recalled that he also “lay silently waiting for the word to advance, when to my relief, I must say, I saw the dark masses of men wheeling to the rear—the idea had been abandoned.”<sup>39</sup>

The situation proved just as perilous for Daniel’s troops. Lt. James E. Green from the 53rd North Carolina noted in his diary that they advanced “down in an open Field toward the Enemys Battery, I suppose with the intention of taking it.” The Tar Heel pointed out that “we did not Charge on it from some cause not known to me.” Within moments, they came under intense fire from the enemy troops on the hill. “We halted down there & was there some time & they opened on us with there Battery of Grape & Canister & shells,” he explained. As a

result, the men in this second line soon “had to fall back” to their starting point.<sup>40</sup>

On the far right of the line, General Lane responded to Ewell’s request for support by sending two of his brigades toward Cemetery Hill. The plan initially proceeded in fine style. The brigades commanded by Brig. Gen. Edward L. Thomas and Col. Abner Perrin moved forward until they were “about 300 yards in front of the enemy’s line.” From there, they prepared to proceed with the attack. The other two brigades from the division remained well to the rear as a reserve force. Perrin reported that, once his troops completed their advance, he was “ordered to push forward my skirmish line, and to drive in the enemy’s pickets from a road in front of the Cemetery Hill.”<sup>41</sup>

The troops at the front of the advance faced some major problems in merely locating the right of Rodes’s main battle line. “We went forward to the point designated and could not find the picket from Ramseur’s Brigade,” one of the men from Perrin’s South Carolina brigade openly complained in a letter to his brother. In the darkness, they soon stumbled into a force of Federal troops along their front. After encountering a sharp response from the enemy skirmishers, both Perrin and Thomas halted their brigades in place and took no further action to support Rodes’s advancing troops.<sup>42</sup>

The final order to stop the assault came from Rodes, who was convinced by Ramseur and Doles that “it was a useless sacrifice of life” to continue in the darkness against such a strong position. Lt. William Calder from the 2nd North Carolina in Ramseur’s brigade echoed those concerns in a letter to his mother soon after the battle. “After dark our division advanced to make a night attack upon the enemy but our general thought better of it and we retreated without engaging,” he remarked. “It was well for us that we did for in the confusion of the darkness we would have lost nearly every man and gained nothing whatever.”<sup>43</sup>

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Lee and Jackson’s Bloody Twelfth: The Letters of Irby Goodwin Scott, First Lieutenant, Company G., Putnam Light Infantry, Twelfth Georgia Volunteer Infantry (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2012), 128.

36 Edwin R. Sharpe Diary, Entry for July 2, 1863, Edwin R. Sharpe Papers, Georgia Historical Society.

37 Charles Timothy Furlow Diary, Entry for July 2, 1863, In Charles T. Furlow, “Record of Current Events from the Time the 4th Ga Regt Left Camp Jackson, Va.,” 48, Diaries Miscellaneous Collection (MS 181), Manuscripts and Archives Library, Yale University, New Haven, Connecticut.

38 “Extract of a letter from a member of the ‘Southern Foresters,’ 12th Alabama Regiment to his mother,” July 8, 1863, *Mobile Evening News*, July 24, 1863.

39 Blackford, “5th Alabama Sharpshooters,” 50.

40 James E. Green Diary, Entry for July 2, 1863, NCOAH.

41 OR, 27.2:663, 666.

42 Blackwood K. Benson to Dear Brother, July 7, 1863, in Susan Williams Benson, ed., *Berry Benson’s Civil War Book: Memoirs of a Confederate Scout and Sharpshooter* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 147.

43 OR, 27.2:556; William E. Calder to Dear Mother, July 8, 1863, Calder Family Papers, Wilson Library, Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, North Carolina (hereafter cited as SHC).



Iverson, whose handful of troops were in no condition for further action following their devastating losses on the previous day, had a similar reaction to the news that the attack had been canceled. Although he had nothing to do with the decision to withdraw, Iverson gladly pulled his command back from its exposed position. "Perceiving, as I believe every one did, that we were advancing to certain destruction, when the other parts of the line fell back, I also gave the order to retreat and formed in the road, in which we maintained a position during that night and the whole of July 3," he commented in his official report.<sup>44</sup>

For at least one officer from the 5th Alabama in O'Neal's brigade, however, the order to halt the attack came as a major disappointment. He noted that the men in his brigade had "advanced, with empty muskets, to within three hundred yards of the enemy's works without being discovered." The officer insisted that the outlook for success remained far from hopeless. "I believe that we would have carried the heights had we gone on," he argued in a letter home. "I never saw such determination expressed by the men. Unless they were really impregnable, they would have been carried."<sup>45</sup>

After withdrawing from the foot of Cemetery Hill, Rodes placed the men from his three lead brigades along Long Lane, where they could be easily renew the fight on the following day. "Instead of falling back to the original line, I caused the front line to assume a strong position in the plain to the right of the town, along the hollow of an old road-bed," the division commander explained in his official report. "This position was much nearer the enemy, was clear of the town, and was one from which I could readily attack without confusion." The other two brigades settled into place a couple of hundred yards to the rear "in the position originally held" by the first line.<sup>46</sup>

Whether justified or not, the failure to support Early's division on the right proved to be critical in losing the advantage that Hays's and Av-

ery's brigades had gained by successfully storming the Federal batteries at the top of Cemetery Hill. "Charging over a hill into a ravine, they broke a line of the enemy's posted behind a stone wall, and advanced up the steep face of another hill, over two lines of breastworks" Ewell explained in his official report. "These brigades captured several batteries of artillery and held them until, finding that no attack was made on the right, and that heavy masses of the enemy were advancing against their front and flank, they reluctantly fell back."<sup>47</sup> The losses included Colonel Avery, who was mortally wounded in the attack.<sup>48</sup>

Hays argued that they withdrew largely because of the lack of assistance from Rodes's troops. "Approaching within 100 yards, a line was discovered before us, from the whole length of which a simultaneous fire was delivered," the general stated in his report. "I reserved my fire, from the uncertainty of this being a force of the enemy or of our men, as I had been cautioned to expect friends both in front, to the right, and to the left."<sup>49</sup> According to Capt. William J. Seymour from Hays's brigade staff, they "anxiously waited to hear Rodes's guns co-operating with us on the right, but unfortunately no such assistance came to us."<sup>50</sup>

The disappointment among the men in Avery's brigade was just as strong. Maj. Samuel McDowell Tate from the 6th North Carolina in that brigade informed Governor Zeb Vance soon after the battle that "it was manifest that I could not hold the place without aid, for the enemy was massed in all the ravines and adjoining heights, and were then fully half a mile from our lines." After finally retreating down the hill, he "demanded to know why we had not been supported."<sup>51</sup> Capt. Neill Ray from the same regiment insisted that "no one who has never been in a similar position can understand how anxiously we looked for re-inforcements." He complained that "none came, however, and before long orders came for us to fall back to our original position."<sup>52</sup>

<sup>44</sup> OR, 27.2:580.

<sup>45</sup> "Private Letter from an Officer of the Fifth Alabama Regiment," Aug. 20, 1863, in William B. Styple, ed., *Writing and Fighting from the Army of Northern Virginia: A Collection of Confederate Soldier Correspondence* (Kearny, NJ: Belle Grove Publishing Company, 2003), 262–63. Although the writer places those events on the third day of the battle, he is clearly referring to the night attack on July 2.

<sup>46</sup> OR, 27.2:556.

<sup>47</sup> OR, 27.2:447.

<sup>48</sup> John A. McPherson to Dear Sir, Aug. 3, 1863, Avery Family of North Carolina Papers, SHC.

<sup>49</sup> OR, 27.2:480–81.

<sup>50</sup> William J. Seymour Journal, Entry for July 2, 1862, in Terry L. Jones, ed., *The Civil War Memoirs of William J. Seymour: Reminiscences of a Louisiana Tiger* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 75–76.

<sup>51</sup> OR, 27.2:486.

<sup>52</sup> Neill W. Ray, "Sixth Regiment," in Walter Clark, ed., *Histories of the Several*

Even before the attack was halted, Early had arrived at Rodes's position to urge him forward in support of his troops on the other part of the hill. "I found him getting his brigades into position so as to be ready to advance, but he informed me that there was no preparation to move on his right, and that General Lane, in command of Pender's division, on his immediate right, had sent him word that he had no orders to advance, which had delayed his own movement," Early remarked. He acknowledged that Rodes "expressed a readiness to go forward if I thought it proper, but by this time I had been informed that my two brigades were retiring, and I told him it was then too late."<sup>53</sup>

The finger pointing began almost immediately. Rodes's lack of action upset Early so much that he complained directly to their corps' commander. "General Early's indignation was great," Lt. Thomas Turner from Ewell's staff recalled. "He rode to Gen. Ewell's Headquarters bitterly commenting on Rodes's failure to fulfill his promise to support him." The three generals held a hurried conference, during which Rodes attempted to explain his decision. According to Turner's account, Rodes's "excuses for not advancing was that Genl. Ramseur, one of his brigadiers, had objected to the attack on account of the number of guns on his front & that Pender—commanding on his right flank refused to advance without orders from his commanding officer (Hill)."<sup>54</sup>

As was most often the case in Lee's army, Early made no direct mention of his complaints in the report on the battle. He noted only that his assault on Cemetery Hill had failed because "no attack was made on the immediate right, as expected, and not meeting with support from that quarter, the brigades could not hold the position they had attained."<sup>55</sup> In later years, the embittered division commander described Rodes's failure to carry through on the attack against Cemetery Hill as "the solitary instance of remissness on the part of any portion of the corps in the battle." Many others ar-

gued that Rodes's lapses had allowed one of the best chances for turning the enemy's flank on July 2 to slip away.<sup>56</sup>

Ewell himself clearly blamed Rodes for this missed opportunity. The corps' commander pointedly remarked in his official report that that he had "every reason to believe, from the eminent success attending the assault of Hays and Avery, that the enemy's lines would have been carried."<sup>57</sup> Behind the scenes, the general remained even more critical of Rodes's shortcomings that day. According to Maj. Campbell Brown from the Second Corps' staff, Ewell was convinced that Early's attack was "admirably timed" and only "failed because of Rodes's failure to co-operate." In his view, Rodes's lack of support directly caused the attacking troops to withdraw after penetrating the enemy's defenses at the top of the hill. Brown noted that Ewell held the general "fairly censurable" for his actions.<sup>58</sup>

Although he later distinguished himself as one of the best division commanders in the army, Rodes suffered so much damage to his reputation at Gettysburg that he was never seriously considered as a potential corps' commander. A possible explanation for Rodes's uncharacteristic performance was his apparent poor health. At least one eyewitness from Early's staff reported that Rodes appeared noticeably ill and flushed with fever during a meeting late in the afternoon on the previous day.<sup>59</sup> Early's fifteen-year-old nephew, who had arrived in camp with hopes of being assigned as a volunteer aide on his uncle's staff, confirmed that assessment. The Virginia Military Institute cadet clearly recalled that Rodes was "so sick that he was compelled to ride in an ambulance whenever practicable."<sup>60</sup>

Despite his lapses in attacking Cemetery Hill, Rodes's prowess as a combat leader was again apparent during the bloody Overland Campaign in the spring of 1864. In those battles, he showed that Gettysburg had clearly been an aberration. One of the high points in Rodes's career came in mid-May at Spotsylvania Court House where he led a fierce

*Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861-'65* (Goldsboro, NC: Nash Brothers, 1901), I, 314.

53 Early, *Autobiographical Sketch*, 274.

54 "Copy of a portion of Capt. Turner's Memoranda relating to Gettysburg written before Col. Walter Taylors book—either in '76 or '77," in Terry L. Jones, ed., *Campbell Brown's Civil War: With Ewell and the Army of Northern Virginia* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1991), 322.

55 OR, 27.2:470.

56 Jubal A. Early, "Leading Confederates on the Battlefield: A Review by General Early," *Southern Historical Society Papers*, 4 (1877), 280.

57 OR, 27.2:447.

58 G. Campbell Brown to Henry Jackson Hunt, May 7, 1885, in Jones, *Campbell Brown's Civil War*, 329.

59 Darrell L. Collins, *Major General Robert E. Rodes of the Army of Northern Virginia: A Biography* (Clarendon Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2008) 280, 284.

60 John Cabell Early, "A Southern Boy's Experience at Gettysburg," *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*, 48 (1911), 417.

counterattack against the Federal troops, who had breached the salient known as the Mule Shoe.<sup>61</sup> While serving with Early's forces in the Shenandoah Valley, Rodes suffered a mortal wound from "a piece of shell" during the action at Winchester on September 19.<sup>62</sup>

His untimely death unleashed a huge wave of sadness among the officers and men who had served under him during the war. Brig. Gen. Bryan Grimes, who formerly commanded a regiment in Ramseur's brigade, lamented to a fellow officer a few days after the battle that "our chief loss has been the death of Maj. Genl. Rodes, who cannot be replaced."<sup>63</sup> Brig. Gen. Cullen A. Battle from O'Ne-

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61 Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Gray: Lives of the Confederate Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 263.

62 J. L. Schaub, "Gen. Robert E. Rodes," *Confederate Veteran*, 16 (1908), 69.

63 Bryan Grimes to Francis M. Parker, Oct. 4, 1864, in Michael W. Taylor, ed., *To Drive the Enemy from Southern Soil: The Letters of Col. Francis Marion Parker and the History of the 30th Regiment North Carolina Troops* (Dayton, OH: Morningside House, 1998), 350.

al's old brigade well summed up the extent of the despair among the veteran soldiers. "The whole army mourned his death," he lamented. "No single death—save that of Jackson, caused such deep regret and bitter sorrow."<sup>64</sup>

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64 Brandon H. Beck, ed., *Third Alabama!: The Civil War Memoirs of Brigadier General Cullen Andrews Battle, CSA* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2000), 127.