THE LITTLE ROUND TOP CONTROVERSY—
GOVERNEUR WARREN, STRONG VINCENT, AND GEORGE SYKES

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BRIGADIER General Gouverneur Warren, Colonel Strong Vincent, and Major General George Sykes are familiar figures to historians and enthusiasts of the Federal defense of Little Round Top during the Battle of Gettysburg. The basic facts of their actions there are well known. Warren first recognized the tactical value of this position and initiated the chain of events which led to the Union occupation of the hill. Vincent is remembered for his participation in the gallant stand on the height in repelling Law and Robertson’s Confederate brigades; and Sykes, the reliable old Regular, has received general credit for his role in stopping Longstreet’s thrust of July 2. The details surrounding the exact roles of these officers on that afternoon are, however, confused and the source of historical controversy. Who ordered Vincent’s brigade (Third Brigade, 1st Division, V Corps) to the hill? Was it Warren? Sykes, the corps commander? Brigadier General James Barnes, the division commander? Did Vincent seize the initiative and move to the height without orders? And finally, why was Brigadier General Stephen Weed’s brigade (Third Brigade, 2nd Division, V Corps) committed piecemeal to the defense?

Nineteenth-century historians and the reports of the participating officers in the Official Records almost uniformly grant the credit for the deployments to Warren. William Swinton concluded that “The leading division of this corps [V] under General Barnes, was passing out to reinforce Sickles. General Warren assumed the responsibility of detaching from this force the brigade of Vincent, and this he hurried up to hold the position.” 1 Accord-

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ing to Jacob Hoke, "Warren . . . dashed down to Barnes and detached Vincent's brigade and hurried it up the hill." In his official report, Sykes observed: "In the meantime Vincent's brigade . . . had seized the rocky height. . . . These troops were posted under the direction of General Warren." Barnes noted in his report that "Warren . . . came up . . . and pointing out . . . [Little] Round Top, urged . . . assistance in that direction. Sykes yielded to his urgent request, and I immediately directed . . . Vincent . . . to that point with his brigade."

In recent years, historians have also generally attributed the movements to Warren. Noting that "Sykes was sending two brigades down into the flat land along Plum Run to reinforce Birney," Bruce Catton concludes that it was "at Warren's request he shot another brigade [Vincent's] straight south to defend Little Round Top." In his excellent *Commanders of the Army of the Potomac*, Warren W. Hassler, Jr., maintains that "Warren performed an inestimable service when he moved troops from the Fifth Corps, going to the aid of Sickles, to Little Round Top just in time to save that vital knob from capture."

A number of local historians and teachers in the Erie, Pennsylvania area have rejected the traditional view crediting Warren with the deployments; instead they have stressed the role of Strong Vincent, a former native of northwestern Pennsylvania. Their position was expressed recently by the Honorable Joseph Vigorito (Democrat, 24th District) in a speech delivered before the United States House of Representatives. He concluded that if it had not been for Gen. Vincent's extraordinary act of bravery at Gettysburg, the battle could have been lost and the outcome of the Civil War might have been very different. On the second day of the battle Gen. Vincent took the responsibility, without specific orders and in the

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4 Ibid., pp. 600-601.
face of a possible court-martial, of leading his brigade of men to the summit of Little Round Top and securing that important defensive position for the Union army.\(^7\)

A solution to these complex questions may be that Vincent’s brigade was the first to move to the hill. Vincent reacted to indirect orders resulting from Warren’s call for assistance since Warren did not physically order Vincent to occupy the height. Warren did direct and did accompany part of Weed’s brigade to the knob, arriving after Vincent had reached the crest. Sykes, shortly after this, directed the remainder of Weed’s brigade to the hilltop.

By the early afternoon of July 2, apparently neither Meade nor Lee had grasped the importance of Little Round Top, although Meade claimed later that he directed Major General Daniel Sickles (III Corps) to post his left flank on the hill.\(^8\) Confederate artillery emplaced upon this height could enfilade the Union line and render it untenable. The hill was occupied only by a small Federal signal detachment.

At approximately 2:00 in the afternoon, Sickles, without authority from Meade, advanced his corps forward from Cemetery Ridge into an exposed salient in the Wheatfield and Peach Orchard.\(^9\) One hour later, Meade called in his corps commanders for a conference. While the council was in progress, Longstreet began his artillery bombardment of the Union left flank in preparation for his assault. Meade ordered Sykes to move his corps, which had been massed in reserve near the bridge over Rock Creek on the Baltimore Road, to the extreme left of the Federal line to assist in repulsing the imminent Southern attack.\(^10\)

Meade sent Warren, his chief engineer officer, to the threatened left to “examine the condition of affairs.”\(^11\) Warren rode to the signal station and saw Major General David B. Birney’s division (Sickles’s corps) below him in the Devil’s Den and the Wheatfield. Suddenly, he realized the importance of the height upon which he stood. He rode down the western face of the hill to

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\(^7\) Erie (Pa.) Times-News, July 3, 1966.

\(^8\) Hassler, Commanders of the Army of the Potomac, p. 177.

\(^9\) Ibid.


Devil's Den and directed Captain James Smith of the 4th New York Battery to fire a round into the woods west of the Emmitsburg Road, where he suspected that the Confederates were massing. The shot revealed "the glistening of gun barrels and bayonets of the enemy's line of battle." Warren scrawled out a dispatch to Meade to direct at least a division to Little Round Top and sent his aide galloping back to army headquarters.

Meanwhile, Sykes began to move Barnes's division to the left of the Federal line. Vincent's brigade led the advance, followed by the brigades of Colonel Jacob B. Sweitzer and Colonel William S. Tilton. The sounds of musketry and artillery fire grew louder as the division approached the rear of Sickles's corps which was fighting desperately to hold its ground.

Sykes and Barnes went ahead of the column to reconnoiter the Little Round Top-Wheatfield area. They apparently separated. Sykes rode slightly southwest toward Birney's position, and Barnes headed due south toward Little Round Top. Warren's aide galloped up to Sykes with Meade's approval to forward troops to Little Round Top. Sykes reacted by sending one of his staff captains to find Barnes with orders to send one of his brigades to the height.

Barnes, however, had not returned from his reconnaissance. Accordingly, the staff captain rode up to Vincent who had halted the division to await instructions. When Vincent requested the orders, the captain inquired as to the whereabouts of Barnes. Vincent again asked for the orders. The captain answered: "General Sykes told me to direct General Barnes to send one of his brigades to occupy that hill [Little Round Top] yonder." Vincent replied, "I will take the responsibility of taking my brigade there," and started his troops immediately to the knob.

Notice that neither Warren nor Sykes directly issued the order to Vincent. Vincent, however, reacting as the last link in the chain of events activated by Warren. Had not Warren's aide arrived with the order from Meade to send troops to the hill,
Sykes, as we shall see, would have committed the entire 1st Division in the Devil’s Den-Wheatfield area.

Vincent was exercising a considerable amount of initiative, but the intent of the orders from Sykes’s staff captain was clear. Technically, Vincent was opening himself to court-martial by moving without orders from Barnes, but as the commander of the lead brigade he was in a position to act, and did so accordingly.

Meanwhile, Sykes noted that Smith’s battery was without adequate infantry support and rode to Birney to offer to post Sweitzer and Tilton’s brigades in the gap between Smith and Birney’s left flank. Birney agreed, and Sykes posted these brigades personally. 6

Following Tilton’s brigade came the lead brigade of the 2nd Division under Weed, Colonel Patrick H. O’Rourke’s 140th New York Infantry was the lead regiment, followed by Battery “D,” 5th United States Artillery, commanded by Lieutenant Charles E. Hazlett. 7

After firing the round from Smith’s battery, Warren returned to and remained on Little Round Top while the preceding developments unfolded. The officer commanding the signal detachment prepared to fold up his flags and withdraw as Confederate bullets began to whistle and chip at the rocks around him. 8 Warren convinced the signallers to remain, and they continued to wave their flags, more as a gesture of defiance than for any practical communication value. 9

Unknown to Warren, Vincent was approaching the rear (eastern slope) of the hill through the heavy woods and brush. Warren saw reserve troops (Weed’s brigade) moving west toward the Peach Orchard. He rode down to intercept these men, moving on a course west-northwest. Because of the dense foliage, he did not see Vincent’s brigade. 10 Warren reined in and halted Weed’s column. He discovered quickly that Weed had gone ahead for orders and had not yet returned. Warren recognized the brigade as the one which he had commanded in earlier campaigns. He approached O’Rourke and quickly explained the need for troops

7 Report of Col. K. Garrand, who took command of the brigade when Weed was killed, ibid., p. 651.
8 Johnson and Buel, eds., Battles and Leaders, III, 308.
9 Ibid.
on Little Round Top. Warren accepted the responsibility for the deployment, and O'Rourke wheeled his regiment to the left and moved to the hilltop. Warren also forwarded the six guns of Hazlett's battery. Hazlett's gunners, with great effort and exertion, brought their pieces through the woods and over the rocks of the slope to the summit. It is doubtful whether Vincent's brigade could have held the height without the immediate support of O'Rourke and Hazlett.

When Weed rode ahead for orders, he met Sickles who directed him to support Birney. Weed returned to his column and found that Warren had departed with O'Rourke and Hazlett. He then started his remaining three regiments west to Birney's line. Upon noticing this movement, Sykes sent a staff officer to ascertain its cause. Weed explained his orders from Sickles. The staff officer returned to Sykes, who immediately reversed Sickles's directive and ordered Weed's regiments to the hilltop on the double-quick. Sykes preferred to commit his troops to sectors where he felt that they were needed. The arrival of these units as the gray tide threatened to engulf the thin blue line was also tactically important.

Since the Union forces were almost overwhelmed, all of the units on Little Round Top were necessary for its defense. The ferocity of the bloody hand-to-hand fighting can be seen in the dreadful loss of Federal commanders there. Weed, Hazlett, and O'Rourke were killed; Vincent was mortally wounded; and Warren received a minor wound.

Warren emerges as the key figure of this action. He not only initiated the chain of orders that eventually brought troops to the hill, but he intervened personally to bring O'Rourke and Hazlett into position. In secondary roles, Vincent, who reacted with a degree of initiative in getting the first troops to the crest, and Sykes, who directed Weed's three remaining regiments there, cannot be ignored nor forgotten.