

A PEDANT'S GUIDE TO THE MOVIE 'GETTYSBURG'

The 1993 Turner Pictures movie *'Gettysburg'* based on the Pulitzer Prize winning novel by Michael Shaara *'The Killer Angels'*, did much to raise public awareness and interest in America's Civil War. This movie, which is over four hours in length, contains a number of historical and geographic inaccuracies, editing flaws, some "interesting" casting decisions and various transpositions of events and other errors of time. Whilst these features of the movie may have been included for dramatic effect, such artistic licence is hard to reconcile with the film distributor's claim that the movie has been "...rigorously authenticated down to the boots".

In this paper, some of these errors and flaws are examined with a view to allowing readers to develop a view on the extent to which they affect the impact of the movie as a whole.

CASTING ISSUES

The casting of Martin Sheen as Robert E Lee was probably based on similarities of their facial features, but this had at least two shortcomings. First, Lee was around six feet (or 180cm) tall but Sheen's height gave the impression that Lee was considerably shorter than this. Importantly, Lee was an accomplished equestrian, something that Sheen was unable to replicate.

It is interesting to note that in the opening credits of the movie the actor Tim Scott is shown to play the role of General Richard S Ewell and both Scott's and Ewell's photographs are shown in the credits. This is the only appearance in the movie of Ewell other than in the credits at the end of the movie. Furthermore, A P Hill, whose Corps played a significant role in the battle, receives only a small mention in the film's script and does not appear in person in the movie at all.

The selection of present day re-enactors as Confederate troops leaves something to be desired. Whilst we see some of them marching in bare feet and some with authentic worn out boots, they tended to look to be too well fed! In particular, the sergeant commanding the Confederate picquet through which the scout/spy came to report to Longstreet near the beginning of the movie could have made a great Santa Claus but would have as much chance of making the forced march from Virginia through Maryland into Pennsylvania as a beached whale!

One of the interesting casting decisions is seen in the latter part of Pickett's Charge when Armistead's brigade crosses the fence line close to the Union position. An officer raises his sword and shouts "Let's go boys!" and is immediately shot. This officer is none other than Ted Turner himself. One wonders if he had to audition for the part?

SOME IMPOSSIBILITIES

In the opening scenes of the movie the scout/spy, Harrison, sights the Union cavalry on the move. Whilst they look impressive, they are riding their mounts too hard for sustained travel. At the speed they are shown travelling, the horses would likely not last a full day's riding.

After Colonel Chamberlain had first spoken to the men from the 2nd Maine who had been entrusted to him as prisoners, he offers them a meal and orders Sergeant Tozier by name to position these troops near some trees. Chamberlain would not have known who Sgt Tozier was, however, since Tozier was, in fact, one of the men of the 2nd Maine. Furthermore, Chamberlain's "sensitive new age" speech to the men before the battle – "... we all have value..." was most unlikely to have struck a chord with the regiment of working-class Maine men.

It has been suggested that the style of the hat worn by Longstreet in the movie was not made until around 1870 – another example of his being ahead of his time!

In one of the scenes where the drums of the band are playing, the name 'REMO' can be seen on drumheads. This is the name of a percussion company that in 1863 had not yet been founded.

Following the initial Confederate artillery barrage prior to Pickett's Charge, the Federal artillery opens fire and two Confederate cannon are seen to be destroyed. Whilst these explosions looked quite spectacular, the fact remains that the Confederates did not lose any guns at Gettysburg. Indeed, they actually captured and left the field after the three-day battle with an additional six pieces.

SOME PROBLEMS WITH GEOGRAPHY...

In the early part of the movie there is a view from the cupola on Seminary ridge towards the town of Gettysburg. This view shows the Chambersburg Pike to the south when it is actually to the north!

At the beginning of Day 2 of the battle, a number of Union soldiers on the summit of Little Round Top signally with a red flag. Whilst this was a standard means of communicating and coordinating actions of units within the Army at this time, the question needs to be asked:

To whom are these soldiers actually signalling?

The only troops forward of these signallers were – Confederates – the enemy! The rest of the Union forces were to their right and behind them except the 20th Maine who was on their left but also behind the summit. This appears to be simply a case of poor map reading on the part of these Federals or maybe they were just trying to ensure a "fair" fight ensued?

LET'S GET THE TIMINGS RIGHT!

The movie gets a number of events out of chronological order and other events at the wrong time. First, General Heth's confrontation with Lee regarding the bringing on the initial engagement of the forces is presented in the movie before the Iron Brigade goes into action. In reality, the timings of these events were such that Lee was not forward in the field and, therefore, would not have spoken to Heth until after the Iron Brigade had defeated Heth's two leading brigades.

Second, on the morning of the second day of the battle, (July 2, 1863), General Hancock is seen to ride up to the Irish Brigade as Father Corby is giving the men absolution. In reality, Corby gave absolution to the Irish Brigade around 4pm on this day, just before their going into action in the Wheatfield. At this time, Hancock was occupied elsewhere on the battlefield trying to prevent a collapse of the Union's right flank.

In the movie, JEB Stuart's interview with Lee took place in the late evening of the second day, whereas it actually took place much earlier in the day around 2:30pm. Also, Harrison, the spy/scout reported to Longstreet in the evening, not early in the morning as portrayed in the film.

SOME SPECIAL EFFECTS

There are a number of special effects in the film that almost make it. In the final stages of Pickett's Charge, several Confederates advancing towards a Federal gun are blown backwards, presumably by a canister round. A closer inspection of the scene, however, shows a "bungie" type cord attached to the back of one of these soldiers and this is what throws him back with such force. It was a case of "pull" not "push".

The rubber bayonets used during Pickett's Charge can be seen "wobbling" in the hand-to-hand fighting and this problem seems to be compounded by troops cheerfully greeting each other as the hand-to-hand continues.

SOME MINOR EDITING PROBLEMS AND ERRORS OF FACT

Throughout the movie there are problems of editing, mainly minor, that are a source of some amusement to some who view the film. Whilst a number of these are included in both earlier and subsequent sections of the paper, four such problems are presented below:

The first relates to General Longstreet's amazing cigar. As Longstreet is speaking to one of his staff officers, his cigar changes miraculously from being freshly lit to having been smoked down to a stub and then magically back to a longer length. How does he do it?

Second, as troops from Pickett's Division greet Lee prior to their charge, Lee shakes hands with a number of these soldiers, including one with a distinct mark on his wrist left by a wrist watch being worn in sunlight. In Civil War times wrist watches were not worn!

Third, in the early part of the movie, Colonel Chamberlain is seen walking with his brother Tom towards three Confederate prisoners. In the sky behind them the exhaust trail from a modern jet plane can be seen!

It should be noted, also, that in the scene after the Little Round Top engagement where Lieutenant Chamberlain brings a cup of coffee to his brother Colonel Chamberlain, you are able to see the statue of General Gouverneur Warren behind the bushes. Perhaps greater care could have been given to the angles used in filming the scene or, more simply, thicker bushes used to hide the statue?

Errors of fact, or is it poetic licence, include there being no evidence that Lieutenant Tom Chamberlain spoke to General Armistead and Colonel Chamberlain never spoke to General Hancock during the battle – in the *Killer Angels* it was Sykes.

SOME GREAT STAFF WORK

It is interesting to note that as the remnants of Pickett's Division retreat to the relative safety of their own lines, Longstreet is presented with remarkably detailed and accurate casualty figures for his Corps by one of his staff officers. Given the tactical situation, however, such a report would probably take many hours to assemble. What makes the report even more remarkable is that it accurately summarises the final casualty figures of a battle still in progress. Indeed, if Lee had had the benefit of this staff officer's advice and predictions on a regular basis, the War would have not dragged on until 1865 and the result might have been very different! Perhaps Longstreet chose to keep this officer's skills to himself and did not inform Lee of this invaluable resource. Alternatively, this officer might have dropped and smashed his crystal ball after the battle.

WE ALL HAVE TO DIE...

Towards the end of the movie there is a scene where Lee comes upon the badly wounded Brigadier General Kemper, one of Pickett's brigade commanders, and asks him about the extent of his wounds. Kemper replies that he has been told that the wounds are mortal and, as a dying wish, asks Lee to see that full justice is given to his men who made the charge. Lee responds by saying he will pray that it is not true that Kemper's wounds are mortal.

Kemper did, in fact, die but not until 1895, 32 years after the battle! What power the prayers of the pure and mighty have!

SOMETHING A LITTLE MORE SERIOUS...

The focus of the movie on the men of Virginia, particularly just prior to Pickett's Charge, implies that the Army of Northern Virginia comprised troops only from Virginia. Whilst Virginia provided the most number of enlistments to the Confederate cause (~155,000), in terms of the proportion of the state's population, North Carolina had the most number of enlistments – 12,8% compared with Virginia's 9.8%. At Gettysburg, there were more troops from North Carolina who took part in Pickett's Charge than any other state of the Confederacy, including Virginia. On this basis, it might be argued that referring to the charge on Day 3 of the battle as 'Pickett's Charge' is somewhat of a misnomer.

From a personal viewpoint, the major flaw in *'Gettysburg'* is that in depicting Pickett's Charge it fails to show the full extent of the carnage wrought on the combatants of both sides. Indeed, one critic described the charge as:

*"... a remarkably non-violent, clean and heroic, little parade"*¹

Whilst such a description might lend itself to hyperbole, the scenes that depict Pickett's Charge do not provide a picture of:

*"...a hurricane of violence in which human debris literally filled the air"*²

One is left with a feeling that there is something honorable about it and we need to be reminded of Lee's words "...it is well that war is so terrible, else men would learn to love it too much"

THE VALUE OF 'GETTYSBURG'

Given these errors of historical fact in *'Gettysburg'*, the flaws in casting and the technical shortcomings of production and editing, the question needs to be asked as to the value of the movie in conveying an appreciation and understanding of this critical battle and its impact on the outcome of America's Civil War. There is little doubt that the movie has been instrumental in raising public awareness of Civil War issues. Using the criterion of - the proof of the pudding is in its eating – the answer must be a resounding affirmation of the film. Indeed, the fact that people debate these minutiae in the movie is an indication that there is a high level of interest in Civil War issues generally.

As an aside, it is worth comparing *'Gettysburg'* with other movies depicting events of the Civil War era. In this regard, there are films like *'They Died With Their Boots On'* which is the story of the life of George Armstrong Custer and *'Santa Fe Trail'* which focuses on the raid on Harper's Ferry by John Brown's abolitionists. These movies are typical of the films of an earlier era and are riddled with historical inaccuracies presumably for dramatic effect.

'Gettysburg' is generally historically accurate although not a complete coverage of the battle and only transgresses in the fine detail and/or the disputed facts of the battle, a fact that places it apart from earlier Civil War movies. Although it does not live up to the film distributor's claim that "... it has been rigorously authenticated down to its boots", it is part of a new genre of historical film³ for the cinema and television that paces historical accuracy with dramatic effect as key principles of production. It is, therefore, of value as a record of an important part of America's history and for expanding the general public's understanding of this seminal event in the Civil War with the important proviso that the fine detail of the movie is not taken as completely factual.

¹ Johnson Brendan B., *The Nitpickers Site*, Movie Nitpick No. 20473

² *ibid*

³ These include movies of the Civil War era such as *Glory*, *Ride with the Devil*, and *Andersonville* and documentaries made for television such as Ken Burn's *The Civil War*