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## Self-doubt confronted at Gettysburg

By Thomas J. Ryan  
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### **COURAGE ON LITTLE ROUND TOP**

By Thomas M. Eishen, Skyward Publishing Inc., 294 pages, \$16.95 (paperback)

Michael Shaara's popular novel about the Battle of Gettysburg, "The Killer Angels," features Col. Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain of the 20th Maine. On Little Round Top, a low-lying hill that anchored the left of the Union line at Gettysburg on July 2, 1863, Chamberlain barely escapes being shot by an officer of the 15th Alabama whom Mr. Shaara describes simply as a "handsome, full-bearded man in gray."

Thomas M. Eishen's new historical novel, "Courage on Little Round Top," identifies this officer as Lt. Robert Wicker and relates the circumstances that led to his confrontation with Chamberlain. Wicker, like the youthful, fictional Pvt. Henry Fleming in Stephen Crane's "The Red Badge of Courage," was beset by fear that he would prove to be a coward on the battlefield. His superiors reinforced his self-doubt when they deemed him unsuitable for promotion to company commander.

This was the burden that Wicker, a real person, was carrying as the Confederate invasion of the North was under way in June 1863, and at times he found his challenge nearly overwhelming. Eishen sets the stage for the Chamberlain-Wicker encounter by describing their movements just before arrival at Little Round Top on July 2.

While marching toward Gettysburg, Chamberlain had to contend with his two well-intentioned but meddlesome brothers, who were serving on his staff. Wicker had similar issues with enlisted men in the regiment, close friends and relatives from Alabama with whom he routinely fraternized. As part of a close-knit group, Wicker feared that if he ran from the enemy, he would become a laughingstock and an embarrassment to his family.

As the armies of Gen. Robert E. Lee and Gen. George G. Meade converged on the remote crossroads community in south central Pennsylvania and met in the opening clashes on July 1, Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock helped the Union Army establish a defensive position on Cemetery Hill and the adjacent ridge just south of town. In one telling scene, the author depicts Hancock as being relieved that evening when Dan Sickles, a notorious political general whose actions would come into question the next day, passes by without recognizing him in the fading light. "He didn't want Sickles to spoil his evening."

In the early morning of July 2, Gen. Evander Law's brigade, including Wicker's company, conducted a forced march from New Guilford, Pa., to Gettysburg to join Gen. John Bell Hood's division of Gen. James Longstreet's corps.

In the meantime, Chamberlain learned that he had the unpleasant task of informing the men of his regiment of Meade's message emphasizing the critical nature of the upcoming battle — and that "commanders are authorized to order the instant death of any soldier who fails in his duty." Chamberlain fully understood that was a responsibility he could never carry out and hope to return home to Maine.

Also on the morning of July 2, after Lee's scouts informed him that the hill on the Yankee left was unoccupied, he decided that Longstreet's corps would attack that flank of the enemy position. After a countermarch to avoid Union Signal Corps observers, the attack went forward late in the day, and part of Law's brigade marched toward

## Little Round Top.

When Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren, Meade's chief engineer, learned that the hill was undefended, he directed a brigade that included Chamberlain's regiment to occupy it immediately. Warren's initiative was timely because Law's units soon moved into position at the base of this eminence.

Fate placed the 20th Maine and the 15th Alabama in direct contention on the battlefield, and the scene was set for Chamberlain to seize the moment and Wicker to confront his personal demons. The description of these fast-moving events is crisp and detailed. The story to which Mr. Shaara's novel alludes in just a few pages takes on new meaning, and the characters involved come alive.

Thomas Eishen has done a commendable job of conveying Civil War history through dialogue fashioned for its participants. While not neglecting strategy and commanders' tactics, he concentrates on the actions of lower-level persons that often go unnoticed. Readers who enjoyed the scope of "The Killer Angels" and the power of "The Red Badge of Courage" will find that "Courage on Little Round Top" combines some features of both.

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