

# Sharpsburg:

## 17 September 1862

by Captain Jared Sutton

General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia slipped across the Potomac River on 4 September 1862. Their movement had gone unobserved by Federal forces, thanks to the deft screening operation conducted by General J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry. Their immediate aim was to bring the war onto Union soil and relieve the pressure on the Confederacy. In the long term, the Confederacy hoped to conduct a successful campaign in Federal-held territory, culminating in the decisive defeat of the Army of the Potomac and European recognition for the Confederacy as a legitimate government. Unknown to either side, this campaign's outcome would have great and far-reaching implications for the remainder of the war. The Maryland Campaign had begun.

At the start of the campaign, the Army of Northern Virginia numbered about 50,000 men and 230 guns. The army was poorly clothed, badly equipped, short on supplies, lacked proper transportation, and was underfed.<sup>1</sup> To conduct operations in Union territory, the army would have to sustain itself by foraging and capturing supplies from Union troops and supply depots. Proper footgear for the Confederate infantry was in shortest supply. Despite conducting an invasion of Union territories, most of the Army of Northern Virginia did not have shoes on their feet prior to crossing the Potomac River. The Confederacy did enjoy a distinct advantage in organization and leadership.

On paper, the largest formation of troops authorized by the Confederation was the division. However, by early 1862 the Army of Northern Virginia was beginning to adopt a 'corps-like' level as well. Without proper legislation by the Confederate government, Lee was unable to form a proper corps with appropriate command and staff. That, however, did not stop the Army of Northern Virginia from achieving the next best thing.

It was common practice for two or more Confederate divisions to be grouped together and commanded by the senior division commander present. This system allowed Lee two advantages over the Army of the Potomac. First, it offered Lee the ability to observe who could effectively command at corps level and higher. Second, it offered him the ability to replace commanders that could not handle corps command, or commanders that were not aggressive or competent division-level commanders. In short, the Army of Northern Virginia was organized into 'commands' rather than formal corps. This may explain why the Confederacy was able to shift their combat power to counter Union attacks so quickly.

Contrast that with the organization of the Army of the Potomac. After a Union defeat at Second Manassas (Second Bull Run), Major General George B. McClellan was placed in command of all Union forces in the Washington, D.C. area. This included his old command, The Army of the Po-



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tomac, and the shattered elements of Major General John Pope's Army of Virginia. Having received orders from Washington to repel any attempts by the Confederacy to invade the North after their success at Second Manassas, McClellan combined the two Union armies under the Army of the Potomac on 5 September 1862. Complicating matters for the Union was the fact that three of the six Union Corps commanders had never fought at that level. Additionally, Major General Fitz-John Porter and Major General William Franklin, both experienced corps commanders, had been relieved of their commands until completion of an investigation concerning charges of disobedience at Second Manassas. The Army of Northern Virginia also enjoyed an advantage in organization.<sup>2</sup>

Dating from the Mexican-American War, artillery, and to a smaller extent cavalry, had been distributed unevenly at the brigade level. It was not uncommon for a brigade to have a cavalry troop or artillery battery as part of its organic makeup. Additionally, uniformity of organization and equipment between brigades of the same division was rare. Lee recognized the inherent weakness of this system and began to reorganize the artillery arm. He took the batteries away from the individual brigades and organized them into a single battalion under a division artillery commander. An additional battalion was made available for 'corps use,' and another battalion as an artillery reserve for the army. However, by the time of the engagement at Sharpsburg, only Major General James Longstreet's corps had received additional artillery.<sup>3</sup> By organizing his artillery in this manner, Lee was able to focus and mass his fires at critical times and places during the battle. These artillery reserve battalions were free for the division or corps commanders to maneuver in support of the local fight. This reorganization of artillery enabled Confederate artillery to achieve effects in the counter-battery fight, despite inferiority in equipment and numbers to union batteries.



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Union artillery had the advantages in both technology and numbers. Having a heavy industrial base was the key to having modern guns and weapons found in European armies. The bulk of the Union artillery was fielded with the 12-pound Smooth-Bore Napoleon.<sup>4</sup> It fired a 12.3-pound solid shot to a range of 1,619 yards at 5 degrees elevation, was reasonably accurate at all ranges, and could maintain a high rate of fire for longer periods than most field pieces of the day. The Smooth-Bore Napoleon also fired canister shots with a devastating effect.<sup>5</sup> In contrast, the Confederacy was equipped with a Mexican-American War vintage piece — the M1841 6-pound gun, which fired a 6.1-pound solid shot at 5 degrees elevation to 1,523 yards.<sup>6</sup> The M1841's main limiting factor was it did not produce the casualties that more modern pieces could achieve.<sup>7</sup>

For the cavalry arm, Lee also made changes. Upon taking command, the Army of Northern Virginia had 10 cavalry regiments that were organized into a single brigade. They would quickly be reorganized into a separate division under the able leadership of General J.E.B. Stuart. This organization would continue to grow over the course of the war into a full corps.<sup>8</sup> This full, independent cavalry division gave Lee the ability to cross the Potomac River unchallenged and begin his invasion of Maryland.

Lee's invasion of Maryland was in stark contrast to the defensive war strategy that had been carried out thus far by the Confederacy.<sup>9</sup> There are two main reasons for the invasion of

Maryland by the Confederacy. First, Lee's success at Second Manassas created a windfall morale and pride in the Confederate military. What better time to invade the enemy's home than when he had been decisively defeated abroad? Such an invasion of the Union would also relieve northern Virginia where much of the fighting had been conducted thus far. There was also the belief among Confederate leaders that the Union did not have the will to carry out a prolonged destructive war. If the Confederacy could invade the North and place the burden of the war on Federal territories, the Union's will to fight would fall and the Confederacy could win independence.

Second, there was a political reason to invade Maryland. There were strong feelings of state's rights among Maryland citizens. These political feelings were so strong that early in the war Federal troops quickly marched south and occupied Maryland to keep it from seceding from the Union. Lee had hoped that by invading Maryland, some local support could be generated and Maryland would enter the war on the Confederacy's side. Disappointing for Lee, he received only a lukewarm response from the citizens of Maryland.

There was also the consideration of European intervention. For the length of the war, the Confederacy had courted both England and France to recognize the legitimate right of Confederate independence. A Confederate victory on Union soil would strengthen the Confederate claim, and perhaps win Confederate independence by bringing Europe into conflict



with the United States.<sup>10</sup> With his goals set, Lee crossed the Potomac River on 4 September 1862.

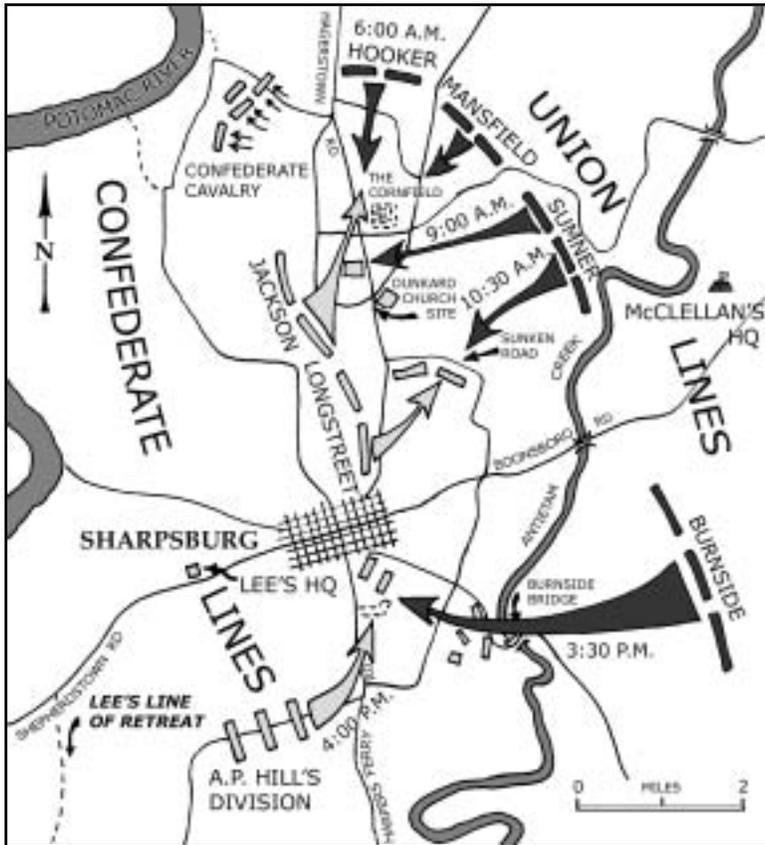
Once across the river, Lee rested at Frederick, Virginia, for 2 days. Lee did not believe that the Federal army would move on him for 3 to 4 weeks. With this estimate in mind, Special Order Number 191 was drafted. It would order Major General Thomas J. 'Stonewall' Jackson's corps to take his command back across the Potomac and march on the Federal armory at Harper's Ferry, destroying as much of the Baltimore and Ohio (B&O) Railroad as possible. Major General Lafayette McLaws, with two divisions of Longstreet's corps, would move to Maryland Heights overlooking Harper's Ferry. Brigadier General John C. Walker would take his division of Longstreet's corps and march south to destroy the Chesapeake and Ohio canal aqueduct, and cross back over the Potomac into Virginia and occupy the Loudoun Heights overlooking Harper's Ferry. The remainder of Longstreet's corps would proceed northwest to Harrisburg, followed by General D.H. Hill's division and Stuart's cavalry providing rear guard. Once Harper's Ferry had been reduced, Jackson, McLaws, and Walker would rejoin the main command at Boonsboro, Maryland. Movements were set to begin on 10 September.

Much to the credit of the Army of Northern Virginia's staff, Special Order No. 191 was clear and unmistakable. Unfortunately for the Confederacy, two copies were delivered to D.H. Hill's division. He received one order directly from Army headquarters and a second copy from Jackson, the

'corps commander.' This being the only disadvantage to the informal command structure that Lee's army possessed. One of these copies would be lost during the march. Two Union soldiers who would understand the importance of their find immediately would later pick up the lost copy. Eventually, Special Order No. 191 would be delivered to the hands of McClellan.<sup>11</sup>

Understanding the importance of the discovery, McClellan made plans to defeat the Army of Northern Virginia while it was divided. He would strike with his left and center wing at Boonsboro and defeat both Lee and Longstreet. McClellan's left wing would then march south and strike Buckeystown and cut off the Confederate line of retreat. However, McClellan would not strike fast enough. His order delayed movement until the morning of 13 September.

By this time, Lee had detected McClellan's movements and had given orders to his subordinates to delay the Union approach through key passes around South Mountain. D.H. Hill's division turned back to defend Turner's Gap. From the south, McLaws detached part of his force to defend Crampton's Gap. These two passes were key terrain that allowed the Union army to mass on the confederate position. Despite determined Union efforts to break through the passes, they would not control the passes until the morning of 14 September. This would prove operationally too late for the Union. Their chance to defeat the Army of Northern Virginia in detail vanished.<sup>12</sup>



Map 1. Antietam Battlefield, 17 September 1862

Lee knew that McClellan was pushing troops through South Mountain as fast as he could. Fortunately for Lee, the pace was very slow. Lee made the decision to end the campaign early, cross back over the Potomac, and head to Harper's Ferry to linkup with the rest of his army. By the afternoon of 15 September, Lee stood on the banks of the Potomac near the town of Shepherdstown. The first news of Jackson's corps would reach him there. A messenger would bring word that Jackson had reduced the garrison at Harper's Ferry, had finished loading supplies, and was marching toward Sharpsburg to rejoin Lee.<sup>13</sup> At this point, Lee made the fateful decision to engage McClellan at Sharpsburg with his back toward the Potomac River. During the day on 16 September, both armies built up their combat power — McClellan's 97,000 soldiers would match Lee's 50,000 soldiers. By the morning of 17 September, the battle at Sharpsburg would begin.

McClellan's plan for the morning was a three-phased attack. The first phase was an attack with three corps in echelon: Major General Joseph Hooker, Major General Joseph Mansfield, and Major General Edwin Sumner in the north to fix Jackson's position on the Confederate left and draw out the reserve. In the far south, Major General Ambrose E. Burnside would launch phase two with an attack after Sumner's corps was engaged. His corps was tasked with destroying Confederate General D.R. Jones's brigade at Sharpsburg, and cutting off any line of retreat open to the Confederates. The final stage was an assault on Longstreet in the center of the Confederate line once both ends were fixed. This final assault would envelop the Confederate line already overwhelmed by the first two assaults.<sup>14</sup> What would happen on the outskirts of Sharpsburg, near Antietam Creek, was far different than what McClellan had envisioned the day before.

At 0543 hours on the morning on 17 September, Hooker's corps attacked the Confederate's extreme left. Hooker attacked with two divisions abreast, with his reserve division following in support in the center. The attack was conducted over open ground, with a single cornfield providing the only concealment on this portion of the battlefield. The Federals made contact with the Confederates at about 0615 hours. Jackson's corps had taken up position in the cornfield. The Federal assault drove both Confederate divisions back, and left the Union in control of the cornfield for about 45 minutes. Lee realized the danger on his left flank, so he ordered reserve formations to march to Jackson's aid. By 0700 hours, Jackson had his reinforcements and committed his reserve division of Brigadier General J.B Hood's Texans to retake the cornfield. After a bitter set of engagements, including a fierce fight with Brigadier General John Gibbon's Iron Brigade, the cornfield was retaken for a time. Hood managed to stabilize the Confederate line. At the same time that Hood made his attack, the second Union corps was committed. After being briefed by Hooker of determined Confederate resistance and a savage counterattack, Mansfield's attack was slow and cautious. In moving into position just east of Hooker, Mansfield was shot by one of his own men and died of the wound. Brigadier General A.S. Williams replaced Mansfield and was ordered by Hooker to continue the attack toward Dunkard Church. The assault was conducted in the open and with inadequate support. Williams was able to reach Dunkard Church by 0800 hours, but was unable to push any further into Confederate lines. He was forced to halt and reorganize. Effectively, the engagement north of Sharpsburg was over.<sup>15</sup> The next set of engagements would happen in the Confederate center.

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In this fall, 1862 photo, President Lincoln meets with General George B. McClellan at Antietam.

**At right, the pontoon bridge across the Potomac and ruins of the stone bridge at Berlin, Maryland (present day Brunswick).**

All photos: Library of Congress, Prints & Photographs Division, Selected Civil War Photographs, 1861-1865

the same time, two divisions were sent by Lee to reinforce the left wing. One division was Walker's division, pulled from the extreme right. The other division was McLaws division, Lee's only remaining reserve formation. They advanced on Sumner's attack with McLaws supported by Walker. The Confederate counterattack struck Sumner in the right flank and drove him back in disorder. The Federal VII Corps would arrive at 1000 hours to reinforce Sumner's right flank. They would find little resistance and request two times — once to Hooker and then to McClellan — to assault the Confederate lines. Both times they would be denied because they were the Union reserve to be held to prevent a Confederate counterattack. Had the attack been authorized, VII Corps would likely have met little organized resistance and penetrated all the way to the Confederate's rear.

The remainder of Sumner's corps was involved in fighting for Bloody Lane against Longstreet's corps. Bloody Lane was the name given to a sunken road that ran almost the length of the Confederate center. From this position, D.H Hill and Major General Richard Anderson's troops enjoyed the cover of this natural trench line. These divisions were placed in the Bloody Lane because they had been heavily attrited during the engagements at South Mountain.

The Union initially attacked with two divisions abreast. Their assault stalled just short of Bloody Lane. Union artillery was unable to suppress confederate positions in the sunken road. Conversely, Union formations suffered greatly under the assault of both Longstreet's corps artillery, and fire from Confederate positions in the sunken road. The Confederates unsuccessfully launched a counterattack to drive the Union back from the sunken road. Ultimately, the Union gained a foothold in the southern portion of the sunken road. From this position, federal forces enveloped the Confederate line, forcing the rebels to withdraw. The Confederates launched a single counterattack aimed at retaking the sunken road, but failed to dislodge the Union.<sup>16</sup> By 1300 hours, fighting in the Confederate center had stopped. At the same time, the final assault of the day was beginning in the south, Major General Burnside was crossing Antietam River.

Burnside had received orders to cross the river at 0800 hours. He did not begin his movement until 1000 hours, and did not get his first regiment across until 1300 hours. Burnside was ordered to carry the bridge, which he took literally. Burnside claimed his tardy assault was the fault of his orders that specified he was not to attack until given further orders. He did not bother to see that the river was fordable in many places. He was opposed on the far side by a single brigade, who overwatched the bridge and made the crossing a costly



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affair in casualties. Once across the bridge, Burnside would stop to reorganize his corps. This would cost the Union another 2 hours.

Burnside would start his assault on Sharpsburg at 1500 hours, in just enough time for Major General A.P Hill's division to arrive from Harper's Ferry. In another fortuitous event, Hill would counterattack Burnside's corps on the left flank, stopping the Union assault. The engagement at Sharpsburg was over.<sup>17</sup>

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For the Union, it provided the necessary victory that President Abraham Lincoln needed to give his Emancipation Proclamation. The Proclamation was a defunct order by a politically brilliant president that freed all slaves in Confederate territory, where the Union had no control, and left slaves in the Border States in bondage. The true purpose of the Proclamation was to change the focus of the war from Union preservation to one of antislavery. Its effect was to keep the British from entering the war on the side of the Confederacy by politically eviscerating the Confederacy in

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world opinion. After the Emancipation Proclamation was issued, any nation providing support to the Confederacy was endorsing slavery. The British, deeply involved with anti-slavery operations off the coast of Africa, were unwilling to tie their public image to the Confederacy and withdrew any overt support. Sharpsburg represented a missed opportunity to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia and end the war early. Had McClellan's plan been executed as he envisioned, the War of Secession may have ended much sooner.

It is hard to say what caused McClellan to miss the opportunity to end the war early. Almost all the factors were stacked in his favor. Organization and leadership aside, McClellan had the largest most modern army, was fighting on his own soil, and held the largest trump card — the perfect read on the enemy with Special Order No. 191.

Perhaps the largest problem plaguing the Union during the Maryland Campaign was the lack of initiative. McClellan's education as an engineer showed through his military experience. By delaying the attack until all his assets were properly in place, McClellan unconditionally surrendered the initiative to the enemy despite being privy to his operational plan. Once McClellan had Special Order No. 191, he should have moved quickly with his forces to seize South Mountain ahead of the Confederacy. Once the passes were secure, McClellan could have passed the remainder of his forces through to seize Boonsboro and destroy the Army of Northern Virginia. However, McClellan resisted moving decisively throughout the campaign. Even with most of his army opposite the Confederate position outside Sharpsburg, McClellan refused to move until his vanguard units repositioned from their engagements at South Mountain. This delay allowed Lee to dramatically increase his fighting potential by giving Jackson time to march into position from Harper's Ferry.

The greatest failure of the Maryland Campaign from the Union side is its failure to conduct a coordinated attack on the Confederate position. As already mentioned, the lack of experience at corps-level leadership may have caused difficulty in coordinating the attacks on the Confederate position. More than half of the corps-level officers in the Union army had no experience in commanding large formations, which may have proved somewhat at fault for the disjointed operation carried out that September day. That, however, does not explain the hesitation that kept Burnside from crossing the Antietam and engaging, for some 5 hours, after Hooker launched his attack. Burnside was an experienced commander. It may be argued if he was a competent commander, but he was not new to command. Burnside himself said that he did not cross because he had conflicting orders that told him to remain unengaged until specifically ordered otherwise. Burnside's hesitation was likely caused by a failure to understand the commander's intent.

Even McClellan seemed to have difficulty with what he wanted his subordinates to do. He ordered the northern wing of the Army of the Potomac to engage Jackson's corps, followed by Burnside's attack in the south to block any line of retreat. Yet at the start of the attack in the north, Burnside claims he received orders to wait. By the time it was discovered that Burnside did not attack and a messenger was dispatched, it was too late. It was 5 hours later and Lee had time to reposition his forces.

There was also the interesting case of VII U.S. Corps. Upon arriving on the field, they discovered very little Confederate

resistance in their zone and requested, from both Sumner and McClellan, to attack the weak Confederate position. Both times VII Corps was denied authorization despite the fact that McClellan originally wanted to push Burnside through what he thought would be weak resistance around Sharpsburg. It would seem that McClellan lost his chance to defeat Lee when the opportunity was presented in the north.

Had McClellan given clear guidance from the start of the battle on what he wanted his subordinates to accomplish, Burnside should have understood the plan. He would have waited until the Confederacy was heavily engaged in the north before beginning his attack. Burnside also would have known the trigger for the attack and would likely have not lost the initiative. Clear commander's guidance would have sent VII Corps forward into the Confederate line where it was weak, just as McClellan had intended Burnside to do from the south. In such a case, Burnside would have probably met VII Corps in Sharpsburg around noon. With the defeat of the Army of Northern Virginia, the Confederacy would have been forced to sue for peace much sooner.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Compact History of the Civil War*, Warner Books, New York, 1993, p. 159.

<sup>2</sup> Jay Luvaas and Harold W. Nelson, *Guide to the Battle of Antietam*, University Press of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas, 1996, pp. XII-XIV.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Curt Johnson and Richard C. Anderson Jr., *Artillery Hell: Employment of Artillery at Antietam*, Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas, 1995, p. 39.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 6.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>8</sup>Luvaas and Nelson, p. XVI.

<sup>9</sup>Dupuy and Dupuy, p. 9.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 160.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., p. 167.

<sup>15</sup>Norman Stevens, *Antietam: 1862*, Osprey Books, London, 1994, pp. 45-53.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., pp. 61-72.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid., pp. 72-84.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 85.

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