

George McClellan Wins Antietam But Loses His Command

Prelude

(All Dates are in 1862)

June 1 – Robert E. Lee assumes command of the soon to be newly named Army of Northern Virginia, replacing the wounded Joseph E. Johnston.

July 1 – Last of the Seven Days Battles of the Peninsular Campaign.

August 30 – Lee defeats John Pope at Second Manassas.

September 4 – McClellan assumes command of new Union army consisting of units from three different commands, including McClellan's Army of the Potomac; Mac relieves Pope's former commanders with Joe Hooker for McDowell, Ambrose Burnside for Sigel, and Joseph Mansfield replacing Banks. Four other corps commanders, Bull Sumner, 2nd Corps, Samuel Heintzelman, 3rd Corps, Fitz-John Porter, 5th Corps, and William Franklin. 6th Corps are retained.

The initial news of Rebel movements in Maryland reaches Washington DC.

September 5 -- Lincoln directs McClellan to pursue, overtake, and crush Lee's army.

September 7 – Lee occupies Frederick, Maryland, with 40,000 troops while McClellan establishes his headquarters at Rockville.

September 9 – Lee issues Special Order 191 dividing his army into five segments. Three of the segments, under Stonewall Jackson, were directed to surround Harper's Ferry, the site of the huge Federal armory and munitions factory; a fourth segment, under Longstreet's command was sent to Hagerstown while the fifth segment, under D.H. Hill, was sent guard the passes on South Mountain, which stands between Lee's army and McClellan.

September 10 – Lee's army resumes its march in several columns.

September 11 – D. H. Hill guards the three passes at South Mountain while Longstreet marches north toward Hagerstown, Maryland. (At this point it

might be fun, and certainly instructive, to refer to the Animated Map of the Battle of Antietam at the Civil War Trust link.)

September 12 – McClellan’s vanguard reaches Frederick.

September 13 – Union soldiers find a copy of Special Order 191 (wrapped around three cigars). At this point Union army is closer to various pieces of Rebel’s dispersed pieces than Rebels were to each other, giving McClellan once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to destroy Lee’s army in detail. Mac designates Burnside to command a wing consisting of Hooker’s 1st Corps and Burnside’s 9th Corps with Jesse Reno replacing Burnside as corps commander. After a 12-16 hour delay, McClellan sends forces toward Boonsboro in pursuit of Lee and Longstreet.

September 13 – McLaws seizes Maryland Hts and Loudoun Hts overlooking Harpers Ferry along the Potomac River.

September 14 – South Mountain -- Starting at 1630, Franklin’s corps forces its way through Crampton’s Gap – defended by a brigade -- while other Union units batter defenses at Turner’s and Fox’s Gaps. Jesse Reno is mortally wounded at Turner’s Gap and is replaced by Jacob Cox. Franklin fails to continue from Crampton’s Gap toward Harper’s Ferry.

By dark Union attacks gain possession of the entire crest of the South Mountain to be able to outflank the defenders on either side. By midnight Lee orders his Confederate defenders off the mountain, and after abandoning their dead and wounded the Confederates begin their retreat down the National Road toward Boonsboro. Each side suffers approximately 1,800 dead and wounded in the struggle for South Mountain.

September 15 – Union garrison at Harper’s Ferry surrenders. The surrender of 12,737 Federal soldiers to Stonewall Jackson would be the largest surrender of U.S. troops until the fall of the Philippines during World War II. Lee orders Jackson to join rest of Army of Northern Virginia (“ANV”) at Sharpsburg, Maryland, leaving A. P. Hill at Harpers Ferry.

McClellan’s advance divisions continue to arrive east of Antietam Creek

September 16 – Lee deploys Jeb Stuart with artillery on Nicodemus Hts to the left of Lee’s lines with Jackson on Stuart’s right and Longstreet defending the right of the line. Lee has established an interior line west of Antietam Creek.

East of Antietam Creek McClellan “surveys” battlefield but does not use cavalry to scout. The respective armies exchange artillery fire across the valley of Antietam Creek. McClellan issues verbal orders for a double envelopment the next day. During the afternoon, Joe Hooker’s three divisions cross Antietam Creek upstream from ANV center. At 1600 Hooker’s hand is tipped when the 13th Pa Reserves comes down Smoketown Road and skirmishes with John Bell Hood’s men. Lee starts moving units to his left flank.

September 17, 1862
Morning Phase
Dunker Church/ Miller’s Cornfield

0600 – Hooker’s 1st Corps, led by Seymour’s Brigade, begins the attack by coming down astride Hagerstown Rd toward Dunker church but Hooker’s right bogs down under artillery fire from Nicodemus Hill. Hooker fails to coordinate with Joseph Mansfield’s Corps whose men are still eating breakfast; Hooker also fails to send infantry to neutralize Stuart’s artillery on Nicodemus Hill.

0700 – Hood counterattacks and stops Hooker’s advance at Miller’s Cornfield with heavy casualties; 1st Texas suffers 80% casualties. Hooker is seriously wounded leaving a confusion of command.

0730-0830 – Stuart moves his artillery from Nicodemus Hill south to Hauser Ridge.

0730-0900 – Mansfield’s small 12th Corps comes down astride Smoketown Rd to attack toward the Dunker Church but fresh ANV reinforcements drive them back. Just as his men are entering the battle, Mansfield – the only other man who knew what Hooker’s plan was -- is mortally wounded while riding with the 10th Maine. Williams assumes command and loses control of units especially when Hartsuff is wounded and Christian falls apart and leaves the field. After a series of counterattacks by both sides, The Cornfield becomes a no man’s land.

0900 -- Sumner’s 2nd Corps crosses Antietam Creek planning to advance between Hooker’s 1st Corps and Mansfield’s 12th corps where they wanted to crush the CSA left flank before wheeling south toward Sharpsburg. Sumner stays with Sedgwick’s division of 5,000 men, the 2nd Corps’ lead division

1000 – Sedgwick’s division of Sumner’s 2nd Corps attacks into the West Woods but is inadvertently flanked by McLaws and Walker – both recently redeployed by Lee -- and routed with heavy losses of men and officers, including Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. (Wert calls Sumner’s decision to deploy Sedgwick toward the Dunker Church “arguably the worst tactical decision by a Union general in the field.”) Sedgwick is among those severely wounded.

Midmorning Phase Sunken Road

0915 – With Sumner being with Sedgwick, Sumner’s following divisions, led by French and Richardson respectively, do not know where to go upon crossing Antietam Creek, thus inadvertently veering south toward Sunken Road defended by brigades in D. H. Hill’s division.

1030 -- French’s division begins its attack upon the Sunken Road.

1100 – Richardson’s division advances along French’s, which is stymied. The Irish Brigade, led by Meagher, who is “thrown from his horse”, is Richardson’s lead unit. Caldwell’s Brigade, the next unit, eventually at 1230 gains the high ground that enfilades an angle in Sunken Road that becomes a death trap to be known as Bloody Lane.

1300 – Mistaking an order to redeploy for that of retreat, Rebels flee a section of Bloody Lane, allowing Richardson’s division, led by Barlow’s brigade followed by Cross, to pour through until reaching Longstreet’s Hqs at the Piper House. Longstreet’s staff mans artillery pieces and in the ensuing artillery battle, Richardson is mortally wounded while organizing a pursuit after which a stalemate develops.

~1445 – McClellan, who has temporarily crossed the Antietam, and being fearful of consequences of a repulse (still apparently believing that ANV outnumbered McClellan’s troops), decides not to renew the attack, even with fresh troops, which if successful would have rendered the coup de grace to battered ANV. McPherson describes this particular battle as “An unplanned battle with tremendous accomplishments but without any particular results.”

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Afternoon Phase Burnside's Bridge

Night of September 16-17 – Heavy rains cause the creek to rise to chest high.

0630 – A. P. Hill leaves Harper's Ferry.

0930 – Burnside's first attack against the Lower Bridge is defended by Toombs's Georgians of perhaps 400-500 men, perhaps Toombs' finest hour (Toombs – who likes to drink -- had been initial CSA Secretary of State with presidential aspirations.) Toombs' sharpshooters fire from an abandoned quarry immediately above the bridge.

1000 – Burnside's 11th Corps of approximately 10,000 men, led by Cox of Kanawha division, who commands the corps while Burnside is "wing" commander, makes second attempt to cross the bridge.

~1230 – Upon third attempt, Federal troops start across the bridge, soon to be known as Burnside's Bridge

1300 – Rodman's division of the 11th Corps wades through Snavelly's Ford and flanks Toombs' Georgians above the bridge.

1500 – After a two hour delay, Burnside launches a general assault with 8,000 men, pushing Longstreet back to the outskirts of Sharpsburg. Only 2,000 men make it to the road at Sharpsburg.

1600 – Remainder of A. P. Hill's division arrives after 17 mile march from Harper's Ferry just in time to cripple Burnside's advance with a counterattack against the Union left flank. Rodman is mortally wounded during Rebel's counterattack, and Cox orders a withdrawal back to Antietam Creek. Throughout the day, Burnside never commits more than one of his four divisions to combat at any given time.

Notes

Most of McClellan's orders were issued verbally and singularly. As a result it is very difficult for his corps commanders to coordinate with each other

With one exception during the battle, McClellan remains at his headquarters at Pry House, east of Antietam Creek while Lee is hands-on close to the battle.

During the entire battle McClellan never deploys more than 20,000 troops at any one time, and usually only 10,000 at any one time, and out of 80,000 available troops only 60,000 are ever deployed altogether. Lee has 37,500 available troops, all of whom were deployed.

The Union cavalry is a nonentity both during the battle and during the days preceding the battle. McClellan keeps all his cavalry with him near headquarters, perhaps intending to order a cavalry charge up the middle of the battlefield after his flanking forces had scattered the Rebels

Afterward

Night of 17th & 18th – McClellan receives substantial reinforcements that compensate for losses of previous day. However, McClellan's concerns about shortage of long range artillery ammunition may be legitimate.

September 18 – McClellan spends the dark, leaden day reconnoitering, redeploying his units, consisting of 60,000 troops, and mulling over the situation. McClellan suffers a bout of recurring dysentery before he finally orders an attack for the next morning. Lee, with 25,000 – 30,000 remaining effectives, compacts his lines around Sharpsburg.

Night of 18th & 19 – ANV re-crosses the Potomac, ending Lee's Maryland campaign.

September 20 – McClellan sends Porter with two divisions that engage in Battle of Shephardstown, a one-hour engagement that mauls 118th Pennsylvania.

September 21 -- And again on the 23rd, Federal cavalry regiments launch small-scale reconnaissances on the south side of the Potomac in and around the Shepherdstown area.

September 22 – Lincoln issues his Emancipation Proclamation to take effect the following January 1, further diminishing the Young Napoleon's political influence and military powers.

October 1—Fitz-John Porter, almost certainly with McClellan's prior consent, if not substantial input, writes a letter to the editor of the *New York World* to outline why McClellan did not renew the battle at Antietam. Among other things Porter cites the army's limited remaining supplies of ammunition, its loss of officers, a large number of new troops, and Sumner's resistance to renewing the battle after Sedgwick's defeat.

October 2 -- Abraham Lincoln visits Antietam to tour the battlefield, to confer with McClellan, and to inspect the troops. During his three-day visit the Federal Commander-in-Chief attempts to encourage a quick resumption of an offensive against the Army of Northern Virginia, but to no avail.

October 9 -- While McClellan is making intensive preparations for his proposed move up the Shenandoah Valley toward Winchester -- Jeb Stuart begins another “ride around McClellan” that reaches its apex at Chambersburg, Pennsylvania, where it arrives after dark on the 10th; Stuart’s raid of three or four days covers 180 miles and captures over 1,200 horses, destroying extensive machine shops, railroad depots, burning several trains of railroad cars, as well as 5,000 muskets, pistols, and sabers.

October 13 -- Lincoln sends McClellan a lengthy and carefully honed letter, in the voice of a displeased parent, outlining the campaign Lincoln expected from the Young Napoleon. Lincoln’s letter is a mix of encouragement and proffers support, military maxims, Euclidean geometry, as well as a challenge of McClellan’s manhood.

October 22 -- McClellan reluctantly agrees to moving “upon the line indicated by the Presdt in his letter of the 13th” In short McClellan would move his army in the valley between the east slope of the Blue Ridge and the Bull Run-Catoctin Mountains.

October 26 -- McClellan begins another attempt to confront Lee in Virginia, taking six days to complete the crossing of the Potomac at Berlin, (present Brunswick) Maryland. Afterwards McClellan’s army takes another seven days to march fifty miles to the vicinity of Warrenton, Virginia, which Reynolds seizes November 6.

October 28 -- Through out much of October Lee continues to reposition his army, ordering Longstreet to Culpeper to block McClellan while leaving Jackson at Winchester to guard against and to decoy McClellan’s rear units. Lee -- aside from Longstreet -- is moving southward west of the Blue Ridge Mountains.

November 3 -- Longstreet begins to occupy Culpeper, establishing positions on the Orange & Alexandria R.R. that had been intended to be McClellan’s main supply route.

November – The day after the elections, Lincoln relieves McClellan of his command.

Final Analysis

Casualties were the most severe of any American one-day battle in any war. Nearly 4,000 were killed outright with around 19,000 being wounded (thousands of these wounded would eventually die from these wounds). The logistics of caring for these wounded encompassed an area with a 40 mile radius.

Within a 12 hour period, Lee lost 10,000, or approximately one third, of his 35,000 men on September 17. Over the two week period of the Maryland campaign, Lee started with 55,000 men and retreated with perhaps only 20,000 men capable of fighting.

Union forces were also severely affected. More than 12,000 troops, or about 25% of those who saw action, became casualties. However, McClellan withheld about one-fourth of his available troops from action.

Tradition holds that visitors to the battlefield do not see the elaborate statues and other memorials to the generals because of their many costly blunders.

Field artillery played a major tactical role. Indeed, because of the destruction wrought by the armies' long arms, Antietam has sometimes been nicknamed "Artillery Hell."

Tactically Antietam was at most a narrow victory for the Union but strategically Lee's Maryland campaign was a calamity for the Confederacy that would forever cripple its war aims.