

Introduction

The Battle of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania (July 1–July 3, 1863), was the largest battle of the American Civil War as well as the largest battle ever fought in North America, involving around 85,000 men in the Union’s Army of the Potomac under Major General George Gordon Meade and approximately 75,000 in the Confederacy’s Army of Northern Virginia, commanded by General Robert Edward Lee. Casualties at Gettysburg totaled 23,049 for the Union (3,155 dead, 14,529 wounded, 5,365 missing). Confederate casualties were 28,063 (3,903 dead, 18,735 injured, and 5,425 missing), more than a third of Lee’s army.

These largely irreplaceable losses to the South’s largest army, combined with the Confederate surrender of Vicksburg, Mississippi, on July 4, marked what is widely regarded as a turning point—perhaps the turning point—in the Civil War, although the conflict would continue for nearly two more years and witness several more major battles, including Chickamauga, Spotsylvania Courthouse, Monocacy, Nashville, etc.

The Gettysburg Campaign

In the wake of Confederate victory at Chancellorsville, Virginia (May 1–4, 1863), Lee decided to attempt a second invasion of the North. This would take pressure off Virginia’s farms during the growing season, especially in the “breadbasket of the

Confederacy,” the Shenandoah Valley. Additionally, any victories won on Northern soil would put political pressure on Abraham Lincoln’s administration to negotiate a settlement to the war, or might lead to the South’s long hoped-for military alliance with England and France.

The campaign began under a dark shadow: Lee’s creative and aggressive corps commander, Lieutenant General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson, had been mortally wounded by his own men at Chancellorsville. The Army of Northern Virginia reorganized from two corps to three, with Lt. Gen. Richard Ewell replacing Jackson in the Second Corps and Lt. Gen. Ambrose Powell (A. P.) Hill commanding the newly formed Third Corps. Lieutenant General James Longstreet—Lee’s “Old War Horse”—retained command of the First Corps. The Army of Northern Virginia was about to invade enemy territory with two of its three corps commanders newly appointed to their positions, and the secretive, self-reliant Jackson had done little to prepare them for this level of command.

This would be Lee’s second incursion into the North. The previous one ended in the bloodiest single day in America’s history, the Battle of Antietam (called the Battle of Sharpsburg in the South) in Maryland on September 17, 1862. Total casualties from that one-day battle exceeded 23,000.

In order to mask the army’s movement up the Shenandoah Valley into western Maryland and central Pennsylvania, Lee depended upon his renowned cavalry leader J.E.B. “Jeb” Stuart. Upon crossing into Maryland, Stuart loosely interpreted Lee’s ambiguous orders and began raiding Union supply trains. Cut off by the advancing Army of the Potomac, from June 25 until the night of July 2, Stuart lost all communication with the rest of the Confederate army, leaving Lee to operate blindly deep in enemy territory.

Meanwhile, on the Union side, the Army of the Potomac was still under the command of General Joe Hooker, who had lost the Chancellorsville battle, diminishing his reputation as “Fighting Joe.” As reports arrived that the Confederates had crossed the Potomac and were on Northern soil, Hooker dispersed his army widely, trying to simultaneously protect the approaches to Washington, Philadelphia and Baltimore. He’d lost Lincoln’s confidence, and the president made the difficult choice to replace an army commander in the face of an enemy invasion. On June 28, a military engineer, Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade—who had only been promoted to corps command less than six months earlier—was placed in charge of the Union’s largest army. He immediately ordered his scattered corps to concentrate in a manner that would allow each to be quickly reinforced by another. He hoped

to draw Lee into attacking him on high ground along Pipe Steam Creek.

As Meade's corps moved closer to each other, Lee's army was scattered, moving along multiple roads. He issued orders to his subordinates to not bring on a general engagement until the army could concentrate its forces. Fate had other plans.

Gettysburg: Day 1

On the morning of July 1, Major General Henry Heth, of A.P. Hill's Third Corps, sent his 7,500-man division down the Chambersburg Pike toward Gettysburg. Encountering resistance, they initially assumed it was more of the hastily assembled Pennsylvania Emergency Militia that they'd been skirmishing with during the campaign.

In reality, Colonel John Buford had deployed part of two brigades of Union cavalry as skirmishers in the brush along Willoughby's Run three miles west of town. Just two weeks previously, they'd been issued breech-loading carbines, and they used the guns' fast-

loading capability to create the impression of a much larger force, slowing the advance of Hill's brigades for a time before falling back.

The Confederates followed them across the stream, only to meet a line of Union infantry on McPherson's Ridge. The Army of the Potomac was arriving piecemeal, and among the first to arrive was a brigade of Western regiments that had earned the nickname "Iron Brigade of the West." Confederates recognized these "fellows in the black hats" and realized they were in for a rougher day than expected.

Union major general John Reynolds, commander of the left wing of the Army of the Potomac (I, III and XI corps), arrived and took charge of the defense. His men fought tenaciously, and Reynolds was shot dead during the fighting.

From his headquarters at Taneytown, Meade dispatched Major General Winfield Scott Hancock to take command at Gettysburg—although Major General O. O. Howard was

already on the field—and assess whether or not the battle should be fought there. Hancock, seeing the strong defensive position offered by the hills near Gettysburg, chose to stand, and Meade ordered the other corps to the little crossroads town.

By afternoon, Confederate reinforcements had also arrived, and the general engagement Lee hadn't wanted at this stage of the campaign was a fait accompli.

The Union's XI Corps was driven back through the town of Gettysburg, losing 4,000 men, and by evening was entrenching on Culp's and Cemetery hills south of town.

Lee expressed a desire for General Ewell to assault the hills without waiting for further reinforcement, but he failed to make it an express order. Ewell did not press his tired men forward, giving Meade time to reinforce the troops on the hills.