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## MASTER OF MILITARY STUDIES

INSIDE THE LINES: MEADE'S VICTORY AT GETTYSBURG

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Title:** INSIDE THE LINES: MEADE'S VICTORY AT GETTYSBURG

**Author:** Major Phillip W. Chandler, USMC

**Thesis:** That the ability to operate on interior lines was the decisive factor in the Union victory at the Battle of Gettysburg.

**Discussion:** The concepts of interior and exterior lines gained prominence during the Napoleonic Era with the writings of Jomini. Interior Lines of Operation deal with forces whose operations diverge from a central point. The use of interior lines allows a commander to rapidly shift forces to the decisive point.

The Battle of Gettysburg was a great historical example illustrating the impact of interior and exterior lines. At the Battle of Gettysburg, the Confederates uncharacteristically fought along exterior lines. Their lines of communication stretched from Pennsylvania through the Shenandoah Valley south to Richmond. This was an extremely precarious situation for General Lee and weighed heavily on his decisions at Gettysburg.

The Army of the Potomac, under command of newly appointed General Meade, found themselves operating from interior lines at Gettysburg. On July 2 and 3, this became a major factor in General Meade's ability to react to the offensive actions taken by the Army of Northern Virginia.

I propose that Lines of Operations, as espoused by Jomini years earlier, was the decisive factor in the Gettysburg Campaign. I believe that the use of interior lines by General Meade, specifically throughout the day and night of Day 2 and again on day 3, allowed the Army of the Potomac to gain victory. The Army of Northern Virginia on several occasions achieved momentary breaks in the union lines only to be repulsed by Union forces shifted from other positions. General Meade would not have been able to rapidly shift these forces to the decisive point unless he was operating on interior lines.

**Conclusion:** Throughout the three days of battle, General Meade applied Operational Art in positioning his forces at the decisive time and place. One must keep in mind the significance of General Meade's actions at Gettysburg. He defeated the venerable General Robert E. Lee on the battlefield, a feat elusive to all previous commanders of the Army of the Potomac. This feat was made possible by the ability to decisively shape the battlefield using interior lines.



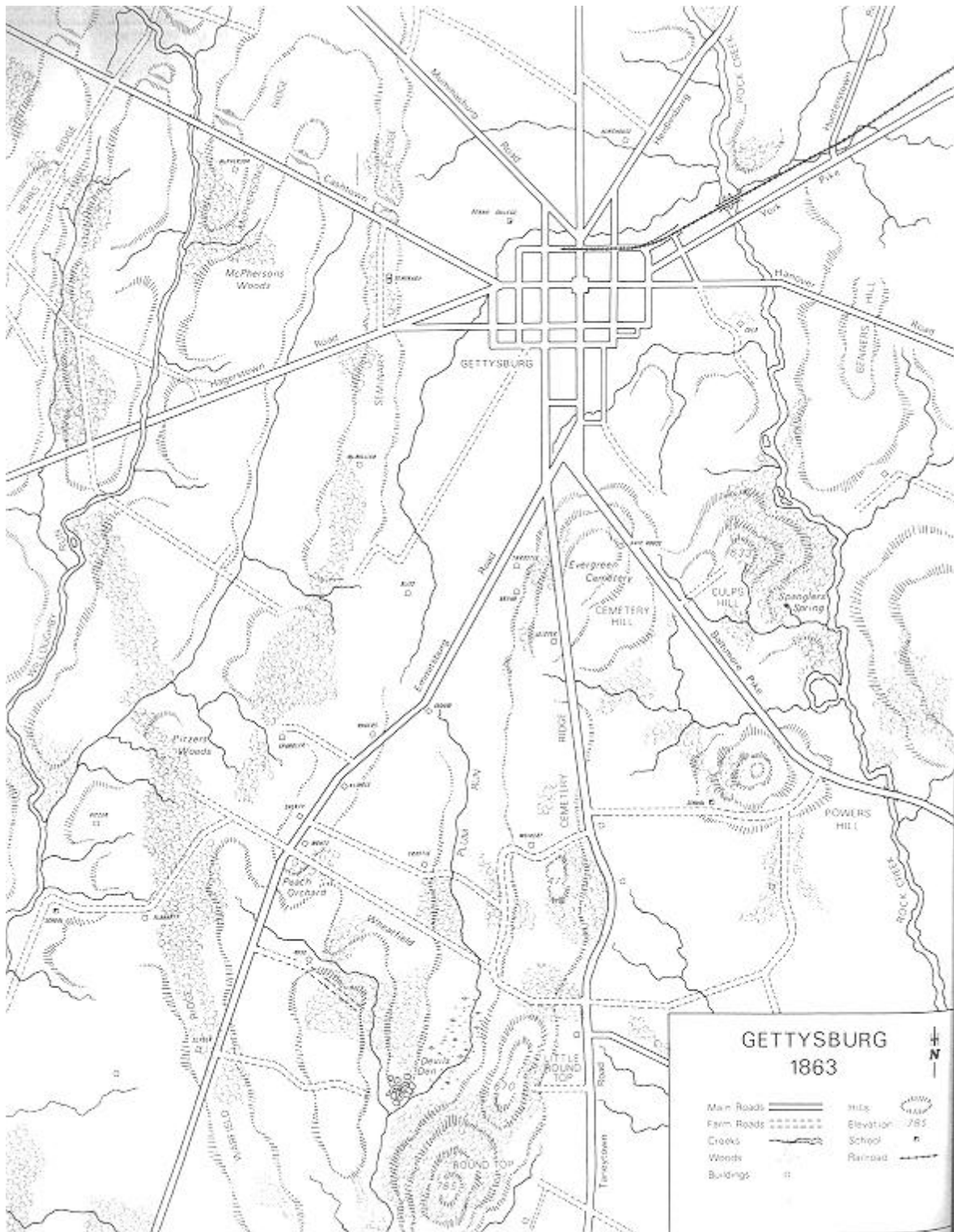
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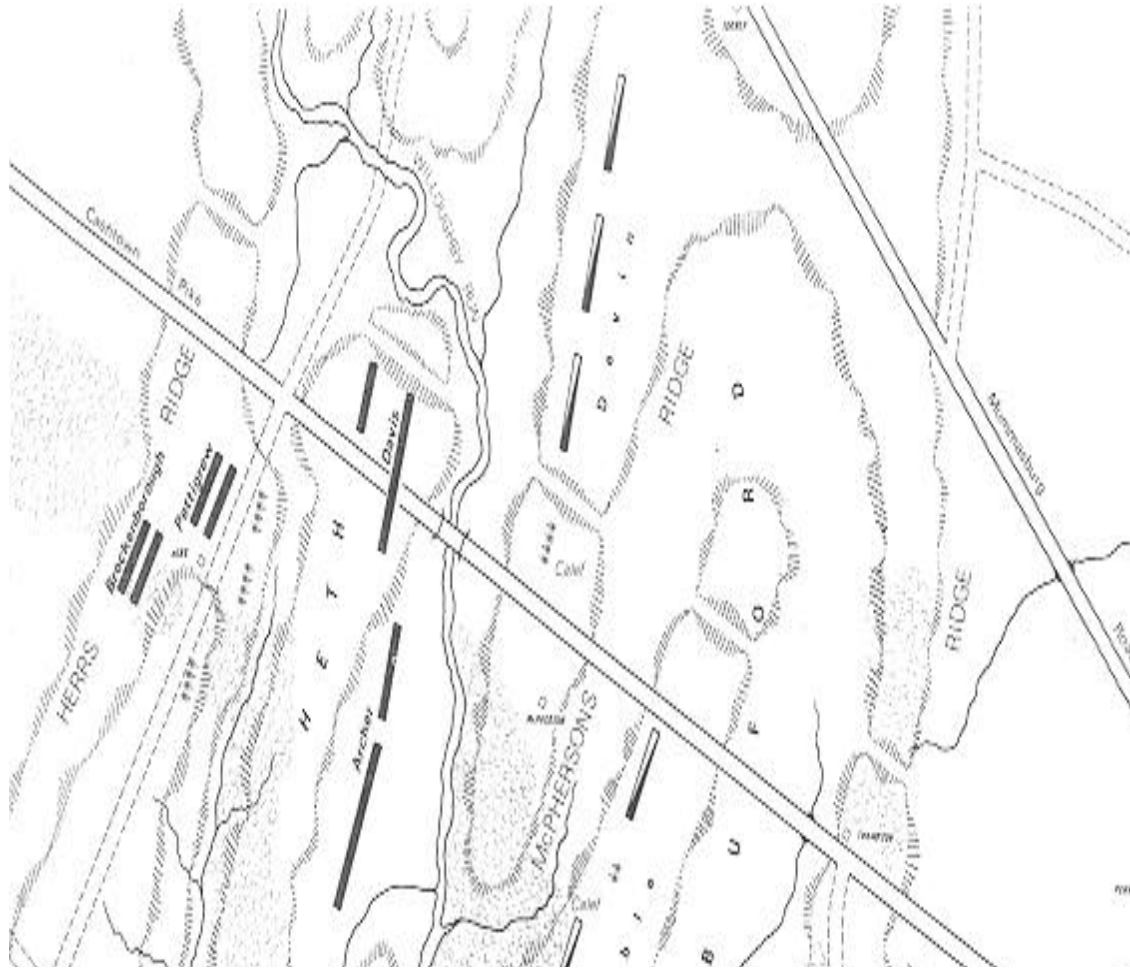
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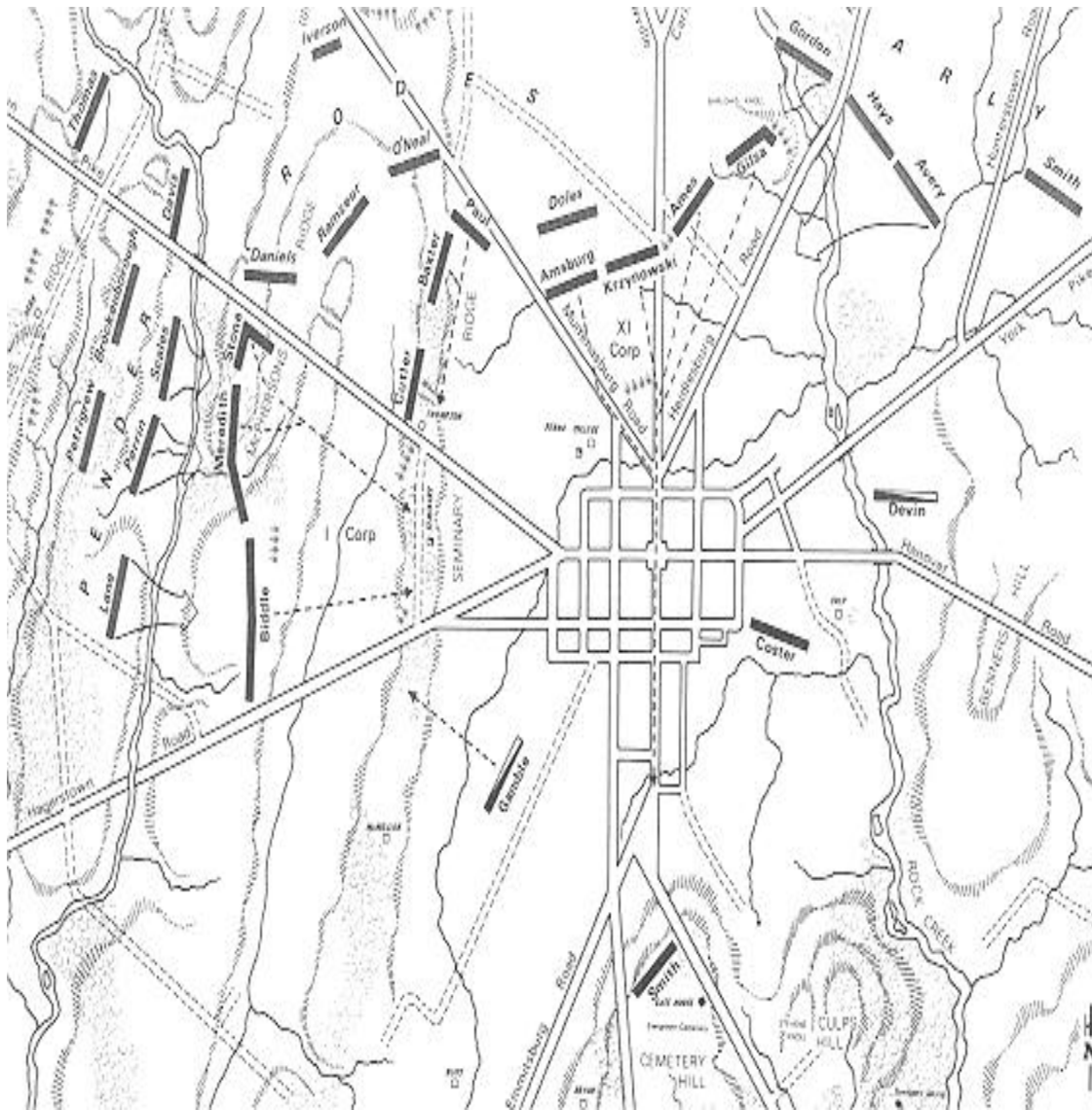




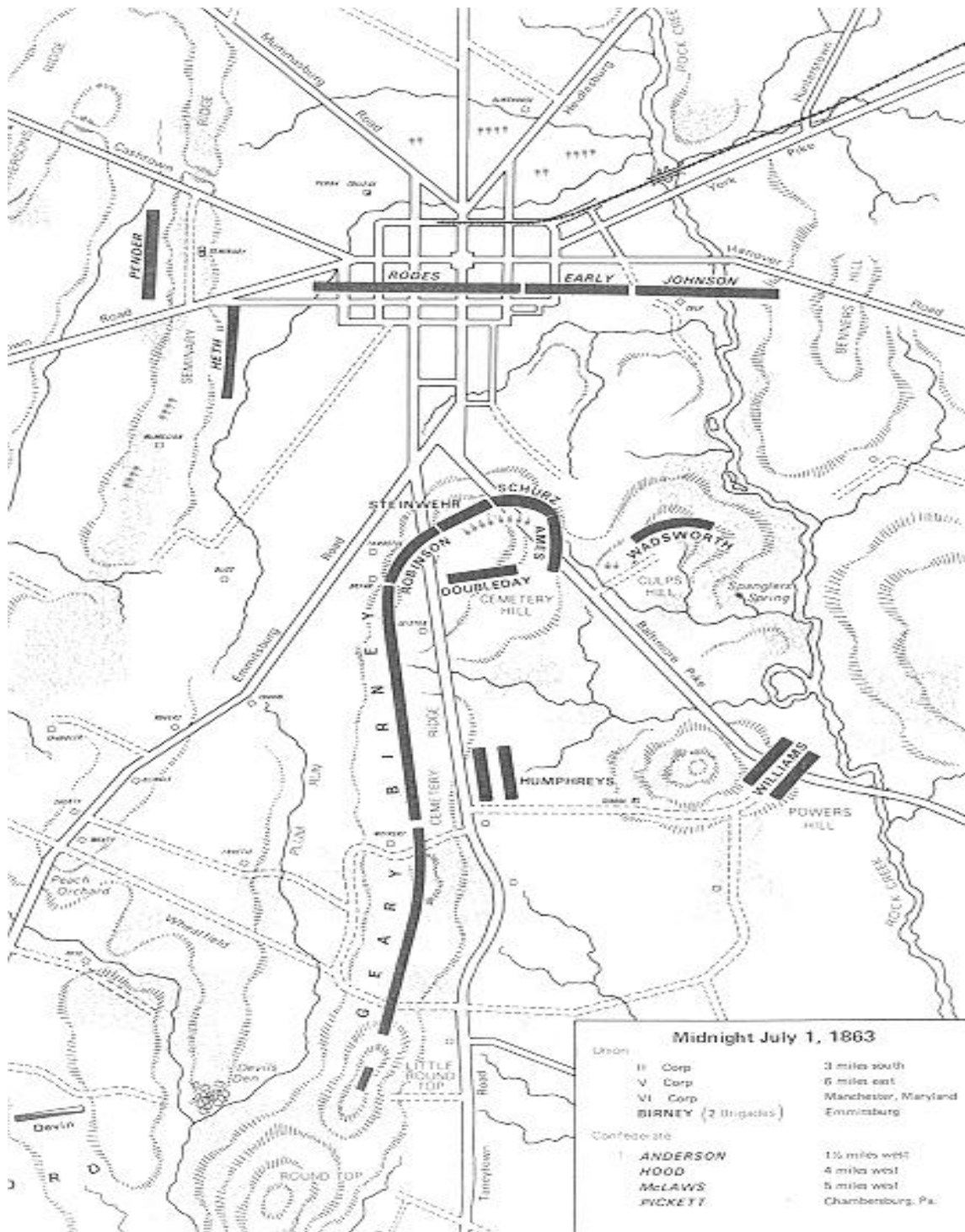
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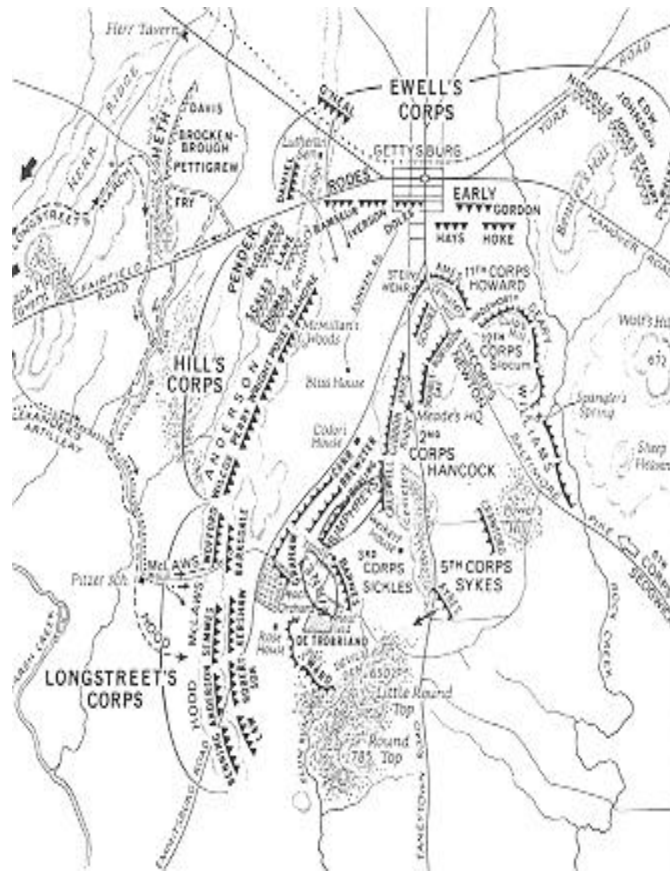
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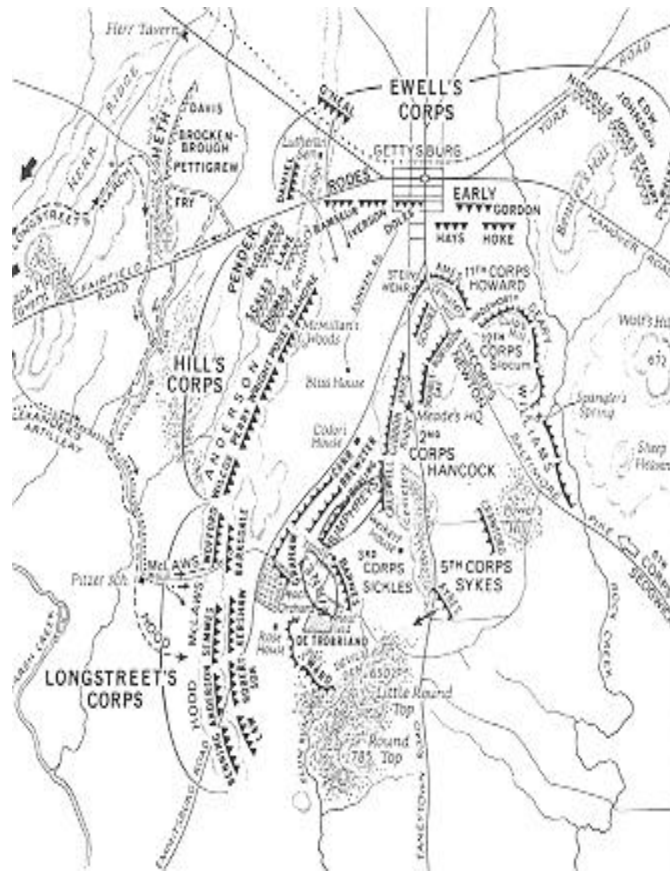


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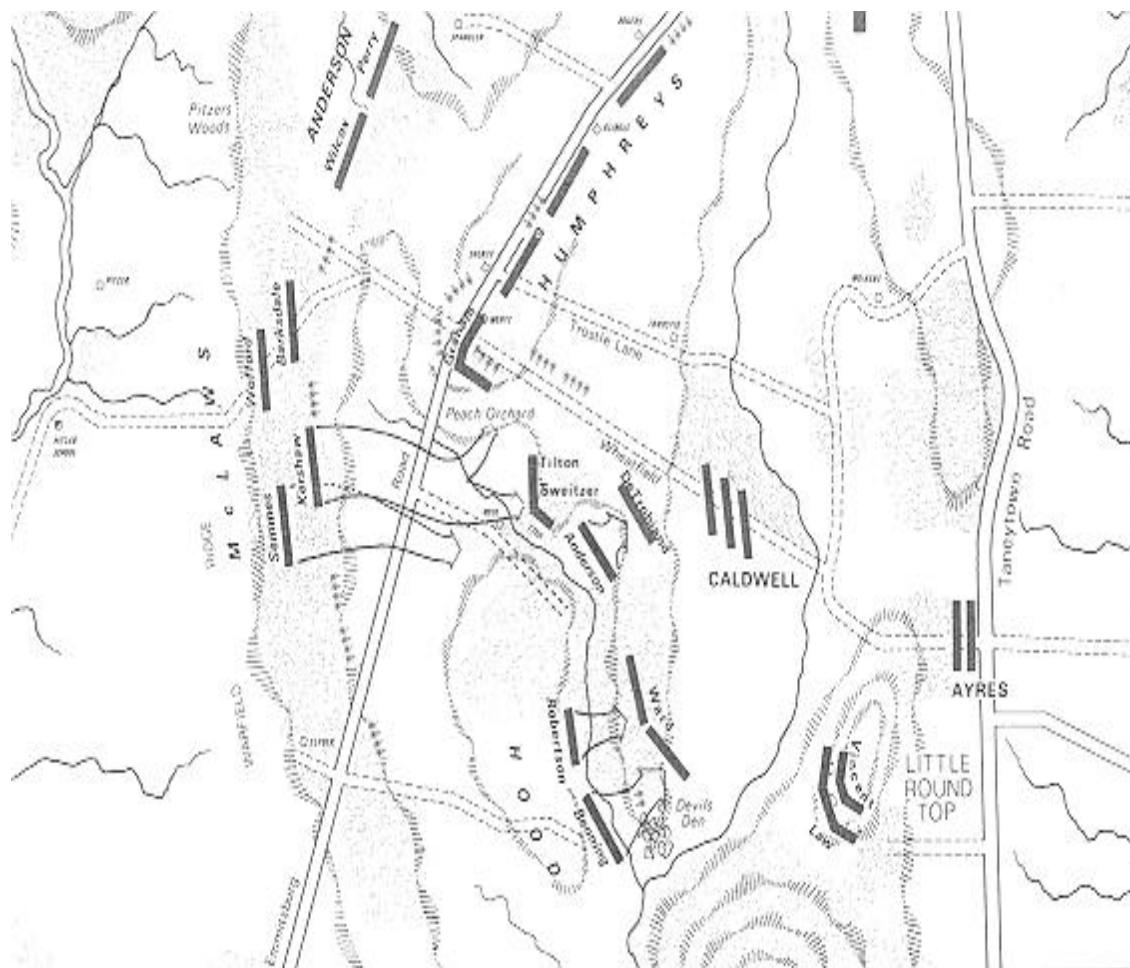


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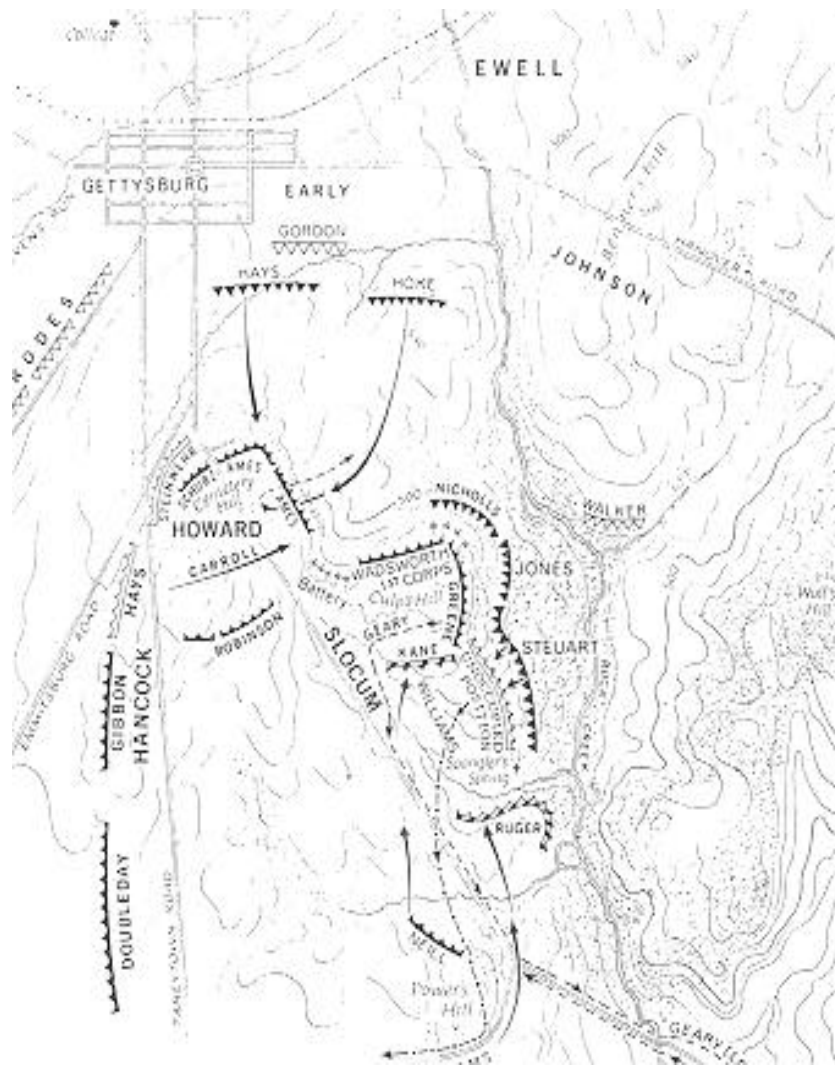




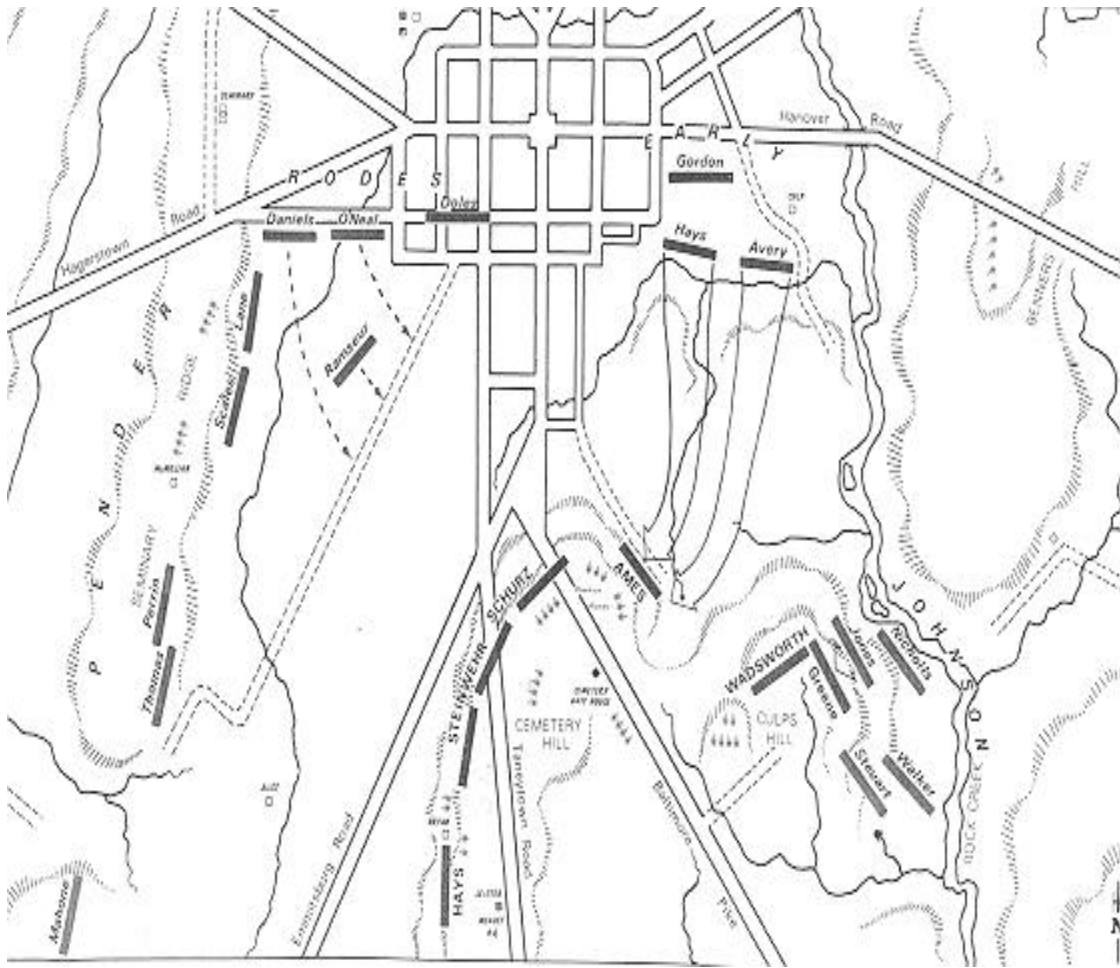
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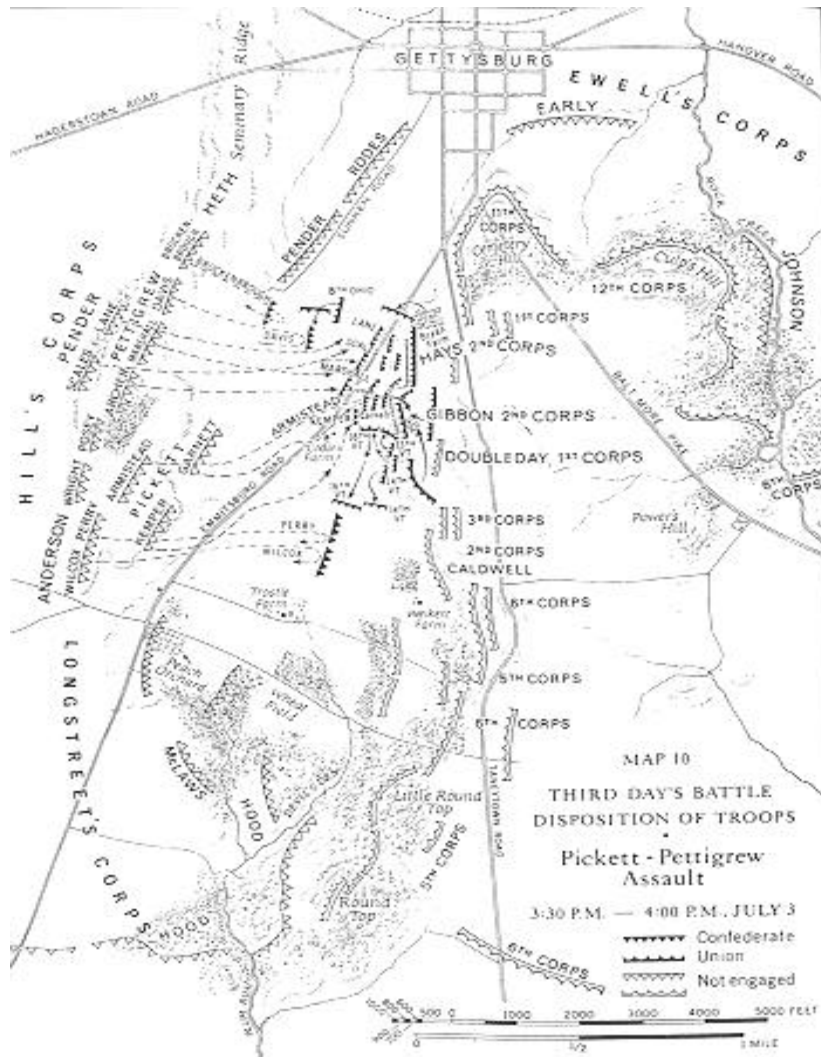
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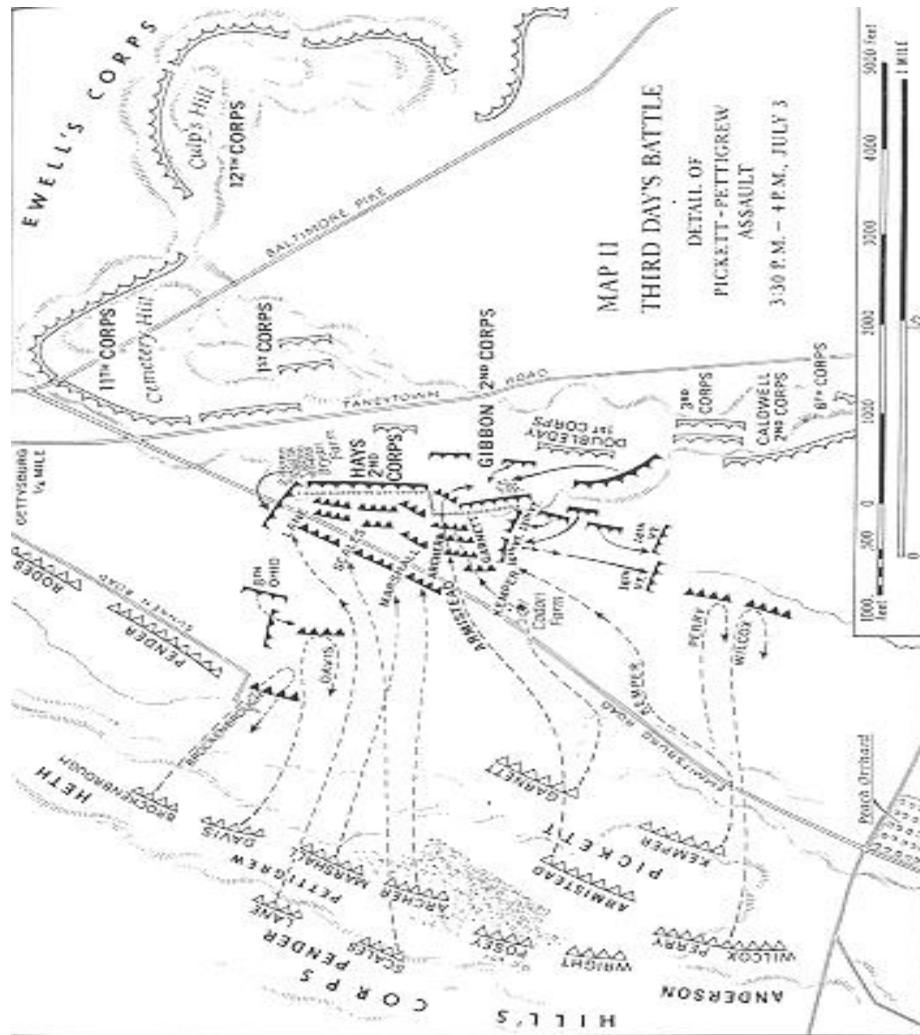
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## **INSIDE THE LINES: MEADE'S VICTORY AT GETTYSBURG**

### **INSIDE THE LINES?**

The first three days in July 1863 marked the high water mark of the Confederacy's quest for independence. The subsequent Union victory at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania was the beginning of the end of the Civil war. Why was this battle so significant? Why was the string of recent Confederate victories brought to a close on this battlefield? It is my intent to analyze the Battle of Gettysburg to show the relationship of lines of operation and the Union success. Specifically, I plan to argue that the Union use of interior lines was the decisive factor in their victory at Gettysburg.

The concepts of interior and exterior lines gained prominence after the Napoleonic Era with Jomni ascendancy. Interior lines deal with forces whose operations diverge from a central point. The use of interior lines allows a commander to rapidly shift forces to the decisive point. The Battle of Gettysburg is an ideal historical example to analyze the impact of interior and exterior lines.

At the battle of Gettysburg, the Confederates operated uncharacteristically along exterior lines. Their lines of communication stretched from Pennsylvania through the

Shenandoah Valley south to Richmond. This was an extremely precarious situation for General Lee and weighed heavily on his decisions at Gettysburg. The Army of the Potomac, under command of newly appointed General Meade, operated along interior lines at Gettysburg. On July 2 and 3, this became a major factor in General Meade's ability to react to the offensive actions taken by the Army of Northern Virginia. This use of interior lines by General Meade, specifically throughout the day and night of Day 2 and again on day 3, allowed the Army of the Potomac to gain victory. The Army of Northern Virginia on several occasions achieved momentary breaks in the Union lines only to be repulsed by Union forces shifted from other positions. General Meade would not have been able to shift these forces to the decisive point unless he operated on interior lines.

### **The Road to Gettysburg**

In order to set the stage for the analysis, we must first review how events unfolded before the battle. How did the forces arrive at this particular time and place? The last significant battle between the two eastern armies occurred at Chancellorsville, Virginia in April of 1863. Professor and historian, Edwin Coddington, wrote one of the



most comprehensive accounts of the Gettysburg Campaign. In his book, *The Gettysburg Campaign, A Study in Command*, Coddington summarized the events at Chancellorsville as follows:

Hooker's powerful Army of the Potomac was at peak strength as he began a series of complicated maneuvers near Fredericksburg, Virginia, which were designed to crush his foe in one mighty blow and open up the road to Richmond. With the Union army once more on the prowl, people in the north from President Abraham Lincoln to the most humble citizen during the first few days of May hopefully awaited news of a great and final victory. What they finally heard with aching hearts was the same old refrain: Lee had again escaped a trap near the little crossroads hamlet of Chancellorsville and in one of his most brilliant displays of generalship had inflicted ignominious defeat upon a force twice the size of his own. While many people in both the North and the South saw in Chancellorsville further evidence of the Confederacy's invincibility, they overlooked certain realities.

Lee, it is true, had prevented Hooker from accomplishing his objective and had forced him to retreat to his winter quarters. Although the Northern army had suffered heavy losses, it still was intact and could renew the offensive if given a breathing spell. The Confederates, however, could not afford to wait. Lee and other Southern leaders felt they had to gain a decisive victory that summer, as time was running out and never again would the South be so strong.<sup>1</sup>

As the Confederates reorganized and basked in their victory, the Army of the Potomac tended their wounds contemplating what went wrong. The success of General Lee in Chancellorsville renewed his desire to take the fight to

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<sup>1</sup> Coddington, Edwin B., *The Gettysburg Campaign, A Study in Command*, (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1979), 4.

the North on their territory. Lee again sought to invade the North and relieve the pressure placed on his war stricken Virginia. Lee revealed his plan to Confederate President Jefferson Davis at a strategy conference on 15 May 1863:

This time the Virginian dazzled Davis and Seddon with a proposal to invade Pennsylvania with a reinforced army and inflict a crushing defeat on the Yankees in their own backyard. This would remove the enemy threat on the Rappahannock, take the armies out of war-ravaged Virginia, and enable Lee to feed his troops in the enemy's country. It would also strengthen Peace Democrats, discredit Republicans, reopen the question of foreign recognition, and perhaps even conquer peace and recognition from the Union government itself.<sup>2</sup>

The plan was almost unanimously agreed upon and in late June of 1863, the Army of Northern Virginia marched through Maryland into Pennsylvania. The Army of the Potomac had no recourse but to trace the movements of the Confederates and keep itself interposed between Lee and the Union capital of Washington.

During this same period, the Army of the Potomac again found itself conducting a battlefield change of command. In a letter to his wife, General George Gordon Meade recounts the notification of his new assignment as the Commanding General of the Army of the Potomac:

It has pleased almighty God to place me in the trying position that for some time past we have been talking

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<sup>2</sup> McPherson, James M., *Battle Cry of Freedom*, (Ballantine Books, New York, 1989), 647.

about. Yesterday morning, at 3 a.m., I was aroused from my sleep by an officer from Washington entering my tent, and after waking me up, saying he had come to give me trouble. At first I thought that it was either to relieve or arrest me, and promptly relied to him, that my conscience was clear, void of offense towards any man; I was prepared for his bad news. He then handed me a communication to read; which I found was an order relieving Hooker from the command and assigning me to it. As, dearest, you know how reluctant we both have been to see me placed in this position, and as it appears to be God's will for some good purpose-at any rate, as a soldier, I had nothing to do but accept and exert my utmost abilities to command success... Love to all.<sup>3</sup>

Now with General Meade in command and General Lee marching into Pennsylvania, the stage was set for the epic Battle of Gettysburg. On the morning of 1 July 1863, the battle was joined between lead elements of Confederate General A.P. Hill's Third Corps and Union General John Buford's Cavalry. There was little significance to the town of Gettysburg (See Map 1) prior to the battle. Mr. Coddington described Gettysburg in 1863:

Although Gettysburg was the seat of Adams County with a population of about 2,400, in appearance it had nothing to distinguish it from many other towns in that part of the state...The most unusual feature of the place was the large number of roads converging there, all of which had lateral connections so that the town formed the center of a weblike complex of highways...This network of roads and the open nature of the country would lend themselves to rapid military maneuvers for offensive operations, while the hills and ridges would afford many fine positions for an army on the defensive.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Meade, George, *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade, Volume II*, (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1913), 11-12.

<sup>4</sup> Coddington, 265.

## **Hooker Reorganizes the Army**

Prior to a discussion of the actual battle, I would like to reflect on the reorganization under which both armies had recently undergone. This reorganization became a factor for both sides during the battle, so it is worth a brief outlining of the facts.

The Army of the Potomac was the first to undergo a transformation. The army, under the leadership of General Ambrose E. Burnside, was reeling from the heavy losses suffered from the fighting in Fredericksburg during December of 1862. His time as Commanding General, Army of the Potomac, was as short as it was disappointing. The appointment of General Joseph Hooker to the helm in the spring brought a new promise of victory. Author William Swinton wrote:

Yet notwithstanding the untoward fortunes the Army of the Potomac had suffered, it could hardly be said to be demoralized, for its heart was still in the war; it never failed to respond to any demand made upon it, and it was ever ready to renew its courage at the first ray of hope.

Such a day-spring came with the appointment of General Hooker to the chief command... Hooker's measures of reform were judicious: he cut away the root of many evils; stopped desertion and its causes; did away with the nuisance of the "Grand Division" organization; infused vitality through the staff and administrative service; gave distinctive badges to the different

corps; instituted a system of furloughs; consolidated the cavalry under able leaders...<sup>5</sup>

General Joseph "Fighting Joe" Hooker was an extremely capable officer and an outstanding administrator. The most relevant changes he instituted were in the army organization. He organized a cavalry corps, initially commanded by Brigadier General George Stoneman and at Gettysburg by Major General Alfred Pleasonton, which would finally be able to match the likes of Confederate cavalryman Major General Jeb Stuart. The fighting spirit of this unit was shown at the cavalry battle at Brandy Station and again at the meeting engagement west of Gettysburg on July 1.

The second significant modification came with the expansion of the artillery reserve, under the command of Brigadier General Henry Hunt. Previously all artillery had been placed with the separate corps. Now, however, the army commander had general support artillery available for tasking and each corps retained a brigade of direct support artillery. These artillery units, as did the cavalry, significantly influenced the fighting at Gettysburg.

Hooker also moved away from the "Grand Division" organization and instituted corps level commands built

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<sup>5</sup> Swinton, William, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*, (Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1882), 267-268.

around a triangular model. Each of the seven corps had three divisions, each normally with three brigades. This triangular model is still commonly used today because it offers the best span of control to the commander. The "Grand Divisions" grew in size beyond the control of the commander and did not offer enough flexibility in the tailoring of forces for a battle.

### **A New Look for General Lee's Army**

After the battle of Chancellorsville, General Lee initiated a reorganization of his own. Until this time, he had operated with only two corps, under Generals James Longstreet and Thomas Jackson. After the death of "Stonewall" Jackson, General Lee decided it was time to implement his previous plans to reorganize. He, as Hooker did, understood the need to break the army into smaller units to give more flexibility during a battle. General Lee detailed his plans to his Commander-in-Chief in May of 1863:

I have for the past year felt that the corps of this army were too large for one commander. Nothing prevented my proposing to you to reduce the size and increase their number but my inability to recommend commanders. Each corps contains, when in fighting condition, about 30,000 men. These are more than one man can handle and keep under his eye in battle in the country that we have to operate in. They are always beyond the range of his vision, and frequently beyond his reach. The loss of Jackson from command of one-

half of the army seems to me a good opportunity to remedy this evil.<sup>6</sup>

General Lee moved to a triangular model as well, with three corps of infantry, each with three divisions, and a separate cavalry division. The Army of Northern Virginia maintained no general support artillery instead choosing to house all artillery within the corps structure. This was due in large part to General Lee's lack of confidence in his chief of artillery, Brigadier General William Nelson Pendleton. In September of 1862, General Pendleton, while assigned the rearguard mission for the Army of Northern Virginia, nearly lost the entire artillery reserve to a Union attack at Boteler's Ford near Shepherdstown. In his essay, "We Don't Know What on Earth to do with Him," Peter Carmichael underscores Pendleton's relegation to an administrator after the near catastrophic fiasco. He states, "Although Lee never decided to remove Pendleton, he consistently tried to restrict his duties to bureaucratic matters rather than giving him control of artillery in battle."<sup>7</sup>

The significance of the organizational shifts for General Lee lay in the fact he was now forced to place two

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<sup>6</sup>*The War of the Rebellion*, Series I, Volume 25, Part 2, (Government Printing Office, Washington, 1889), 810. (Hereafter referred to as OR). (Series I unless otherwise noted).

<sup>7</sup> Gallagher, Gary W., *The Antietam Campaign*, (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 1999). 279.

inexperienced generals in charge of corps level commands.

Coddington wrote of General Lee's decision:

He took great care in dismissing and appointing officers to obtain the best leaders possible. In the end, Longstreet retained command of the First Corps. Richard S. Ewell was promoted to the rank of lieutenant general and appointed to succeed Jackson as the head of Second Corps, while A.P. Hill, who also became a lieutenant general, was made commander of the newly organized Third Corps. It was composed of one division from the two old corps and a third still to be formed...The capabilities of two of its three corps commanders, Hill and Ewell, to handle more than a single division remained to be tested.<sup>8</sup>

This definitely played a factor in the first three days of July in Gettysburg.

### **THE BATTLE IS JOINED**

On Wednesday, July 1, 1863 the sun rose to find troop movements all along the Cashtown Pike west of Gettysburg. Skirmishes had broken out between the brigades of Major General Harry Heth's Division and Brigadier General John Buford's dismounted cavalry (See Map 2). Buford maintained his position, under heavy fighting, until Major General John Reynolds brought up units from his Union I Corps from some three miles east along the Baltimore Pike. Throughout the morning heavy fighting ensued along the Pike. A

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<sup>8</sup> Coddington, 12.



Confederate sharpshooter early in the engagement killed General Reynolds and command passed to Major General Abner Doubleday. Neither corps was able to impose their will upon the other in the initial engagements.

The Union I Corps was taking a beating from a Confederate cannonade as news of the approach of the Union XI Corps raised spirits. Major General Oliver Howard had marched from Emmitsburg earlier in the morning and his lead brigades now began to arrive on the battlefield. By mid-afternoon, General Howard was in charge of both corps and had positioned his forces along McPherson's Ridge in the west stretching north along Seminary Ridge to the Mummasburg and Heidlersburg Roads (See Map 3).

### **Where to Fight**

General Meade had located his headquarters to the south in the town of Taneytown. He sought out his old friend and subordinate Major General Winfield S. Hancock to ride forward to Gettysburg and take charge of the fighting at hand. General Hancock reported:

...I then proceeded in person to General Meade's headquarters, and, on reporting to him, was informed as to his intention with reference to giving battle to the enemy, the orders for preparatory movements being then ready for issue.

A few minutes before 1 p. m., I received orders to proceed in person to the front, and assume command of the First, Third, and Eleventh Corps, in

consequence of the death of Major-General Reynolds. Having been fully informed by the major-general commanding as to his intentions, I was instructed by him to give the necessary directions upon my arrival at the front for the movement of troops and trains to the rear toward the line of battle he had selected, should I deem it expedient to do so. If the ground was suitable, and circumstances, made it wise, I was directed to establish the line of battle at Gettysburg.<sup>9</sup>

General Hancock arrived at Gettysburg, and after a brief wrangling over command with General Howard, found the terrain at Gettysburg and the positions of the Union forces to his liking and informed General Meade of his decision.

#### **The Momentum Shifts**

Prior to Hancock's arrival at Gettysburg, the Union situation had grown weaker. General Ewell's II Corps had arrived at Gettysburg from the north along the Heidlersburg Road. This was a decisive moment in the first day's fight. The tide now turned in the favor of the Confederates due to numerical superiority. Early's Division returning from York in the north struck the Union XI Corps in the flank. This attack completely dislodged the XI Corps and eventually turned into a complete rout. The dislodgment had an even larger impact. The Union I Corps with its right flank exposed could no longer maintain its position

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<sup>9</sup> OR, Vol. 27, Part 1, 367.

along Seminary Ridge and was forced to fall back to Cemetery Ridge. Swinton reflected on the chaos:

The troops fell back in much disorder into Gettysburg. At the same time the right of the First Corps, giving way, also retreated to the town, where they became entangled with the disordered mass. Early, launching forward, captured above five thousand prisoners. The left of the first alone drew back in some order, making a stand on Seminary Ridge until the artillery and ambulances had been withdrawn, and then fell back behind the town.<sup>10</sup>

General Hancock consolidated the Union forces south of the town along Cemetery Ridge. The Confederates had an excellent opportunity to exploit their success. Bruce Catton wrote:

All in all, as evening came down there were no more 5,000 fighting men left of the two corps which had fought that day. These were grouped in a semicircle on and around Cemetery Hill, and between the height of the ground and the trenches and gun pits Steinwehr had dug they put up a bold front, but if the Confederates had followed up their victory they probably could have taken the hill and everybody on it. The expected attack did not come, however.<sup>11</sup>

### **The Lost Opportunity**

Why was no attack launched? There were many contributing factors in my belief. First, General Lee's order to his newly appointed corps commander was vague at

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<sup>10</sup> Swinton, 334.

<sup>11</sup> Catton, 391-392.

best. He ordered Ewell to continue his attack "if practicable". This was the type order he issued to General "Stonewall" Jackson, who reveled in such an ambiguous mission type order. General Ewell, due to his lack of experience as a corps commander, needed clear direction. Secondly, the Confederate forces were quite tired and disarrayed from the days fighting. Coupled with the approaching nightfall and one might understand Ewell's reluctance. Donald Pfanz, in his biography of General Ewell, maintains any criticisms directed against the general fail to look at the Union piece of the equation stating:

Such criticisms failed to take into account the strength of the Union position and ignored the obstacles in Ewell's Path. The Union army had an estimated 12,000 soldiers on Cemetery Hill that afternoon. Sixteen hundred of these men belonged to Col. Orland Smith's brigade, which had not yet been engaged. The rest were fragments of the First and Eleventh Corps that had fought and been defeated. Although many regiments had been badly mauled and were incapable of further combat, others remained in condition to resist a Confederate advance.<sup>12</sup>

No matter the reasons, the pursuit did not occur this night and the stage was set during the night for the major battles of the next two days. During the evening hours, General's Lee and Meade each concentrated their armies as

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<sup>12</sup> Pfanz, Donald C., *Richard S. Ewell, A Soldier's Life*, (The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill and London, 1998), 322.

quickly as possible in preparation for the next days events. Each force consolidated their positions and began planning. During the consolidation of the Union forces the fishhook shape defense emerged along Cemetery Ridge (See Map 4).

### **MEADE'S DEFENSE**

We begin day two by looking at the arrangement of the Union forces along Cemetery Ridge. It was this very arrangement that allowed General Meade to employ his forces along interior lines. The barb of the hook was formed by Major General Henry Slocum's XII Corps along Culp's Hill and Spangler's Spring. To his left, the bend in the hook was occupied by remnants of Major General Oliver Howard's XI Corps along Cemetery Hill. Pushing south along Cemetery Ridge Major General John Newton, now in command of I Corps, tied his forces in with General Howard. Still further to the south was III Corps, commanded by Major General Daniel Sickles.

Throughout the first night, heavy skirmishing continued along Cemetery Hill, which led General Meade to believe an attack was imminent in this sector. He decided to temporarily position General Hancock's II Corps in

reserve behind XI Corps just to be safe. When no attack appeared, he continued with his plan to employ Hancock between Newton and Sickles along the center of the Union lines. This was an early example of the ability to shift forces rapidly when operating on interior lines. In this case, Meade's actions were not decisive, but it illustrated the flexibility offered by interior lines. Moving north along Taneytown Road, Major General George Sykes was still positioning his V Corps as a reserve force behind III Corps. Major General John Sedgwick's VI Corps had yet to arrive, but was approaching along the Baltimore Pike. Brigadier General Henry Hunt by mid morning had four of his five artillery brigades in position in the Union center south of Meade's headquarters (See Map 5).

General Meade's defense began to solidify by this time; however, his thoughts were not purely defensive. Slocum received the following orders from General Meade:

The commanding general desires you to make your arrangements for an attack from your front on the enemy, to be made by the Twelfth Corps, supported by the Fifth. He wishes this a strong and decisive attack, which he will order so soon as he gets definite information of the approach of the sixth Corps, which will also be directed to co-operate in this attack. For this purpose, he has sent an officer to ascertain the whereabouts of General Sedgwick, and report.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup>OR, Vol. 27, Part 3, 486.

Within an hour, General Slocum reported his disapproval of such an attack from his position:

GENERAL: Your note of 9.30 a. m. is received. I have already made a better examination of the position in my front than I am now able to now that we have taken up a new line. It is true that the enemy is massing troops on our right, I do not think we could detach enough troops for an attack to insure success. I do not think the ground in my front, held by the enemy, possesses any peculiar advantages for him.

Very Respectfully, your obedient servant.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Confederates Attack**

It was not until about 4:00 PM on the afternoon of 2 July when General Lee's forces finally began their attacks (See Map 6). The first attack came on the Union left flank in the III Corps sector of the defense. General Sickles had pushed his forces westward towards the Emmitsburg Road seeking better defensive terrain, but in doing so had created a salient in the Union lines. Meade immediately recognized General Sickles' blunder and began to rearrange forces to cover the weakness in his lines. Here began the decisive movements of General Meade. Recognizing the weakness of his left, he immediately ordered General Sykes to move his V Corps into position near Little Round Top, which had been left unoccupied by Sickles' westward movement. We all know the importance Little Round Top held

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<sup>14</sup> OR, Vol. 27, Part 3, 487.

for the Union forces; it dominated the entire southern flank. Confederate General John Hood's Division smashed the Union left in and around Little Round Top; however, due to the close proximity of the V Corps the attack was repulsed by Colonel Strong Vincent's Brigade. This was the famous charge of the 20<sup>th</sup> Maine, led by Colonel Joshua Chamberlain, against the 15<sup>th</sup> Alabama, which saved the entire Union left flank. The ability of General Meade to quickly relocate V Corps to the decisive point could be directly attributed to interior lines and the short distance between units in the defense.

Another example that received little attention was Meade's personal placement of Brigadier General Andrew Humphrey's Division. The division did not become engaged at Little Round Top, because V Corps had already occupied that position. Nonetheless, General Meade was able to quickly redirect Humphrey's division to a critical area of the battlefield. General Meade wrote:

...realizing the urgency of the situation, and fearful, although the Fifth Corps was momentarily expected, that it might not arrive in time to meet it, dispatched an officer to Humphreys, who was close by, ordering him to move his division quickly to the endangered point... He had, however, marched a very short distance in that direction when he received word from General Meade, who had in the meantime been notified that reinforcements from the Fifth Corps had reached Round Top, countermanding the movement, and



directing him to resume his march to the position assigned him by Sickles, on the Emmitsburg Road.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Salient is Crushed**

By 6:00 PM on day two, General Sickle's III Corps was heavily engaged and in danger of being destroyed. Confederate General Longstreet's Corps was pounding away at the salient in the area known as the Wheatfield. General Meade again tapped into forces, not engaged, within his lines to reinforce his defense. This time he moved a division from Hancock's II Corps in the center to reinforce Sickles. This did not prevent the salient from being crushed, but in my estimation, it unquestionably prevented the Confederates from being able to exploit their success. In crushing the salient, Longstreet's forces had suffered as badly, if not worse, as Sickles.

With the fall of the salient, a huge gap was created in the Union center, which was ripe for exploitation. Again, General Meade responded by repositioning forces at the decisive moment. General Meade also showed extreme command prescience in the face of the enemy during this fight. Author Freeman Cleaves recounted Meade's actions:

Meade and four aides alone occupied the gap as enemy standards began moving toward them. Because most of his escorts had dashed to corral fugitives in retreat, he had only his immediate staff with him. The last

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<sup>15</sup> Meade, 82.

ditch force of five men seemed rather small for the work immediately at hand, but the General's aides saw him stand apparently unmoved. It was for them to follow their leader. As Meade suddenly straightened himself in his stirrups, the four aides nervously did likewise, and as he drew his sword from its scabbard, four more blades rattled and then flashed in the sun. The meager handful stood poised against an enemy regiment now only six hundred yards distant. Would the General, someone was wondering, lead a desperate charge? Glancing aside from the enemy, aides were looking about anxiously for help when, with great relief, the cry was heard, "There they come, General."<sup>16</sup>

General Meade was in a flurry of movements and counter-movements during this period. He had already plugged his reserve corps, V Corps, in to hold the Round Tops, so he had to seek units from within the defense. Lead elements of Sedgwick's VI Corps were just arriving on the battlefield after continuously marching almost twenty-four hours covering more than thirty-four miles. Meade immediately plugged these divisions into the gap created by the collapse of III Corps. He also called on the assistance of Newton's I Corps, which had been positioned in the center behind XI Corps. Various units were brought in piecemeal from throughout the defense to fill the gap. Hancock's II Corps provided cannon support from his position in the Union center.

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<sup>16</sup> Cleaves, Freeman, *Meade of Gettysburg*, (Norman and London, University of Oklahoma Press, 1960), 152-153.

## **Crisis in the Union Center**

A very important unit throughout the Gettysburg Campaign was Slocum's XII Corps. Remember that Slocum had employed his forces along Culp's Hill to protect the Union right flank. During the next twelve to twenty-four hours, XII Corps would be called upon to engage in some heavy fighting throughout the defense.

Late in the afternoon on 2 July, General Meade called upon General Slocum to move forces to the Union center where the salient had been crushed. General Slocum had been preparing all day for an attack from General Ewell, which he was assured, would eventually commence. General Slocum sent his First Division, under the command of Brigadier General Alpheus S. Williams. General Williams recounted the events in a letter to his daughters three days after the battle:

...We took the route promptly and marched rapidly, following the sounds of battle, for I could find no one on the way to give me intelligence as to the point I was most needed.

...I followed the side where I heard infantry volleys, and as I came near the wooded apex an artillery officer rode rapidly towards me begging assistance to protect his battery. It proved to be Maj. McGilary of Maine, who once commanded a battery in my division. He was delighted to see me and I heard, with the rapidity that such occasions require, that the infantry supports had just left him and that in the woods in the front the rebels had just captured several pieces of our artillery, or rather dragged them there after capture. I had the new brigade leading and one regiment of it had fallen behind. The

First Maryland Home Regiment, Col. Maulsby, was ahead and I ordered him to pitch into the woods. So he did, indeed, without waiting to form line of battle, but rushing forward in column. Fortunately, he met little resistance, for the Rebs. Ran and left the captured guns, which were thus recaptured without firing a gun.<sup>17</sup>

Major Freeman McGilvery had done yeomen's work himself throughout the afternoon. Quite honestly, he was truly one of the unsung heroes of Gettysburg. His brigade was a major contributing force in the prevention of a Confederate penetration in the Union lines after the collapse of III Corps. Coddington wrote of McGilvery:

The central figure in meeting the crisis which developed with the destruction of organized resistance near the Peach Orchard was Colonel Freeman McGilvery, whom General Hunt with fond respect called the "cool clear headed old sailor" from Maine.<sup>18</sup>

McGilvery positioned his batteries to continually pour canister into the attacking rebel lines. While maintaining the firing of his guns, he pulled artillerymen from cannons throughout his line to hold off Rebel sharpshooters in a protracted infantry battle. His actions led the Confederates to believe the position was still occupied by Union infantry and prevented further penetrations prior to General Williams timely arrival. Lieutenant Dow of the Sixth Maine Battery reported of the action:

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<sup>17</sup> Quaife, Milo M., *From the Cannons Mouth, The Civil War Letters of General Alpheus S. Williams*, (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, Michigan, 1959), 228.

<sup>18</sup> Coddington, 415.

...but owing to the prompt and skillful action of Major Freeman McGilvery, in forming this second line as soon as he found the first line lost, their plan was foiled, for they no doubt thought the woods in our rear were filled with infantry in support of the batteries, when the fact is we had no support at all. At this crisis, my orders from Major McGilvery were to hold my position at all hazards until he could re-enforce the position and relieve me. It was about 7 o'clock when the enemy retired, and I was in action altogether about one hour and a half.<sup>19</sup>

The battles along the Union left flank and center were extremely fierce and were said to be indecisive. This may be true in the case of the Confederates, but I do believe it was decisive for the Union, if for no other reason, their flank was intact and the center was not penetrated. However, the fighting on the right flank was yet to start.

### **The Fight for Culp's Hill**

The Confederate attacks of Longstreet on the left and Ewell on the right were suppose to coincide. "Now the plan of battle contemplated that, while Longstreet attacked, Ewell should make vigorous demonstrations against the forces on Cemetery and Culp's Hills, to prevent re-enforcements being drawn from that flank to increase the opposition to be encountered in the real assault against the Union left."<sup>20</sup> For various purported reasons this did

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<sup>19</sup> OR, Vol. 27, Part 1, 897.

<sup>20</sup> Swinton, 354.

not occur. This was fortuitous for General Meade, for if the attacks had in fact been simultaneous, he would not have had the luxury of moving almost the entire XII Corps to assist the collapsing Union left flank. General Ewell did not begin his attack until almost a full two hours after Longstreet. Swinton continued:

If Ewell's delay had thwarted the original intention of preventing re-enforcements being sent from the right to buffet Longstreet's attack, it at least gave him the opportunity to make his demonstration, when at length made, really effective: for such detachments had been taken from the Twelfth Corps to re-enforce the left during the operations of the afternoon, that there remained of this corps but a single brigade, under General Greene, drawn out in a thin line, with the division of Wadsworth on its left.<sup>21</sup>

The terrain around Culp's Hill was extremely difficult and the Union forces had established quite an extensive breastwork along the hill. The delay had also pushed Ewell's attack to the brink of sunset, which coupled with the dense vegetation and difficult terrain would hamper the Confederate attack. Major General Edward Johnson's division crossed Rock Creek and commenced an attack on Brigadier General George Greene's Brigade as night began to fall (See Map 7). General Greene, who had been in position of the extreme left of the corps, began to extend to his right as quickly as possible. Greene was hit extremely

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<sup>21</sup> Swinton, 355.

hard in the center, but was able to hold behind well-prepared positions. Two brigades of Johnson were able to bypass Greene to his right through the vacated breastworks of the XII Corps. These units became disoriented in the darkness and remained in the vacated trenches, only a couple hundred yards or less from the Baltimore Pike. Meanwhile, regiments from the I and II Corps were sent to reinforce Greene on the right flank. These re-enforcements were not directed by General Meade, but rather by adjacent commanders showing initiative. It was the short distances within the interior lines that allowed the commanders to realize the precarious situation and react in a timely manner.

### **The Fight for Cemetery Hill**

General Ewell had ordered Major General Jubal Early to attack East Cemetery Hill and Major General R. E. Rodes to attack up the western face of the hill. Darkness was rapidly falling as the attacks commenced and confusion ensued. General Early, however, was having success against the XI Corps on East Cemetery Hill. Several determined Louisiana units fought their way to the top of the hill, sending the troops of XI Corps in full retreat. General Rodes failed to launch his attack in support of Early,

leaving the "boys from Louisiana" without support. The use of interior lines, again, played in the Union favor. Bruce Catton wrote:

Then over the top of Cemetery Hill a shadowy mass came rolling forward- Carroll's brigade from Hancock's corps, sent over on the run when Howard called for help. The daylight was entirely gone now, and in the darkness Carroll's men could see nothing except the points and splashes of flame in the overrun batteries, and they came running blindly down the slope, shouting breathlessly as they ran. There was a confused sound of pounding feet and colliding human bodies, grunts and yells and curses and a crackle of rifle fire- and the last of the Confederates were driven out, Carroll's brigade drew up along the lip of the ravine, and the line was secure was again.

The day's fighting was over at last...<sup>22</sup>

#### **A NEW DAY**

The final day of fighting at Gettysburg began where we left off the previous night. The Confederates plan called for an attack on the center of the Union lines. General Lee assumed that since attacks on both Union flanks were repulsed by strong forces the center must be the weak point. The early dawn hours were interrupted by sounds of fighting from the vicinity of Culp's Hill. During the darkness hours, General Meade, after deciding to remain on the defense, moved the dispatched units of the XII Corps

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<sup>22</sup> Catton, 404.



back to their original positions around Culp's Hill.

Slocum's orders were to clear out the Confederate forces and restore the Union lines of the previous day in order to shore up the right flank and protect the Baltimore Pike.

Swinton recounted Meade's counterattack:

With this view, Johnson's force, hugging closely Culp's Hill, was considerably strengthened; but before preparations could be made for an attack, Meade assumed the offensive and drove back the intrusive force. During the night a powerful artillery was accumulated against the point entered by the enemy, and at four o'clock opened a heavy fire. Meanwhile, troops of the Twelfth Corps returned from the left, and the divisions of Williams and Geary, aided by Shaler's brigade of the Sixth Corps, entered upon a severe struggle to regain the lost portion of the line. After four hours' close contest, it was occupied by a charge of Geary's division, the original line on Culp's Hill was re-established and the right flank made secure.<sup>23</sup>

The XII Corps using interior lines was able to effect the outcome of two decisive engagements within a twelve-hour period. Albeit blunders and lack of coordination on the part of the Confederates assisted in the victories, the short lines of Union reinforcement pulled General Meade out of several precarious situations. The fighting, however, was not over; the Confederates still had an opportunity.

### **Attack on the Center**

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<sup>23</sup> Swinton, 356.

It might serve us well at this point to re-visit the new positions occupied by both armies by mid-morning on 3 July (See Map 9). On the Union side, the XII Corps had reoccupied its position on Culp's Hill holding the Union right flank. To their left, XI Corps, along with re-enforcement units from I and II Corps retained its position along Cemetery Hill. General Hancock and the remainder of II Corps remained in the Union center along Cemetery Ridge. To the left of II Corps came a mixture of units from VI Corps, the Reserve artillery, and I Corps. Next came V Corps occupying the original portion of the line held by III Corps, the remnants of which were in reserve in the Union center. Elements of the VI Corps held the extreme left of the Union line along the Round Tops.

The Confederate positions remained static after the close of fighting on day two. General Longstreet's I Corps continued to hold the Confederate right along Spangler's Woods. An important player in today's action, Major General George Pickett, had now arrived on the battlefield and was positioning for his historic assault. General Hill's III Corps held the Confederate center and General Ewell continued to hold the Confederate left.

The remainder of the morning hours on 3 July saw the final preparations for the Confederate attack on the Union center being carried out. Confederate artillery massed in front of Spangler's Woods to conduct preparation fires in support of the attack. This massing of Confederate artillery was painfully evident to the Union forces. General Meade reflected upon seeing the Confederate artillery massing:

By ten o'clock in the morning of the 3d it could be plainly seen, from the Union lines, that the enemy were massing their artillery along Seminary Ridge from the town of Gettysburg to the Peach orchard. To meet this move General Hunt, chief of artillery, placed in position along Cemetery Ridge, all the batteries that the ground could hold, and, beginning on the right, instructed the chiefs of artillery and battery commanders to withhold their fire for fifteen or twenty minutes after the enemy had commenced, and then to concentrate with all possible accuracy on those batteries which were causing the greatest damage and to fire slowly, so that when the enemy's ammunition was exhausted their own would still be sufficient to meet the anticipated assault.<sup>24</sup>

What was General Lee's overall plan for day three?

The original plan called for a coordinated attack on both flanks by Ewell's and Longstreet's Corps. However, due to lack of coordination, Longstreet's failure to be in position for a daylight assault, and Meade's early counter-offensive on Culp's hill, that plan was rendered obsolete early on 3 July. The plan now shifted to an attack on the

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<sup>24</sup> Meade, 104.

Union center with Longstreet's I Corps, re-enforced by III Corps. General Lee's plan also relied heavily on his artillery, Coddington wrote:

For his offensive Lee assigned a dual role to all of his artillery except for some pieces in Ewell's corps: to silence opposing batteries in a cannonade prior to the infantry advance, and to push forward with the moving columns as protection for their flanks and support for their attack.<sup>25</sup>

Coddington continued:

In planning for his grand assault Lee sought to overcome his artillery's traditional handicap through careful deployment and synchronized use of their guns. He hoped to blast Union artillery into oblivion with a cannonade unparalleled in the annals of warfare and to demoralize the Union infantry beyond the point of serious resistance. Once his artillery had gained dominance, Lee assumed that a force of 12,000 to 14,000 men stretched out in a line almost a mile wide could advance across three-quarters of a mile of open fields and by moving towards a specific landmark achieve a major breakthrough before the enemy firepower could cut it down.<sup>26</sup>

### **Artillery Commences**

From best accounts, the Confederate artillery began their preparation fires around 1 PM on the Third. Over 130 Confederate cannons pounded the Union center. It created tremendous confusion and chaos in the Union lines. The shelling caused tremendous damage to the supply trains, ambulances, and even General Meade's headquarters. General

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<sup>25</sup> Coddington, 462.

<sup>26</sup> Coddington, 463.

Lee did not want to commence the attack until he softened up the Union center sufficiently to allow his infantry unimpeded movement across the Emmitsburg Road. The only problem with the bombardment was the fact that the infantry in the front lines along the Union center went relatively unscathed. This would come back to haunt the Confederates in the impending charge. Various historians have argued the extent of the Confederate bombardment; Bruce Catton hypothesized:

How long all of this went on no one ever quite seemed sure, and the estimates ranged all the way from thirty minutes to two hours; but eventually, almost imperceptibly, the weight of the bombardment grew less. Hunt had pulled some wrecked batteries out of the II Corps line and was persuading others to cease firing, and along the right of the line many guns had exhausted all of their shell and solid shot. As the Federal firing died down, firing from the Confederate guns slackened also. The smoke still lay heavy between the armies, and Gibbon was trying in vain to peer through it from his post out in front, when the signal station on Little Round Top wigwagged a message to army headquarters: Here come the Rebels!<sup>27</sup>

The Confederates misread the movements and firing of the Union artillery as an indication that the line was beginning to fold under the intense barrage. As mentioned earlier, the Union infantry was still firmly entrenched in the center having escaped the brunt of the bombardment. Colonel Alexander, Commander I Corps artillery, seeing the

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<sup>27</sup> Catton, 410.

Union artillery being pulled from Cemetery Ridge, felt the bombardment was achieving success. Unfortunately, he did not realize this was not a general pullout, but rather a replacement of units within the artillery reserve. These were not the attached, organic batteries of II Corps, but the reserve forces of General Hunt.

### **Meade Prepares for an Assault**

General Meade by this time had discerned the location of the impending Confederate attack and had begun to make provisions. Again his defensive posture allowed him to quickly sally troops to the decisive point, the Union center. General Meade immediately issued orders throughout the army redirecting forces. He, again, called upon General Slocum to thin his lines as much as practicable and send troops from XII Corps to extend and re-enforce the line at Cemetery Hill. He directed a division from I Corps to move into the line on the right of II Corps. III Corps sent two brigades to the right of II Corps as a reserve and 3 more brigades to the left of I Corps. Brigades of the VI Corps were removed from Little Round Top, brought to the center as reserves, and added to the Union left to re-enforce V Corps in the Wheatfield. "The handling of Gettysburg troops was so flexible on July 2 and 3 that brigades and

divisions at different times occupied two or three parts of the field."<sup>28</sup>

This rearrangement of forces proved decisive during the attack. General Lee judged, after day two's engagements, the Union center to be the weakest part of the line. Actually, at the close of day two, it was the weakest part of the line. As noted above, however, General Meade, using interior lines, took definitive measures to re-enforce his center. General Lee was not able to properly synchronize coordinated attacks to prevent this re-enforcement.

### **Pickett's Charge**

At best guess, the first Confederate units emerged from Seminary Ridge around 3 PM. These were the men of Brigadier General J.J. Pettigrew's division on the far left of the Rebel line. General Pickett's division was still not visible to the Union center. Both divisions commenced their attacks at the same time and pushed towards their objectives in impressive order (See Map 10). An officer from one Pettigrew's brigades reported the powerful scene:

There was a space of a few hundred yards between the right of Archer's brigade and the left of General Pickett's division when we advanced, but, owing to the position of our lines (they not being an exact

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<sup>28</sup> Cleaves, 161.

continuation of each other), as we advanced, the right of our brigade, and the left of General Pickett's division gradually approached each other, so that by the time we had advanced a little over half of the way, the right of Archer's touched and connected with Pickett's left.

The command was then passed down the line by the officers, "Guide right;" and we advanced our right, guiding by General Pickett's left. The enemy held their fire until we were in fine range, and opened upon us a terrible and well-directed fire.<sup>29</sup>

Both divisions received this terrible fire from the Union batteries about the time they reached the Emmitsburg Road. Fences on both sides of the road hampered the Rebel movement and allowed the Union batteries to inflict further casualties on the advancing troops. After crossing the road, Pickett's men reformed their lines, narrowed their charge, and moved forward at a double-quick pace into the storm of Union fire.

The assault narrowed so at the objective, that the Confederates became vulnerable on their flanks. The reinforcements positioned earlier by Meade were now able to push forward and strike at the Confederate fringes. "These men and their officers, once they perceived the direction of the confederate assault, broke their lines on both ends of the threatened area and swinging them as doors slammed

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<sup>29</sup> OR, Vol. 27, Part 2, 647.



them against the enemy flanks so as to crush and pulverize them."<sup>30</sup> The brigades of Pettigrew's division began to fold and run under the pressure of the Union cannons on Cemetery Hill. This left General Pickett's division extremely vulnerable. Though vulnerable, with the flanks folding, the center of the Confederate assault continued to push towards the Clump of Trees. A few of the men, including Brigadier General L. A. Armistead, was able to leap the low stone wall in the Union center and temporarily break the Union line. This was but a momentary break though as Meade was able to quickly mass re-enforcements to this vital area.

The scene was mass confusion with hand to hand combat waged all along the front. Catton described the chaos:

This was the climax and the bloody indisputable payoff; the next few minutes would tell the story, and what that story would be would all depend on whether these blue-coated soldiers really meant it. There were more Federals than Confederates on the field, but right here where the fighting was going on there were more Confederates than Federals, and every man was firing in a wild, feverish haste, with smoke settling down thicker and thicker.<sup>31</sup>

Catton continued:

No formal tactical move was possible in that jammed smoky confusion, and no shout command could be heard in the everlasting din... This was not a controlled movement at all. It was simply a crowd of armed men

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<sup>30</sup> Coddington, 513.

<sup>31</sup> Catton, 413.

running over spontaneously to get into the middle of an enormous fight, Yankee soldiers swarming in to get at their enemies, all regimental formations lost, every man going in on his own.<sup>32</sup>

With the repulse of the Confederate penetration along the stone wall in the Union center, thus ended the debacle called Pickett's Charge. There have been as many reasons given for the failure, as there were men who fought there, but none stands out more to me than the Union ability to quickly re-enforce the center. It is especially important in this particular assault due to the distances involved. Any Confederate re-enforcements had to cover the mile of open ground from Seminary Ridge, while Union Re-enforcements had only a few hundred yards of protected ground to cover to be at the decisive point. The numbers of reserves on both sides were roughly equal, but their proximity to the fight clearly weighed in favor of the Federals.

### CONCLUSION

In this essay, I have attempted to prove the decisiveness of interior lines in the Union victory at Gettysburg. Throughout the three days of battle, General

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<sup>32</sup> Catton, 414.

Meade applied Operational Art in positioning his forces at the decisive time and place. The short lines of communication and the close proximity of units within the defense aided him in this quest. At several important moments, General Meade pulled units from less engaged areas and plugged them into critical spots to prevent Confederate penetrations or exploitations.

One must keep in mind what General Meade accomplished at Gettysburg. He defeated the venerable Confederate General Lee, a feat elusive to all previous Army of the Potomac Commanders. Even more amazing was the fact that he had only been in command for a couple of days when the battle was joined. It has been written of Meade:

Meade concentrated on maneuvering his army to the battle and left tactics to corps and division commanders. That is a remarkable feat in itself considering that he had been a corps commander himself only three days before the battle. For some unknown reason, but much to his credit, he made the transition instantly from the tactical to the operational level when he assumed command of the army.<sup>33</sup>

General Meade operating on interior lines remained visible throughout the battle. He operated from a central command post, located near the front lines, to effect these decisive movements of the Army. Only time bore out the

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<sup>33</sup> Rolston, David A., Lieutenant Colonel, U.S. Army, *Meade's Gettysburg Campaign: The Operational Art of George Gordon Meade*, (USAWC Military Studies Program Paper, U.S. Army War College, Carlisle Pennsylvania, 1986).

significance of General Meade's accomplishment. Although the war would drag out for another two years, the Confederacy had reached its high water mark at Gettysburg. General Meade and the Army of the Potomac, operating on interior lines, accomplished what had alluded them for the previous two years: a battlefield victory against the Army of Northern Virginia.

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