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MCCLELLAN, SUMNER AND THE
SECOND ARMY CORPS IN THE
MARYLAND CAMPAIGN OF SEPTEMBER 1862

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE
GRADUATE FACULTY OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF ARTS

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

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MCCLELLAN, SUMNER, AND THE SECOND ARMY CORPS IN THE
MARYLAND CAMPAIGN OF SEPTEMBER 1862

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ABSTRACT

MCCLELLAN, SUMNER, AND THE SECOND ARMY CORPS

IN THE MARYLAND CAMPAIGN OF SEPTEMBER 1862

MARION V. ARMSTRONG, JR.

The subject of this dissertation is the Maryland Campaign of September 1862. The focus of the study is Major General George B. McClellan, the commander of the Army of the Potomac, Major General Edwin V. Sumner, the commander of the Second Army Corps, and the Second Army Corps itself.

Standard interpretations of the Maryland Campaign and the Battle of Antietam in particular have always been critical of the performance of McClellan and Sumner, and have always portrayed the role of the Second Army Corps at Antietam as critical to the outcome of the battle. By examining the interrelationship of the command decisions made by McClellan and Sumner, and how those decisions were carried out within the Second Corps, this study provides new detail and insight into the conduct of the Maryland Campaign and the Battle of Antietam. While this study does not dispel criticism of McClellan's conduct of the campaign and battle, it does reevaluate the role of Sumner, and reexamines in exacting detail how Sumner's decisions were carried out within the Second Corps, and how those decisions contributed to the final outcome of the battle and the campaign.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Every historian builds on the work of those historians who have come before. First and foremost, therefore, I would like to acknowledge my debt to all of those historians who have researched and written about the Civil War, the Maryland Campaign in particular. It does not matter that my reconstruction and interpretation of events may differ from theirs, or that this study, which is based largely on primary sources, might be considered as shedding new light upon the campaign, the Battle of Antietam, and its participants. None of that would be possible without the work of the historians who taught me about the campaign in the first place.

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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is about the Maryland Campaign of September 1862. In particular, it is about the commander of the Federal army during that campaign, Major General George B. McClellan, and about the commander of the Second Army Corps, Army of the Potomac, Major General Edwin Vose Sumner, and it is about the Second Army Corps itself.

The Maryland Campaign has long been recognized as one of the pivotal campaigns of the Civil War. It resulted from the first invasion of northern territory by Robert E. Lee and his fabled Army of Northern Virginia. Lee's objective in undertaking the campaign was nothing short of achieving a swift recognition of southern independence by winning a decisive battle on northern soil, and in doing so demonstrating to the northern people the hopelessness of ever subjugating the South. Coming as it did in September 1862, the campaign took place when the military fortunes of the North were at a low ebb, perhaps the lowest that they would be during the entire war. In the Eastern Theater, where the campaign took place, the early prospect of success for the Federal armies there—the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Virginia—had been completely reversed in two summer campaigns that virtually restored all of Virginia to southern control. The Federal armies themselves were at a low state of operational capability, needing rest, reorganization, refitting, and an infusion of new recruits. The northern command structure was completely discredited, and no torchbearer appeared on the horizon to

correct the situation. Politically, an ever-growing peace movement in the North threatened to sooner rather than later to force the President of the United States, Abraham Lincoln, to negotiate an end to the conflict based on the recognition of southern political independence. To bolster the Federal war effort, Lincoln had decided on issuing an emancipation proclamation that would free slaves in the rebellious states and make the war about ending slavery, and not just about political reunification. But when he proposed this to his cabinet, the Secretary of State, William Seward, pointed out that such a move could not be taken before achieving some military success, lest it should be seen as “our last shriek on the retreat.” The opportunity for achieving that success, or failing to achieve it, would come with the Maryland Campaign. It was with good reason, then, that a century after the campaign the eminent Civil War historian, Bruce Catton, referred to it as the high water mark of the war, and the turning point.¹

As a critical part of the American Civil War, the Maryland Campaign has, of course, received its share of attention. General studies of the war, like Catton’s *The Centennial History of the Civil War* and Shelby Foote’s *The Civil War, A Narrative*, invariably devote a chapter or more to it. Two full length studies have dealt comprehensively with the campaign; James V. Murfin’s *Gleam of Bayonets* (1965), and Stephen Sears’ *Landscape Turned Red* (1983). Other full length studies, like John Priest’s *Antietam, The Soldiers’ Battle* (1989) have dealt with particular aspects of the campaign and the Battle

¹ Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1983), 45; Bruce Catton, *This Hallowed Ground: The Story of the Union Side of the Civil War* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1956), 161, 169.

of Antietam. There are anthologies as well, like *Antietam: Essays on the 1862 Maryland Campaign* (1989) edited by Gary W. Gallagher.

In these works and others, standard interpretations of particular aspects of the campaign, the Battle of Antietam, and the role of major figures have inevitably developed. In particular, standard interpretations have developed concerning the subjects of this study, McClellan, Sumner, and the Second Army Corps. McClellan, as the principal Federal commander from the summer of 1861 until November of 1862, is easily one of the most controversial figures of the war. His performance as commander of the Army of the Potomac during the Maryland Campaign is usually characterized as excessively slow, overly cautious, and blind to the opportunity presented him for defeating the Army of Northern Virginia and ending the war at the Battle of Antietam. Typical of this interpretation is A. Wilson Greene's comment, "Between September 13 and 18, 1862, George McClellan discarded the best opportunity ever offered to destroy the Confederacy's principal field army."²

Edwin Vose Sumner has been even less kindly treated by historians for his performance at Antietam. His reputation as an old fool, unfit to command even a corporal's guard dates back at least to Francis Palfrey's *The Antietam and Fredericksburg* (1882) in which Palfrey, the lieutenant colonel of the 20th Massachusetts in Sumner's corps at Antietam, accused Sumner of committing the corps to battle based on "some notions as to charging and cutting one's way out." Sumner's poor reputation as a corps

² A. Wilson Greene, "'I Fought the Battle Splendidly;' George B. McClellan and the Maryland Campaign," in *Antietam: Essays on the 1862 Maryland Campaign* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1989), 83.

commander at Antietam has been accepted and furthered by more modern historians like Sears, who wrote that Sumner committed the Second Corps at Antietam after “having devised a plan of action based almost entirely on misapprehension.”³

The story of the Second Army Corps in the Maryland Campaign and at the Battle of Antietam has always been that of a veteran command mishandled by its commanders. It is the story of Sedgwick’s division committed to and immediately driven from the West Woods, of French’s division lost and drifting “south to encounter a hornet’s nest at the Sunken road,” and Richardson’s division arriving belatedly on French’s flank and fighting gallantly to finally break that Confederate position. No historian has maligned the performance of the Second Corps itself, but the corps has always been inextricably and centrally identified with the Federal failure at Antietam.⁴

With regard to McClellan, this study does not set out to correct the standard interpretation of his performance during the Maryland Campaign. Rather, it seeks a reconsideration of his role as the army commander through a step by step presentation of his actions, decisions, and orders as the campaign progressed. Americans were vividly and visually reminded during the 2003 Iraq War that a commander’s view—as well as the public’s—of an ongoing campaign is myopic at best. What the enemy is doing and what he is capable of doing are at any given point a matter of the interpretation of known or reported information concerning the situation. This study, therefore, seeks to see the

³ Francis Winthrop Palfrey, *The Antietam and Fredericksburg*, vol. 5, *Campaigns of the Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1882), 88; Sears, *Landscape Turned Red*, 222.

⁴ Greene, 70.

progress of the campaign as McClellan saw it, and to interpret his conduct of the campaign in that light. Key to achieving this objective has been an exacting chronological reconstruction of the correspondence and dispatches flowing through the Headquarters of the Army of the Potomac during the campaign in an effort to know what McClellan knew, when he knew it, and how he acted in light of that knowledge.

When it comes to Sumner, however, this study does seek to correct the record. Rather than the incompetent old fool out of place as a corps commander in the Army of the Potomac, this study will present Sumner as entirely competent in that position. Rather than the general responsible for the failure of his corps at Antietam, Sumner will be presented as a commander effectively working toward the accomplishment of the mission and objectives given him by his commander, and as a commander willing to take the risks necessary to achieve those objectives. The study follows Sumner as it does McClellan, seeing the situation through his eyes, and considering his decisions and actions in the light of his orders and his understanding of what was going on around him. The result is an Edwin Vose Sumner very much different from the one written off by most campaign historians.

The story of the Second Army Corps in this study is also very much different from the story as it has been previously told by historians. This study carefully examines the functioning and operations of the corps from its commander down to the newest private soldier in an effort to understand in detail what the corps did and how it did it throughout the campaign and during the Battle of Antietam. This examination includes a consideration of the condition of the corps during the campaign, the effectiveness of its

commanders in directing a combined arms organization of infantry regiments and artillery batteries, and the tactical arrangements employed by the various subordinate units of the corps. Reconstructing and detailing the operations of the corps has been a matter of painstakingly comparing and contrasting the dispatches and communications received and generated by the corps and division staff officers, the after-action reports of the corps' division, brigade, and regimental commanders, and the available letters, memoirs, and regimental histories written by the corps' officers and soldiers. The result is a narrative account that relates for the first time the details of what happened to Sedgwick's division in the West Woods, and to French's and Richardson's divisions at the Sunken road.

CHAPTER 1

PRELUDE

I

On Saturday, the sixth of September 1862, the weather across all of central Maryland and northern Virginia was sunny, warm, and dry, as perfect a day as could be expected in that region during that delightful, late summer time of the year. The military forecast, though, was unsettled, and the very air was charged with the electricity of an approaching storm.

In the otherwise lazy Federal camps in and about Washington, D.C., it had been rumored for the past two days that Confederate forces were crossing the Potomac River from Virginia into Maryland above Seneca Mills using the crossing sites at Edward's, White's and Noland's ferries. The strength of this mysterious Confederate force was reported as being substantial, anywhere from 30,000 to 50,000 men. What this force would do in Maryland was purely a matter of speculation. The move might be a feint to draw Federal forces out of Virginia in order to weaken the arc of fortifications south of the Potomac, making Washington vulnerable to direct attack from that quarter, or it might be the beginning of a quick strike on that city from the north to take place before Federal forces could be redeployed from Virginia to defend the capital in that direction. A third possibility was that this Confederate force would attempt to cut off the nation's capital from direct land communication with the northern states by severing the roads and

railroads north of the city and occupying nearby Baltimore. Finally, the crossing might be simply a raid into Maryland, foreshadowing a Confederate incursion into Pennsylvania during the harvest and election season.

Whatever the movement or its objectives, it had been made possible by the defeat just a little over a week before of Federal Major General John Pope's Army of Virginia on the plains of Manassas, a mere thirty miles west of Washington. Following that failure, Pope withdrew his weary and demoralized army east toward the fortifications of Washington, supported by a rear guard made up of several corps sent to him from the Army of the Potomac, which was just returning to northern Virginia from its own failed summer-long campaign on the peninsula between the York and James Rivers. The victorious Confederates followed Pope's retreating army toward the fortifications of Washington, all the while aggressively maintaining contact with it. But then, on the third of September, the enemy suddenly broke contact and disappeared to the northwest in the direction of Leesburg. Rumors and the fear of some sort of incursion into Maryland immediately began to permeate the thinking of high level Federal commanders.

As the extent of Pope's defeat and the depth of the military crisis became apparent, President Abraham Lincoln on the first of September directed the Army General-in-Chief, Major General Henry W. Halleck, to place Major General George Britton McClellan in overall command of the defenses of Washington. The following morning, in a meeting that included the President, Halleck and McClellan, the latter's command authority was extended to take in all Federal troops in and around Washington, specifically including

those army corps that had previously been under the command of Pope. That same day, the President, acting through Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton, ordered Halleck to have organized a force capable of taking the field, a force separate from that required for manning the defenses of Washington. Accordingly, on the third of September, Halleck issued orders for McClellan to assemble from the various army corps then in the vicinity of Washington, a “movable army” that would be prepared to take the field to counter any Confederate move into Maryland.¹

II

The President’s selection of McClellan as the commander of all Federal forces in and about Washington during this crisis was made with the greatest reluctance. According to Navy Secretary Gideon Wells, Lincoln readily admitted during the 2 September cabinet meeting, where McClellan’s appointment was discussed, that he was not the general to be trusted in command of an army in the field conducting an offensive campaign. A few days later, Lincoln confided to his private secretary, John Hay, his reason for selecting McClellan. “There is no man in the army who can man these fortifications and lick these troops of ours into shape half as well as he.” Lincoln then went on to tell Hay, “If he can’t fight himself, he excels in making others ready to fight.” Lincoln’s words to Hay reveal

¹ War Department, *War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 71 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), series I, vol. 19, pt. 1, 24-25, 36-37 and pt. 2, 169. Hereinafter cited as OR. All references are to Series I unless otherwise noted.

that the current crisis demanded a general who could quickly bring discipline and organization to the recently defeated Federal armies. But Lincoln's words also reveal that he recognized that the greater need was for a fighting general who could aggressively direct a field army in a campaign of maneuver. In selecting McClellan, Lincoln was settling for a general who had shown himself to be less a fighting general, than a general whose talents lay in his ability to organize an army.²

McClellan had begun reaching the summit of his military career just a little over a year earlier, when, in the aftermath of the first Federal disaster on the plains of Manassas in July 1861, he was called to Washington and given command of the Department of the Potomac comprising the defenses of Washington and the recently defeated field force of Brigadier General Irwin McDowell. Upon arrival in Washington, McClellan quickly concluded that the burden of saving the Union had been placed squarely on his shoulders. He wrote his wife, Mary Ellen, "I find myself in a new & strange position here—Presdt, Cabinet, Genl Scott & all deferring to me—by some strange operation of magic I seem to have become *the* power of the land."³

As the power of the land, McClellan's first task would be the creation of an army through which he could exercise that power, and at that point there probably was no one

² Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan, The Young Napoleon* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 260; John Hay, *Inside Lincoln's White House: The Complete Diary of John Hay*, ed. Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1997), 38-9.

³ OR 2, 763, 766.

on the Federal side better suited to the challenge. McClellan was, to say the least, intellectually gifted. He had begun his military career in June 1842, when at the young age of fifteen he became a cadet at the United States Military Academy at West Point, after having already completed two years of study at the University of Pennsylvania. In 1846, he graduated second in his class of fifty-nine, a class that included twenty men who would become general officers during the Civil War.

As the most promising officers always did, McClellan took his commission in the prestigious and elite Corps of Engineers, and was fortunate in being assigned to an engineer company just then being organized at West Point for service in Mexico. The company was eventually attached to Winfield Scott's army for the 1847 campaign to Mexico City, placing McClellan in the middle of what would prove to be the most important American military experience prior to the Civil War. McClellan's performance during that campaign was exemplary, and he received brevet promotions to first lieutenant and captain.

After the war, McClellan and his company returned to West Point, where he remained until 1851 when he was reassigned to Fort Delaware, a coastal defensive work under construction at the head of Delaware Bay. His time at Fort Delaware was short and notable only for his translation and preparation of a new manual of bayonet exercises for the Army. In the spring of 1852, he was again reassigned, this time to serve as engineer and second-in-command to Captain Randolph B. Marcy on an expedition to explore the sources of the Red River in the northern part of Texas. Subsequent to the Red River

expedition, McClellan was sent to direct a survey of rivers and harbors along the Texas coast, the first assignment in which he was to be in charge and not merely an assistant.⁴

As he was completing this assignment in the spring of 1853, McClellan was offered the opportunity to organize and lead an expedition to find a route through the Cascade Mountains for the transcontinental railroad. The Cascade expedition brought McClellan to the notice of Secretary of War Jefferson Davis, who the following year personally selected him for a semi-secret voyage aboard the frigate *Columbia* to find an anchorage and coaling station for the navy in Santa Domingo. Although nothing tangible came from the Santa Domingo voyage, McClellan was able to write that Davis “expressed himself as being very much pleased with the result of my summer’s work, & the manner in which it had been conducted.” Davis continued to direct McClellan’s assignments and next had him studying railroad construction techniques and costs. In 1855, Davis selected McClellan, now a captain of cavalry, for a trip to Europe along with two more senior officers to study the organization, methods, and equipment of the great continental armies. The trip took them to all of the major capitals of Europe as well as to the siege of Sevastopol on the Crimean Peninsula. The result was the publication in 1857 of McClellan’s report, *The Seat of War in Europe in 1855 and 1856*, establishing him as the American authority on the organization and management of large armies.⁵

Unable to find advancement in an army that relied on a system of seniority for promotion, McClellan resigned his commission in early 1857 to take a job as the chief

⁴ Sears, 34-5.

engineer of the Illinois Central Railroad. His talent for organization and management led to his appointment within a year as one of the road's vice-presidents. During the Panic of 1857, he was made chairman of the committee of assignment to keep the road from financial ruin, and stalwartly kept it in operation without cutting service until the panic subsided in 1858. Not all railroads were so fortunate. The Ohio And Mississippi Railroad was forced into receivership by the financial crisis, which led its directors in 1860 to offer McClellan the position of superintendent, and then the presidency of the road's eastern division at Cincinnati. This is where McClellan found himself when the forces of the provisional Confederate government fired on Fort Sumter on 12 April 1861.

As a distinguished military professional and experienced executive, McClellan's services were much sought after by the governors of Ohio, New York, and McClellan's home state of Pennsylvania. On 23 April, he accepted the offer of Ohio's governor and became commander of Ohio forces, but less than a month later was appointed a major general in the regular army, and given command of the newly formed Department of the Ohio with headquarters at Cincinnati. From there, McClellan directed the organization, equipping, and training of forces from the western states, and during June and July orchestrated a campaign across the Ohio River into western Virginia that secured control of that vital area for the Union. Although he personally directed no battles during the campaign, McClellan's success in western Virginia made him the only successful Federal

⁵ Sears, 40-1, 43.

commander anywhere and prompted the government to call him to Washington in the wake of First Bull Run.

McClellan immediately began to use his considerable talent for organization and management to bring order from the chaos created by the defeat of McDowell's army. When he took command on 27 July 1861, McClellan found in the vicinity of Washington some fifty thousand infantry, supported by less than one thousand cavalry and nine batteries of field artillery with only thirty guns. The regiments and batteries that had been a part of McDowell's army were organized as provisional brigades, but among the rest there was a "general want of discipline and organization." McClellan's first step was to organize the infantry into brigades of four regiments each. To handle the new troops just arriving in Washington, he established camps of instruction for the issuance of arms and equipment, and to provide "some elementary instruction before assigning them permanently to brigades." After a time—it would not be until October—"when the organization of the brigades was well established and the troops somewhat disciplined and instructed, divisions of three brigades each were gradually formed." When new batteries of artillery arrived, "they were also retained in Washington until their armament and equipment were complete and their instruction sufficiently advanced to justify their being assigned to divisions." Similar procedures were followed in organizing the cavalry. It was during this period that McClellan began the development of a European style staff to assist him in building and managing his army.⁶

⁶ OR 5, 11, 13, 14.

The result of McClellan's efforts during the summer and autumn of 1861 was the creation of the Army of the Potomac, the largest, best equipped, and best trained army that the United States had ever possessed. By February of 1862, McClellan could report that this army consisted of fourteen divisions with a total infantry strength of 154,913, supported by 307 guns. McClellan's efforts during this period made him the most celebrated American military figure since Washington. When Winfield Scott retired in November 1861, Lincoln appointed McClellan the new General-in-Chief.

III

Aside from his intellectual brilliance and his considerable talent for organization and management, McClellan had a number of faults of character that better fitted him to the role of organizer and planner than to that of field army commander. These faults, as well as McClellan's talents, began to show during the fall and winter of 1861 as he was organizing the Federal war effort and the Army of the Potomac. His first fault was a penchant for seeing his situation and the situation of the Army of the Potomac as always being more dire than it really was. This led McClellan to continually overestimate the strength and capabilities of the enemy, and to fatalistically see himself and the Army of the Potomac the last great hope of the nation. If he failed, if the Army of the Potomac failed, then the South would prevail and the Union fall. His second fault was his inability to accept direction from above, especially when that direction came from civilian authorities, and especially when those authorities did not completely agree with his assessments. For McClellan the greater enemies soon became those above him in the administration who opposed or impeded his plans in any way. If he failed, it would be their doing, not his. The last fault was that McClellan, the engineer, was a meticulous planner who by temperament and training sought to eliminate risk as a factor that could interfere with the execution of his plans. A solid plan was paramount, and the plan could only be carried out if the conditions were exactly right. Collectively, these faults made McClellan overly cautious and slow in action. They were the faults that made Lincoln

lament by September 1862 that McClellan, despite all of his organizational ability, was not the man for the command of an army in the field.

Shortly after his arrival in Washington in the summer of 1861, McClellan was asked by the President to outline his plan for the conduct of the war. McClellan responded on 2 August with a strategy calling for the massing of forces and a decisive battle. McClellan's rationale was that the crisis in the aftermath of First Bull Run was no longer a simple rebellion, but a full-scale war in which "it has become necessary to crush a population sufficiently numerous, intelligent, and warlike to constitute a nation. We have not only to defeat their armed and organized forces in the field," he wrote Lincoln, "but to display such an overwhelming strength, as will convince all our antagonists, especially those of the governing aristocratic class, of the utter impossibility of resistance." The operational army to carry out this strategy would have to consist of not less than 250 infantry regiments, 100 field artillery batteries, 28 regiments of cavalry, and 5 regiments of engineers; in all an army of 273,000 men. The decisive battle, when it came, would be in Virginia, chosen by the rebels themselves "as their battle-field." Once the main rebel army was defeated, Richmond would be occupied followed by "Charleston, Savannah, Montgomery, Pensacola, Mobile, and New Orleans; in other words to move into the heart of the enemy's country, and crush out this rebellion in its very heart." It would not, however, be a war against the people of the South. By "pursuing a rigidly protective

policy as to private property and unarmed persons, and a lenient course as to private soldiers, we may well hope for a permanent restoration of a peace-full Union.”⁷

McClellan’s strategy was a vision for the conduct of the war that would bring him into conflict with the then General-in-Chief, Lieutenant General Winfield Scott. Scott had long since developed his own plan for the conduct of the war that proposed economic rather than military subjugation of the South. Dubbed by the newspapers the “Anaconda Plan,” its principal features were “a complete blockade of the [South’s] Atlantic and Gulf ports” in conjunction with “a powerful movement down the Mississippi to the ocean . . . so as to envelop the insurgent States and bring them to terms with less bloodshed than by any other plan.” The army for the expedition down the Mississippi would not need to be more than eighty thousand strong and would be supported by a fleet of from twelve to twenty steam gun-boats and forty steam transports to carry the army’s personnel, equipment, and supplies. When enemy batteries were encountered along the banks of the river, they would be captured by turning movements, and the flotilla would continue on “leaving a sufficient number of posts with complete garrisons to keep the river open behind the expedition.”⁸

⁷ OR 5, 6-8; George B. McClellan, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865*, ed. Stephen W. Sears (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 71-5. Although McClellan says in his report that his memorandum to the President was dated 4 August, Sears establishes that it was delivered personally by McClellan to Lincoln on 2 August.

⁸ OR 51, pt. 1, 369-70, 387.

As Scott and McClellan clashed over how best to proceed with the conduct of the war, McClellan began to see Scott as an enemy who had to be defeated before he [McClellan] could get on with defeating the rebel army. On the same day that McClellan presented his plan to Lincoln, he wrote his wife, “I shall carry this thing on ‘En grand’ & crush the rebels in one campaign . . . I will leave nothing undone to gain it.” Concerning Scott and his plan, McClellan commented that he “is fast becoming very slow & very old. He cannot long retain command I think—when he retires I am sure to succeed him.”⁹

During the summer of 1861, Scott and McClellan also clashed over the issue of securing the capital (figure 1). On 8 August, McClellan addressed a letter to Scott laying out his concerns for Washington’s safety. But, McClellan also took the extraordinary step of having a copy of the letter delivered directly to the President by one of his volunteer aides. In the letter, McClellan said, “I am induced to believe that the enemy has at least 100,000 men in our front.” He speculated that the enemy was about to “attack the positions on the other side of the Potomac and at the same time cross the river above the city in force,” and went on to comment that “our present army in this vicinity is entirely insufficient for the emergency.” McClellan’s recommendation was a concentration of all available Federal forces at Washington immediately, and that all the military departments surrounding Washington from Fort Monroe to Baltimore and

⁹ McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 75.

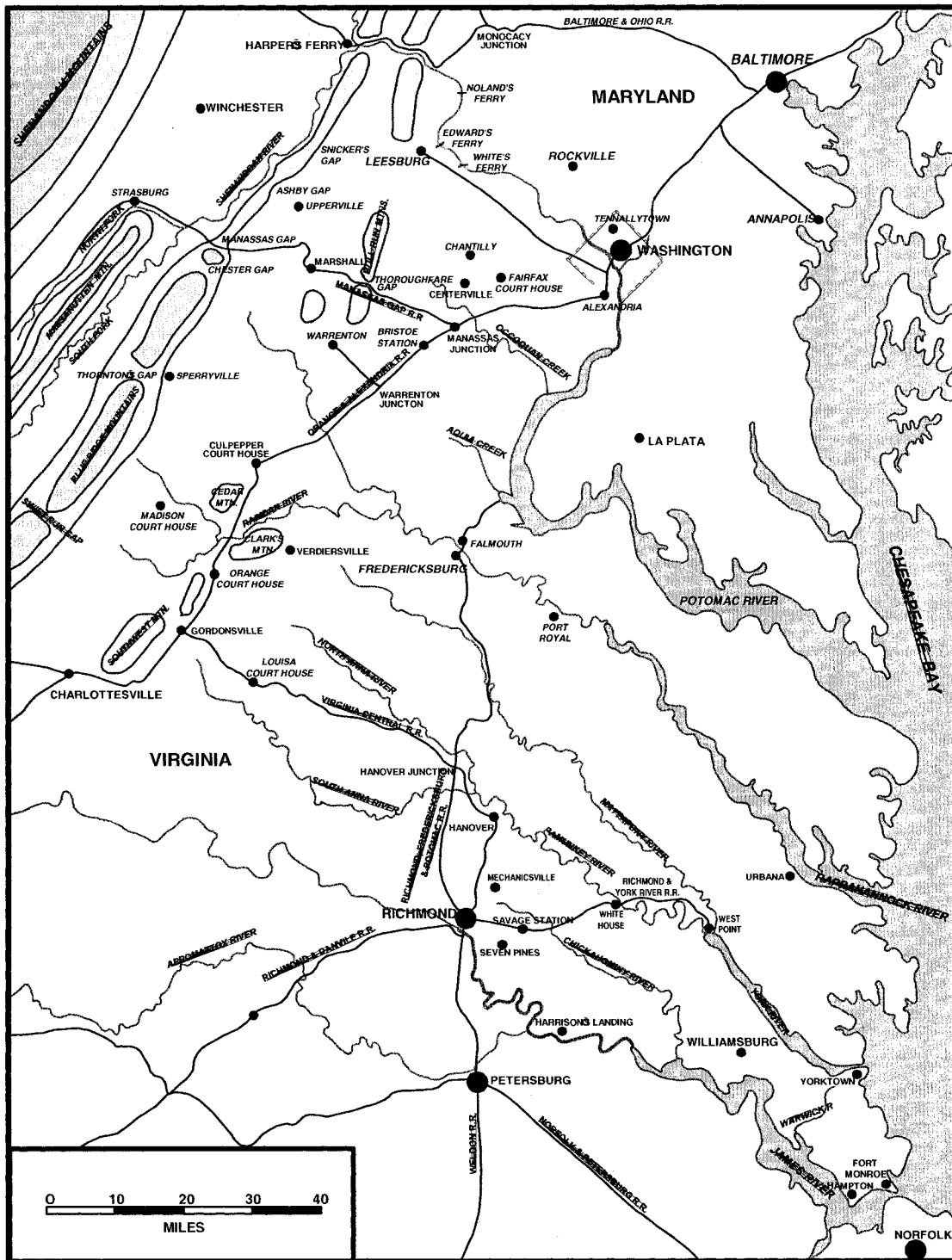


Figure 1. The Eastern Theater of Operations, 1861-1862.

Pennsylvania be merged under his command. "I urge that nothing be left undone to bring up our force for the defense of this city to 100,000 men before attending to any other point."¹⁰

Scott responded to McClellan's alarm in a letter to Secretary of War Simon Cameron the following day. To McClellan's assertion that the capital was insecure and in immediate danger, Scott said, "I am confident in the opposite opinion; . . . I have not the slightest apprehension for the safety of the Government here." Scott reviewed for Cameron his problems with the young general. "Had Major-General McClellan presented the same views in person, they would have been freely entertained and discussed. All my military views and opinions had been so presented to him, without eliciting much remark, in our few meetings, which I have in vain sought to multiply."¹¹

The feud between Scott and McClellan continued on into late summer and early autumn with McClellan increasingly seeing Scott as his major problem, even as he raised the estimate of the strength of the enemy army across the river. He wrote Mary Ellen on 15 August that "Genl Scott is the most dangerous antagonist I have." The next day he wrote her that "the enemy have from 3 to 4 times my force—the Presdt is an idiot, the old general in his dotage—they cannot or will not see the true state of affairs." McClellan increasingly ignored Scott, communicating freely with the President and members of the cabinet. Scott responded on 16 September with General Order No. 17 in which he

¹⁰ McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 79-80.

¹¹ OR 11, pt. 3, 4.

reminded all officers that communication with a superior could be accomplished only through the chain of command, “and the same rule applies to correspondence with the President direct or with him through the Secretary of War.” McClellan ignored this order and continued to go to the President and Secretary of War directly. When McClellan also ignored a direct order from Scott to furnish returns for the Army of the Potomac, Scott wrote the Secretary of War on 4 October, “the remedy by arrest and trial before a court-martial would probably soon cure the evil. But it has been feared that a conflict of authority near the head of the Army would be highly encouraging to the enemies and depressing to the friends of the Union.” Consequently, “being as I am unable to ride in the saddle or to walk . . . I shall definitely retire from the Army.”¹²

Scott’s retirement became effective on 31 October, and at 4:00 a.m. the next morning he boarded a train for New York. It was a dismal rainy morning and few came out to see off the general who had been on active duty since 1808, and for the last twenty years the ranking officer of the United States Army. Among those who did, though, were McClellan and some members of his staff. McClellan described his feelings on this occasion in a letter to his wife. “The sight of this morning was a lesson to me which I hope not soon to forget. I saw there the end of a long, active & ambitious life—the end of the career of the first soldier of his nation—& it was a feeble old man scarce able to walk—hardly any one there to see him off Should I ever become vainglorious & ambitious remind me of that spectacle.” Later that morning a White House messenger

¹² McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 84, 85-6; OR 51, pt. 1, 491-3.

brought McClellan official notification of his appointment by the President as Scott's successor as the General-in-Chief.¹³

With Scott retired, McClellan should now have been able to proceed with his plan to win the war in one great campaign. But suddenly McClellan began to see other problems that would prevent him from going forward with his plan until they were solved and further preparations properly completed. As General-in-Chief, he was now responsible for the whole army and the whole war effort. He wrote Mary Ellen on 2 November, "I find the 'Army' just about as much disorganized as was the Army of the Potomac when I assumed command—everything at sixes & sevens—no system, no order—perfect chaos. I *can* & *will* reduce it to order—I *will* soon have it working smoothly." Of course, no move could take place against the enemy until this had been accomplished.¹⁴

Although McClellan stuck with his plan for winning the war in one campaign, he now suddenly came to believe that that campaign would not succeed without supporting efforts being made in other theaters of operation. In his memoir he recalled, "Until my own sphere of command and responsibility was extended from the Army of the Potomac to all the armies, I supposed that some general plan of operations existed, but now learned that there was none such, and that utter disorganization and want of preparation pervaded the Western armies." This situation would also have to be rectified before the Army of the Potomac could move forward. "Even if the Army of the Potomac had been in

¹³ McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 123-4.

¹⁴ McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 123.

condition to undertake a campaign in the autumn of 1861, the backward state of affairs in the West would have made it unwise to do so; for on no sound military principle could it be regarded as proper to operate on one line alone while all was quiescent on the others, as such a course would have enabled the enemy to concentrate everything on the one active army.”¹⁵

As if this were not enough to justify postponing active operations until the spring of 1862, McClellan also was under the apprehension that Confederate strengths and capabilities were growing more rapidly than his own. Where on 8 August, McClellan had estimated the Confederate army at Manassas Junction at 100,000, when pressed by Lincoln in late October for a definite plan of operation, McClellan reported to Secretary Cameron that “all the information from spies, prisoners, &c., agrees in showing that the enemy have a force on the Potomac not less than 150,000 strong, well drilled and equipped, ably commanded, and strongly entrenched.” Under these circumstances, McClellan told Cameron that there were but two courses of action left for the remainder of 1861; “to go into winter quarters or so assume the offensive with forces greatly inferior in numbers to the army I [regard] as desirable and necessary.” McClellan offered the hope, however, that “if political considerations render the first course unadvisable,” by stripping the western armies of their “superfluous” troops to reinforce the Army of the Potomac “we may yet be able to move with a reasonable prospect of success before the

¹⁵ George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story* (New York: Charles & Company, 1887), 200.

winter is fairly upon us.” This memorandum, however, was written on 31 October, the day before McClellan became general-in-chief, and his tone with regard to the western armies—as already noted—would change with his assumption of that post. Still, it is doubtful that he really believed anything could be accomplished before winter. Just a little over a week later, McClellan wrote a friend, “My intention is simply this—I will pay no attention to popular clamor—quietly, & quickly as possible, make this Army strong enough & efficient enough to give me a reasonable certainty that, if I am able to handle the form, I will win the first battle.” Apparently, McClellan did not see that battle as occurring before the spring of 1862.¹⁶

Even as he was writing his friend on 8 November, though, McClellan’s concept of the singular decisiveness of one campaign and one battle was beginning to undergo a change. In his memoirs he wrote, “As early as the beginning of Dec., 1861, I had determined not to follow the line of operations leading by land from Washington to Richmond, but to conduct a sufficient force by water to Urbana, and thence by a rapid march to West Point . . .” McClellan explained that by means of this operation he hoped to cut off all Confederate forces on the Peninsula, and then, with the James River as his line of communication, to throw the army across that river and take Richmond from the rear. As for the main Confederate army at Manassas Junction, the army that in August he intended to defeat as the first step in overwhelming the South, McClellan said, “There

¹⁶ OR 5, 9; McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 118; 127-8. Sears note on page 118 establishes the date of McClellan’s memorandum to Cameron as 31 October.

was no possible military reason for disturbing them, and it best answered my purposes to keep them where they were.” What McClellan did not mention was how he planned to keep that army at Manassas, or how and when he would eventually deal with it.¹⁷

McClellan revealed very little of his new plan for the conduct of the war to anyone, especially the President. When by early December, McClellan had made no move with the Army of the Potomac, nor issued any positive orders for movements in other theaters, Lincoln sought to activate operations by suggesting a movement of the army via the Occoquan River to turn the position of the Confederate army at Manassas by cutting its line of communication with Richmond, the Orange and Alexandria Railroad. McClellan replied that such an operation would require no less than 104,000 men, and that the enemy could meet the thrust with nearly equal strength. He then confided to Lincoln only that “I have now in my mind actively turned towards another plan of campaign that I do not think at all anticipated by the enemy nor many of our people.” As to what that plan was or when it would take place, McClellan told Lincoln nothing.¹⁸

The relationship between McClellan and the President—never that good at any time—had deteriorated rapidly since the departure of Scott. In McClellan’s mind, Lincoln was now the major obstacle, and he deeply resented and reacted against this perceived interference with his handling of the army and his plans for saving the Union. He took to referring to the President as the “original gorilla,” and “nothing more than a

¹⁷ McClellan, *McClellan’s Own Story*, 202-3.

¹⁸ McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 143.

well meaning baboon.” In one famous incident in November, McClellan returned home from the wedding of an officer and went to bed while the President and Secretary of State waited for him in the parlor. McClellan especially resented Lincoln’s not infrequent, unannounced visits to army headquarters and his quarters. On 31 October, he had written Mary Ellen that in order to get any work done, he had to conceal himself at the house of Edwin M. Stanton “to dodge all enemies in shape of ‘browsing’ Presdt etc. . . .” The “etc.,” no doubt, referred to the members of Lincoln’s cabinet, for whom he had no more use than he did the President. In one letter to Mary Ellen he referred to them as “wretched politicians,” and proceeded to describe their individual faults. Salmon Chase, the Secretary of the Treasury, was the only one he thought well of and trusted, and the only one to whom he confided the details of his strategic thinking in December. No doubt McClellan felt he needed some support at that level.¹⁹

Although he was constantly wanting some information from McClellan, Lincoln did not really begin to pressure him to advance until Lincoln himself began feeling pressure from Congress in January 1862. This came in the form of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, headed by Senator Benjamin Wade of Ohio. Both Lincoln and McClellan had been fortunate that Congress had been in adjournment since 6 August. The Second Session of the Thirty-seventh Congress, however, convened on 2 December, and on 10 December appointed the committee with three members from the Senate and

¹⁹ McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 106-7, 135; Sears, 132-3.

four from the House of Representatives “to inquire into the conduct of the present war.” First and foremost the committee wanted some explanation as to why the Army of the Potomac, the army created in the aftermath of Bull Run “so that offensive operations might be resumed at the earliest practical moment,” had yet to advance against the enemy “and forever crush out any hope of success which the rebels might cherish.”²⁰

Naturally enough, the committee sought an interview with McClellan as its first order of business. However, on 23 December, the day scheduled for McClellan to meet with the committee at its room in the capitol, he came down with typhoid fever and could not attend. As it became apparent that McClellan would be incapacitated for weeks, the committee proceeded to take testimony from other general officers. From these early interviews the committee concluded “that the army of the Potomac was well armed and equipped, and had reached a high state of discipline by the last of September or the first of October. The men were ready and eager to commence active operations. The generals in command of the various divisions were opposed to going into winter quarters, and the most of them declared they had no expectation of doing so.” Armed with this information, Wade and other committee members began pressuring Lincoln to force McClellan to act, or replace him with Irwin McDowell.²¹

²⁰ Congress, Senate, Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 3 pts., 37th Cong., 3rd sess., 1863, Rep. Com. 108, pt. 1, 3, 5-6.

²¹ *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 5-6; Sears, 138-9.

With McClellan still confined to his bed, Lincoln directly queried the commanders of the western departments, Halleck in St. Louis and Major General Don Carlos Buell in Louisville, concerning the status of their commands and their plans for active operations. To his dismay, Lincoln learned that neither general considered their forces ready to move and that there were no plans for any coordinated active operations. Lincoln summed up his feelings in a note written on Halleck's response; "It is exceedingly discouraging. As everywhere else, nothing can be done." Not knowing what else to do Lincoln visited army quartermaster, Brigadier General Montgomery C. Meigs, who recommended that he call an informal council of war of cabinet members and senior general officers to discuss and decide on plans for the conduct of the war. Lincoln held two such meetings, one on the evening of 10 January 1862 and the other the following day.²²

McClellan, still on his sick bed, learned of Lincoln's councils of war from Stanton, who told him, "They are counting on your death, and are already dividing among themselves your military goods and chattels." McClellan blamed the meetings on "radical leaders" and McDowell "hoping to succeed me in command." In response, he took it upon himself to go unannounced to the White House the following morning. There he "took advantage of the occasion to explain to the President in a general and casual way what my intentions were." This was the first mention of his Urbana plan to the President since his hint of its existence in early December. Lincoln then invited McClellan to attend the third war council meeting which was to be held the following

²² OR 7, 526, 532-3, 926; Sears, 139.

morning. At this meeting, McClellan acted with extreme arrogance to all present, including his former cabinet ally, Chase, who knew something of the Urbana plan from McClellan himself. When the President asked McClellan to describe the plan for all present, he replied “that if the President had confidence in me it was not right or necessary to entrust my designs to the judgment of others, . . . that no general commanding an army would willingly submit his plans to the judgment of such an assembly, in which some were incompetent to form a valuable opinion, and others incapable of keeping a secret.” Shortly afterwards the meeting broke up, but as McClellan remembered it, “The radicals never again lost their influence with the President, and henceforth directed all their efforts to prevent my achieving success.”²³

Completely frustrated in his efforts to get McClellan to commit himself to some definite plan for active operations, Lincoln finally took matters into his own hands and on 27 January issued the President’s General War Order, No. 1 directing the advance of all Federal land and naval forces by 22 February. On 31 January, he issued the President’s Special War Order, No. 1, making the particular objective of the Army of the Potomac the execution of the Occoquan operation that he had suggested to McClellan in early December. McClellan responded by asking the President for permission to submit his objections to the President’s plan in writing. This McClellan did on 3 February in a long letter to the new Secretary of War, Edwin M. Stanton, in which, for the first time, McClellan laid out for the administration the complete details of his Urbana plan.

²³ McClellan, *McClellan’s Own Story*, 155-9.

According to McClellan's final report, "many verbal conferences ensued," and Lincoln finally approved the plan on 27 February, though the War Department began the process of collecting the transports necessary to move the army to the lower Chesapeake as early as 14 February.²⁴

In the meantime, an operation was mounted by several divisions of the Army of the Potomac to reopen the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad through western Maryland. This operation involved the construction of a bridge across the Potomac River at Harper's Ferry using canal boats, but when the operation was launched it was discovered that the canal boats that had been assembled for the bridge could not be moved to Harper's Ferry because they were too wide to fit through the locks of the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal. The ineptness of this affair caused Lincoln on 8 March to once again question McClellan concerning his plan for a move to the lower Chesapeake. As McClellan put it, "Another recital of the same facts which had before given satisfaction to his excellency again produced, as I supposed, the same results." But McClellan's recollection of this meeting with Lincoln was faulty, for it took more than a simple "recital of the same facts" to reconvince Lincoln to allow the operation to go forward. McClellan had to assemble and bring back to the White House the senior division commanders of the Army of the

²⁴ OR 5, 41, 42-6; McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 162-71. Sears in *Civil War Papers* provides a copy of McClellan's letter to Stanton that contains several paragraphs not found in the OR version. Also see Sears's notes for a detailed discussion of the development of McClellan's letter.

Potomac to demonstrate that there was general—though not unanimous—approval of the plan by the generals.²⁵

In describing the results of the 8 March meetings as the same, McClellan also misspoke. Lincoln's reapproval of the plan came in form of the President's General War Order, No 3, issued just after the meeting. In this directive, Lincoln established specific caveats for the undertaking of the operation. First, McClellan was to ensure enough forces were left at Washington to render the city "entirely secure." Second, the operation had to include neutralizing the Confederate batteries below Washington that partially obstructed navigation of the Potomac. Third, the movement of the army had to begin by 18 March.²⁶

As the President and General-in-Chief on 8 March debated how best to use the Army of the Potomac to bring the war to a successful conclusion, the Confederate army at Manassas Junction suddenly abandoned its fortifications, withdrawing south into central Virginia. McClellan was not surprised, because the "retirement of the enemy towards Richmond had been expected as the natural consequence of the movement to the Peninsula." Orders were immediately issued for a general movement forward of the Army of the Potomac on the tenth, but McClellan reported that the "almost impassable roads between our positions and theirs deprived us of the opportunity for inflicting damage usually afforded by the withdrawal of a large army in the face of a powerful adversary."

²⁵ OR 5, 48-50.

²⁶ OR 5, 50.

Still the Army of the Potomac and McClellan were for the first time in the field.²⁷

McClellan's departure from Washington offered Lincoln an opportunity to place the conduct of the war and the Federal armies directly into the hands of the administration. On 11 March, he issued the President's War Order, No. 3. It read, in part; "Major-General McClellan having personally taken the field at the head of the Army of the Potomac, until otherwise ordered he is relieved from command of the other military departments, he retaining command of the Department of the Potomac." Surprisingly, McClellan seemed to accept his relief as general-in-chief amicably. In a 12 March note to Lincoln, McClellan reminded him that at sometime past he [McClellan] had stated "that no feeling of self-interest or ambition should ever prevent me from devoting myself to the service." Now, "under the present circumstances," he continued, "I shall work just as cheerfully as before, and that no consideration of self will in any manner interfere with the discharge of my public duties."²⁸

Given that the situation was now changed, McClellan called a council of war of his senior commanders-now the army corps commanders-at Fairfax, Virginia on 13 March. At this council, McClellan presented a modified plan for an advance on Richmond from the lower Chesapeake. Since the Confederate army was now in central Virginia, assembled south of the Rappahannock and Rapidan Rivers, McClellan dared not risk a landing at Urbana and a rapid march on Richmond. Rather, he proposed to use Fort Monroe as the army's base of operations, advancing up the peninsula between the James

²⁷ OR 5, 50.

and York Rivers to Richmond. In his 3 February letter to Stanton, McClellan had described this option as “the worst coming to the worst,” but also admitted that from Fort Monroe he could “operate with complete security, although with less celebrity & brilliancy of results.” The revised plan was approved by the generals and promptly forwarded to Washington for approval, which was given the following day. Leaving Major General Nathaniel Banks with the Fifth Army Corps to secure Manassas Junction against a return of the rebels, the remainder of the Army of the Potomac was set in motion for its places of embarkation. The first troops were started on their way on 17 March, and McClellan himself took ship on 1 April. Several days prior, he had written his friend, Samuel L.M. Barlow, “I shall soon leave here on the wing for Richmond—which you may be sure I will take.”²⁹

IV

In a detailed plan of operations filed with the War Department on 19 March, McClellan stated that he planned to use the York River as his line of communications, establishing his base of operations at West Point at the head of the river just twenty-five miles from Richmond. He expected that the decisive battle of the campaign would be fought somewhere between West Point and Richmond.³⁰

The one obstacle to reaching and establishing his base at West Point was the

²⁸ OR 5, 55.

²⁹ OR 5, 45; McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 213.

Confederate batteries at Yorktown and those directly across the river on Gloucester Point. The best method for dealing with this obstacle, he told the War Department, was “a combined naval and land attack,” which he thought would be successful in a matter of hours. Once Yorktown was neutralized, “a strong corps would be pushed up the York, under cover of the navy, directly upon West Point.” Pursuant to this plan he recommended that the navy “at once concentrate upon the York River all their available and most powerful batteries.” The unattractive alternative was a reduction of Yorktown by siege which would cause considerable delay. “It is impossible to urge too strongly the absolute necessity of the full co-operation of the Navy as a part of this programme. Without it the operations may be prolonged for many weeks, and we may be forced to carry in front several strong positions, which by their aid could be turned without serious loss of either time or men.”³¹

McClellan’s plan for a rapid reduction of Yorktown and a quick advance up the York River to West Point was excellent, especially considering that Yorktown and the lower Peninsula defenses at the time were held by no more than eight thousand Confederate soldiers. Executing any military scheme, however, is never perfect, and requires a commander who is decisive and aggressive and, above all, willing to divert from the plan and take risks when there is the potential for achieving results. McClellan on the Peninsula would not be such a commander.

³⁰ OR 5, 57-8.

³¹ OR 5, 57-8.

Once on the Peninsula, McClellan again took to crediting exaggerated reports of the enemy's strength and dispositions. Rather than immediately brushing aside the relatively small Confederate force manning the defensive works in the vicinity of Yorktown, McClellan moved slowly, believing that they had been heavily reinforced to greater than twenty-five thousand. Then on 7 April, he telegraphed Stanton, "All the prisoners state that General J.E. Johnston arrived at Yorktown yesterday with strong re-enforcements. It seems clear that I shall have the whole force of the enemy on my hands—probably not less than 100,000 men, and probably more." The problem as McClellan saw it was not his lack of aggressive leadership, but the interference of his superiors in withholding from him troops which were supposed to have joined him on the Peninsula. "In consequence of the loss of Blenker's division and the First corps my force is possibly less than that of the enemy, while they have all the advantage of position." McClellan concluded that he now had no choice but "to resort to the use of heavy guns and some siege operations before we assault." The preparation of siege works and heavy batteries for the reduction of Yorktown took until 3 May. When, after a month of digging, McClellan was finally ready to open a bombardment of the lines at Yorktown, Johnston withdrew to Richmond before the first shot could be fired.³²

It took another month for McClellan to get the Army of the Potomac the fifty miles from Yorktown to Richmond, and it was not until the end of May that his army was astride the Chickahominy River and preparing to press against the city's defensive lines.

³² OR 11, pt. 1, 11.

Rather than wait to see what McClellan would do, Johnston on 31 May struck at the Fourth Army Corps that was south of the river and well in advance of the rest of the army. This attack, though, was ineptly handled and the only significant result of the Battle of Fair Oaks, or Seven Pines, was the wounding of Johnston and the naming of Robert E. Lee as his replacement.

McClellan now took another three weeks to shift the remaining corps of his army south of the river, leaving only Fitz-John Porter's Fifth Corps on the north side. This delay gave Lee time to strengthen his army by calling down the army of General Thomas J. (Stonewall) Jackson from the Shenandoah Valley. On 26 June, Lee struck at the Fifth Corps, McClellan's right flank, in its isolated position north of the river. Although Porter managed to hold his position, McClellan determined on withdrawal, believing that he faced a vastly superior Confederate force. As Lee continued to press the attack in a series of battles known as the Seven Days, McClellan continued to withdraw away from Richmond toward the James River. By 2 July, the entire Army of the Potomac was huddled on the James at Harrison's Landing some twenty miles from Richmond. McClellan would style this extended withdrawal "a change of base."

Rather than recognize his own failings, McClellan blamed the reverse before Richmond on continuing interference from Washington, especially Lincoln's withholding of McDowell's corps of forty thousand from joining the Army of the Potomac on the Peninsula. When the President came to Harrison's Landing on 8 July to visit with McClellan, rather than present a new plan of campaign, McClellan undertook to

counseling Lincoln on the military and political condition of the nation. Lincoln returned to Washington and appointed Major General Henry W. Halleck as the new General-in-Chief. When Halleck came to Harrison's Landing near the end of July, McClellan told him that enemy forces defending Richmond numbered two hundred thousand men, but that with a reinforcement of just twenty thousand men, he (McClellan) would undertake to move against the city or to cross the river and attempt to capture Petersburg, a major rail center some thirty miles below Richmond. Halleck returned to Washington to think the situation over, and on 3 August ordered McClellan to begin withdrawing the Army of the Potomac from the Peninsula. His rationale was that if the Confederates were as strong as McClellan estimated, both McClellan and the recently organized army of John Pope in northern Virginia were at risk with superior Confederate forces between them. Better the two armies should be brought together as one in a position from which they could effectively cover Washington while undertaking operations toward Richmond. McClellan protested the decision as causing him "the greatest pain I ever experienced, for I am convinced that the order to withdraw this army to Aquia Creek will prove disastrous to our cause." Nevertheless, the withdrawal of the Army of the Potomac from the Peninsula began on 14 August.³³

As the Army of the Potomac was slowly being transported up Chesapeake Bay and the Potomac River, Lee turned the full force of his army—which numbered in fact only a little more than fifty thousand—against Pope's Army of Virginia. Desperate to reinforce

³³ OR 11, pt. 1, 81, 82-83; 12, pt. 2, 23.

Pope for the climatic battle, Halleck began ordering McClellan to send the corps of the Army of the Potomac arriving at Aquia Creek and Alexandria to the support of Pope, leaving McClellan effectively a commander without an army. With Pope's defeat at the Second Battle of Manassas on 29 and 30 August, the scenario of the summer of 1861 seemed to be replaying itself all over again.

Just as in 1861, the President turned to McClellan, giving him command of the defenses of Washington on 1 September, and of all the forces in an around Washington the next day. Unlike 1861, though, little if any enthusiasm greeted Lincoln's choice. The cabinet, in particular, was decidedly against the reappointment of McClellan, and Stanton had gone so far as to draw up a memorandum for the President expressing the dissatisfaction of the cabinet members with McClellan as an army commander. All except the Navy Secretary signed it. Even so, Welles was no more in favor of continuing McClellan in command than were the others. Welles simply objected to the method. In his diary he noted that "my faith in McClellan's energy and reliability was shaken nine months ago; that as early as last December I had, . . . expressed my disappointment in the man."³⁴

The paper was to be presented to Lincoln at the cabinet meeting on 2 September, but then the President came in and confirmed that he had placed McClellan in command of the forces defending the capital. According to Welles, the President said that "he had

³⁴ Gideon Welles, *Diary of Gideon Welles, Secretary of the Navy Under Lincoln and Johnson*, 3 vols., ed. Howard K. Beale and Alan W. Brownsword (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1960), 1: 102.

done what seemed to him best and would be responsible for what he had done to the country.” The President went on to say that McClellan “can be trusted to act on the defensive, but he is troubled with the ‘slows’ and good for nothing for an onward movement.” Welles thought “there was a more disturbed and desponding feeling than I have ever witnessed in council; the President was greatly distressed.” The one positive note was that McClellan “had beyond any officer the confidence of the army. Though deficient in the positive qualities which are necessary for an energetic commander, his organizing powers could be made temporarily available till the troops were rallied.”³⁵

There are obvious parallels between the situation that McClellan faced in July 1861, and the one that he faced in September 1862. In September of 1862, though, two aspects of McClellan’s situation were very much different. First, during the previous summer, McClellan had the time that he needed to bring order out of chaos, and he had taken that time to first stabilize the situation and then carefully organize the forces that he would need to continue the war. Now, however, with Confederate forces poised to attack the Washington defenses from the south or to quickly cross over into Maryland, whatever action McClellan was going to take would have to be immediate. Second, McClellan had possessed the initiative in the summer of 1861. Once he had organized the forces he needed for the continued prosecution of the war, it was up to him to decide what to do with those forces. The initiative now was with the Confederates. In the coming campaign, McClellan would, at least in the beginning, be on the defensive and would

³⁵ Welles, 104-5.

have to react to whatever moves his enemy was going to make. In 1861, as well as on the Peninsula, McClellan had been deliberate and cautious in his every move. He no longer had that luxury. In the Maryland Campaign, if he would save the country, he would have to be the energetic field commander that heretofore he had not been.

V

Agreeing with Halleck that the next move of the enemy would most likely be into Maryland, McClellan on 3 September ordered the Second Corps of the Army of the Potomac under Major General Edwin V. Sumner and the Second Corps of the Army of Virginia under Major General Nathaniel P. Banks to move across the Potomac via the Chain Bridge to take position north of Washington City in the vicinity of Tennallytown in the District of Columbia where the outer defenses of the capital were located. Another corps, the Ninth, under Major General Jesse L. Reno, was ordered to cross and to take position on the Seventh Street Road just north of the city in support of the other two corps. In addition, those serviceable cavalry regiments that were immediately available in the vicinity of Washington were sent out along the north bank of the river to conduct reconnaissance.³⁶

On the fourth, McClellan's headquarters began receiving vague reports indicating that enemy forces had begun crossing the river. In response, McClellan, ordered Brigadier General Alfred Pleasonton with his brigade of cavalry from the Army of the Potomac to

³⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 38; McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 70.

move over from Falls Church in Virginia to Tennallytown, and to take charge of all cavalry operations on that side of the river and north of Washington.³⁷

The next morning, Halleck wired McClellan that there was now no doubt that the enemy was crossing the Potomac into Maryland in force. He urged McClellan to send Sumner's corps to meet the enemy and to follow up this move with additional forces. McClellan acted on this suggestion from the General-in-Chief by ordering both Sumner's and Banks's corps to move north from Tennallytown to Rockville, and by calling up the division of Major General Darius N. Couch from the Army of the Potomac to move to Offutt's Cross Roads south and west of Rockville.³⁸

By late that same morning, Pleasonton completed his move from Falls Church and established his headquarters at Darnestown from which he began advising McClellan concerning the situation in Maryland. His first reports were ambiguous. One sent at 11:30 a.m. indicated that no large force of the enemy had yet crossed the river and that given the character of the terrain he did not believe that a large force could do so below Harper's Ferry. Later in the day, he reported a column of Confederate infantry three thousand strong to be near Poolesville with additional enemy forces massed near Ball's Bluff (Conrad's Ferry) and Edward's Ferry ready to cross. In his final report of the day, he told McClellan that he believed there were no Confederates in the vicinity of Edward's Ferry, but that enemy forces were moving between White's Ferry and Frederick. He also

³⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 208; 51, pt. 1, 786-7.

³⁸ OR 19, pt. 1, 38; pt. 2, 182.

relayed the story of a rebel deserter who said that the commands of Stonewall Jackson, James Longstreet, Gustavus W. Smith, and Daniel Harvey Hill were crossing the river with a force of up to forty-five thousand men and sixty pieces of artillery.³⁹

Now, on the morning of the sixth, Pleasonton was reporting that a corps under General Robert E. Lee had crossed the Potomac the day before with thirty thousand men and was moving in the direction of Poolesville. Another column under the renowned Jackson was reported to be on the main road between Frederick and Rockville. Their design, according to Pleasonton, was to make an immediate attack on Washington, and he cautioned McClellan to be especially prepared for it to come in the vicinity of Rockville or perhaps as far northeast of Rockville as Brookeville. Pleasonton further told McClellan that he did not think the attack could be made along the river because of the broken character of the country in that quarter.⁴⁰

If Pleasonton's conjecture was correct, it would mean that the brunt of the attack would fall on the two corps of Sumner and Banks that were just that morning completing their move from Tennallytown to Rockville (figure 2). After passing through Rockville, both corps advanced out about two miles beyond the town and deployed into line of battle, taking up positions on what Major General Sumner, the senior officer, reported as "strong ground." To bolster their position and his force in Maryland, McClellan ordered the Ninth Corps to move out to Leesborough, where it was to be joined by the First Army

³⁹ OR 19, pt. 2, 185-6.

⁴⁰ OR 19, pt. 2, 192-3.

Corps, Army of Virginia under its new commander, Major General Joseph Hooker, who was replacing McDowell. McClellan also ordered the Sixth Army Corps, Army of the Potomac, under Major General William B. Franklin, and the division of Brigadier General George Sykes from the Fifth Army Corps, Army of the Potomac to cross into Maryland and take position at Tennallytown.⁴¹

But the enemy did not attack and the day remained generally a quiet one. By 8:30 p.m., Pleasonton, who was in communication with Sumner, was reporting his cavalry pickets to be as far out as Neilsville and Clarksburg, the latter some thirteen miles north of Rockville on the Frederick Road. Even so, Pleasonton was still insisting that Jackson with “some 30,000 or 40,000 men” was in the vicinity of Barnesville. Late in the day, Sumner reported to headquarters that a spy in whom he had confidence had come in from Poolesville saying that the strength of the enemy force in Maryland was fifty thousand,

⁴¹ OR 19, pt. 2, 38, 196.

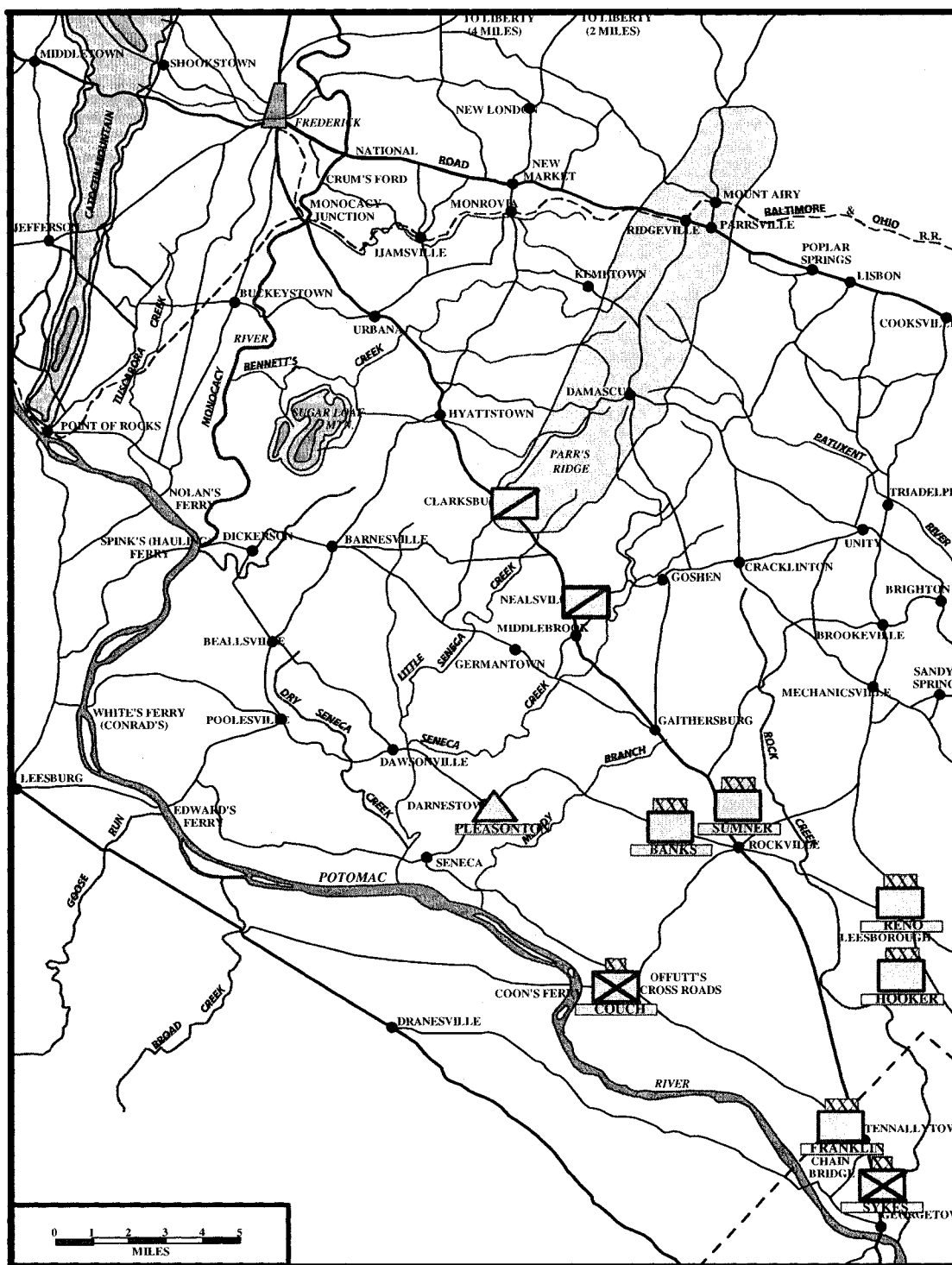


Figure 2. Positions of Federal Army Corps as directed by McClellan, 6 September 1862.

but that they had all gone in the direction of Frederick. The threat, therefore, of an immediate attack on Washington seemed to have subsided and the soldiers of Sumner's and Bank's corps passed the night of 6 to 7 September resting, more or less, comfortably on their arms.⁴²

⁴² D. P. Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns* (Boston: Patrick Donahoe, 1869; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1987), 284-5; OR 19, pt. 2, 194, 196; Charles A. Fuller, *Personal Recollections of the War of 1861* (Sherburne, NY: News Job Printing House, 1906), 53.

CHAPTER 2
CORPS D'ARMÉE

I

The Army of the Potomac that George B. McClellan began assembling in Maryland in early September 1862 was not the Army of the Potomac that he had organized in late 1861, nor was it the Army of the Potomac that he had led on the Peninsula from March until August 1862. The Army of the Potomac of September 1862 was a throw-together, “come as you are” army, made up of the available and serviceable veteran corps in the vicinity of Washington at the time. By September 1862, the army corps, or *corps d’armée* in the French military parlance often used at that time, had become the basic building block of all Civil War armies. It would be the selection, assembling, refitting, and reorganization of the veteran army corps of both the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Virginia that would be the method by which McClellan would create the “movable army” as the President and Halleck had ordered him to do on 3 September to meet the Confederate threat in Maryland.¹

¹ War Department, *War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 71 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), series I, vol. 19, pt. 2, 169. Hereinafter cited as OR. All references are to Series I unless otherwise noted. The Confederate armies would not be officially organized into army corps until 1863, but they were already operating unofficially in a corps type of organization in 1862.

The army corps was a relatively new organizational design that had been developed by Napoleon Bonaparte as early as 1800 when “he organized corps of two or three divisions, which he placed under the command of lieutenant-generals, and formed of them the wings, the center, and the reserve of his army.” The organization of the *corps d’armée* was perfected at the Camp of Boulogne between 1803 and 1805 when Napoleon “organized permanent army corps under the command of marshals, who had under their orders three divisions of infantry, one of light cavalry, from thirty-six to forty pieces of cannon, and a number of sappers. Each corps was thus a small army, able at need to act independently as an army.” The preeminent European military theorist and historian of the mid-nineteenth century, Antoine-Henri Jomini, commented that “this organization was as near perfection as possible; and the grand army, that brought about such great results, was the model which all armies of Europe soon imitated.” Austria followed this example after 1805, as did Prussia and Russia after 1806.²

The re-organization of the large armies of the Napoleonic period into corps provided army commanders with three advantages. First, it simplified the exercise of command at the army level by greatly reducing the army commander’s span of control: the actual number of units that the commander would have to manage directly. Without army corps, any movement or engagement of a large army would involve detailed and complex coordination of the movements of its numerous divisions. On campaign or during a

²Antoine-Henri Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. G.H. Mendell and W.P. Craighill (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1863), 279; David G. Chandler, *Dictionary of the*

battle, the army commander would have to be constantly concerned with the movement and status of each division and thereby be less able to see and manage the operation as a whole. Lost in such details, a commander might easily fail to perceive a danger presented by the enemy, or take advantage of an opportunity.

A second advantage was that army corps combined the three basic combat arms—infantry, cavalry, and artillery—into units capable of independent maneuver and action. This gave the army commander greater flexibility in the application of the army's combat power, because corps could be assigned specific operational objectives, even operational objectives that were supplementary to the army's main objectives. As Jomini put it, the corps were small armies capable of fighting alone for a time without the support of the rest of the army. Napoleon believed that an army corps could engage and hold its own against even a larger enemy force for up to twenty-four hours.³

Finally, the existence of corps allowed an army maneuvering during a campaign to disperse over a wide area without sacrificing security. Without such subdivisions, a large army would have to remain concentrated, often on a single road in a slow-moving extended column formation. Corps, however, could move independently of one another on a broad front, each within one day's march of the next. Upon contact with the enemy, a corps could hold its position or develop the situation while the rest of the army was quickly maneuvered and concentrated in its support.

Napoleonic Wars (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 105-6. Chandler points out the corps type subdivisions of armies can be traced back as far the Roman legion.

³ Chandler, 106.

But the organization of the Civil War armies into corps offered more than just these operational advantages. The corps organization was fundamental to making the whole doctrinal concept underlying the conduct of war and military operations in the 1860s work. Jomini wrote that “the art of war, . . . consists of five principle parts, viz.: Strategy, Grand Tactics, Logistics, Tactics of the different arms, and the Art of Engineering.” Putting aside logistics and engineering, for the moment, the actual conduct of active military operations involved the three functional domains of strategy, grand tactics, and tactics, and these divisions of operational responsibility were facilitated by the organization of army corps.⁴

Jomini defined strategy as embracing thirteen different functions ranging from the selection of the theater of war to the choice of lines of operation and positioning of depots. His American counterpart, the West Point professor Dennis Hart Mahan, condensed Jomini’s definition to “the Art of directing masses on decisive points.” Mahan’s student, and at the time of the Maryland Campaign the army’s General-in-Chief, Henry Wagner Halleck, re-expanded the definition to “the art of directing masses on decisive points, or the hostile movements of armies beyond the range of each other’s cannon.” However it was defined, all three of these military theorists agreed that strategy involved the operational direction of the whole army toward achieving a specific

⁴ Jomini, 66; Henry Wager Halleck, *Elements of Military Art and Science: or, Course of Instruction in Strategy, Fortification, Tactics of Battles, etc.* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1846), 37. Halleck divides the art of war into just four parts, strategy, engineering, logistics, and tactics, but later divides tactics into grand tactics and elementary tactics (see page 114).

objective, and was the domain of the army commander. All would also agree that strategy was accomplished through the army commander's plan of campaign, and his direction of the army's maneuver during the campaign.⁵

As in wars past, the Civil War was fought as a succession of campaigns. Although defined in the 1860s simply as "a series of continuous field operations," each campaign was undertaken in order to achieve objectives that would make a major contribution to winning the war. Campaigns, in turn, were conducted by field armies, the principal operational organization of the Civil War. It was the responsibility of the field army commander to plan and conduct campaigns. Corps facilitated such planning because the field army commanders could think in terms of the maneuvering and positioning of those these semi-independent units. During a campaign, as well as in battle, the corps commanders could be given specific operational or maneuver objectives that would incrementally contribute to the accomplishment of the field army's overall objective.⁶

In achieving the operational objectives assigned to the corps, the corps commanders, assisted by their subordinate division commanders, put into operation the second

⁵ Jomini, 68-9; Dennis Hart Mahan, *Lithographic Notes on the Composition of Armies and Strategy* (West Point, NY: Privately Printed, n.d.), 2; Halleck, 37. As professor of civil and military engineering at West Point, Mahan instructed every class of cadets from 1832 to 1871 in military art and science,

⁶ Henry L. Scott, *Military Dictionary* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1864; reprint, Yuma, Arizona: Fort Yuma Press, 1984), 145. The United States Army currently defines campaign as "a series of related military operations designed to achieve one or more strategic objectives within a given space and time;" a definition that seems to be not much more than a refinement of Scott's. See Department of the Army. *Field Manual 100-5, Operations*. Washington, DC: Headquarters, Department of the Army, 1993.

functional domain of war, grand tactics, which Jomini defined as “the art of posting troops upon the battlefield according to the accidents of the ground, of bringing them into action, and the art of fighting upon the ground, in contradistinction to planning upon a map.” Mahan’s definition of grand tactics was similar, but simpler, “the art of combining, disposing, and handling troops on the field of battle.” The organization of the corps as a combined arms unit necessarily made grand tactics the domain of the corps commander and his subordinate division commanders. It was these officers who would arrange and direct the combined maneuver and action of infantry, cavalry, and artillery during the campaign and on the field of battle.⁷

The third functional domain of war, tactics, was accomplished within the organization of the army corps. Jomini referred to this domain as “tactics of the different arms,” while both Mahan and Halleck called it elementary or minor tactics, and all defined it generally as the rules by which individual units of infantry, cavalry, and artillery were maneuvered and brought into action, particularly on the battlefield. Tactics was the domain of the brigade and regimental and battery commanders of the corps. In a memorandum to the general officers of the Army of the Potomac in August 1861, McClellan wrote, “to the

⁷ Jomini, 69; Dennis Hart Mahan, *An Elementary Treatise on Advanced-Guard, Out-Post, and Detachment Service of Troops, and the Manner of Handling Them in Presence of an Enemy*, 2d ed. (New York: John Wiley, 1862), 32, hereinafter cited as *Outpost*. Halleck defined grand tactics as “the art of combining and conducting battles of all descriptions.” See page 114.

Brig Genls the Genl Comdg looks for the instruction, discipline, & efficiency of the troops.’’⁸

Prior to the Civil War, the United States Army had never used the corps organization because it had never fielded a force large enough to make creation of corps advantageous. In discussing the organization of field armies, the army regulations of 1855 and 1861 did not even mention corps, citing “divisions as the basis of the organization and administration of armies in the field.” As an authority on the organization of European armies, however, McClellan was well aware of the advantages to be gained by organizing the large army that he was creating in 1861 into corps, and it was his intention to do so as soon as “service in the field had indicated what general officers were best fitted to exercise those most important commands.” But, when McClellan by early 1862 had taken no action regarding the organization of army corps, he was preempted by Lincoln who in his General War Order Number 2 of 8 March directed “that the major-general commanding the Army of the Potomac proceed forthwith to organize that part of the said army destined to enter upon active operations . . . into four army corps.” Although McClellan objected to Lincoln’s order as being “issued without consulting me and against my judgment,” he nevertheless carried it out with the issuance of Army of the Potomac General Orders Number 151 dated 13 March 1862, dividing his field army into four army corps. In organizing these initial corps, McClellan generally followed Napoleon’s model

⁸ George B. McClellan, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865*, ed. Stephen W. Sears (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 76.

to create a combined arms organization of three infantry divisions, supported by up to twelve batteries of artillery, and one or more regiments of cavalry.⁹

II

As with all armies of the nineteenth century, the infantry was the principal combat arm because it was the principal producer of combat power. Infantry, therefore, would be the principal combat component of the *corps d'armée*. The infantry of the corps was organized first into divisions, which the army regulations of 1855 and 1861 specified would be made up of two or three brigades. The regulations went on to establish that each brigade would have two or more regiments. The regiment was the basic unit of organization of the infantry.¹⁰

Congressional legislation enacted on 22 July 1861 “for the employment of volunteers,” authorized to each infantry regiment

one colonel, one lieutenant-colonel, one major, one adjutant (a lieutenant), one quartermaster (a lieutenant), one surgeon and one assistant surgeon, one sergeant major, one regimental quartermaster sergeant, one regimental commissary sergeant, one hospital steward, two principal musicians, and twenty four musicians for a band; and shall be composed of ten companies, each company to consist of one captain, one first lieutenant, one second lieutenant , one first

⁹War Department, *Regulations for the Army of the United States* (New York: Harper & Brothers, Publishers, 1857), 63; *Revised Regulations for the Army of the United States, 1861* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co.), 71; George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story* (New York: Charles & Company, 1887), 222; OR 5, 18. Both Lincoln's order and General Orders Number 151 speak of organizing a fifth corps that apparently was not to be a part of McClellan's field army.

¹⁰ *Army Regulations 1855*, 63; *Army Regulations 1861*, 71.

sergeant, four sergeants, eight corporals, two musicians, one wagoner, and from sixty-four to eighty-two privates.

At full strength, therefore, each infantry regiment would have a battle force of thirty-five officers, fifty-one sergeants, and nine hundred soldiers; 986 men in all.¹¹

In the infantry regiments, combat power could be produced in two ways, as firepower through the use of the soldiers' individual firearms, or as shock action through the use of their bayonets. By 1862, however, changes in firearms technology presented commanders at all levels within the corps with a serious tactical dilemma; should the infantry fight primarily through the use of its fire, or through the physical effects of its shock action?

Until 1855, the standard firearm of the infantry in all the nations of the western world had been the smoothbore, muzzle-loading musket. This musket had two important characteristics that recommended its use by the infantry. It could be loaded and fired rapidly, and it could be fired repeatedly without extensive cleaning. To load the musket, the soldier used a paper cartridge that contained both the weapon's powder charge and its projectile, a lead ball. The soldier first tore open one end of the paper cartridge with his teeth, then dumped the gun powder charge down the barrel before inserting the ball. The ball was next rammed down the barrel to the breech with a ramrod that the soldier drew from a channel in the stock of the musket under the barrel. After replacing the ramrod, all that remained was for the soldier to draw the hammer to the full cocked position, prime

¹¹ *Army Regulations 1861*, 518-9.

the musket with a percussion cap, aim, and fire. The entire process could be accomplished in as little as fifteen seconds. The capability to load and fire the musket rapidly and repeatedly resulted from the fact that the musket ball was considerably smaller in diameter than the bore of the barrel. Therefore, it was easily rammed into the barrel and seated at the breech through the use of the ramrod, even after the barrel became fouled from repeated firings. Because of fouling buildup in the barrel after firing, a tight fitting projectile could not have been loaded even after just one shot without stopping to clean the barrel.

The musket, though, had two major disadvantages that greatly limited the effectiveness of its firepower. It had a very limited range and was highly inaccurate. Just as with the weapon's positive capabilities, the undersized musket ball was responsible for these deficiencies. In firing the musket, what actually propelled the ball down the barrel was a rush of hot gas produced by the rapid burning of the gun powder. Because the ball did not tightly fit the barrel, much of this gas would escape around the ball and precede it down the barrel without having a propelling effect. This limited the speed that the ball achieved while traveling down the barrel—muzzle velocity—and thus the distance it could travel once it left the barrel. The maximum range of the musket was only about 250 yards.

The second problem with the undersized ball was that, being loose in the barrel, it would bounce from side to side and top to bottom as it traveled down the barrel. So, like a billiard ball rebounding from the rail, the projectile's direction on leaving the barrel was

determined by which face of the barrel it glanced off last. This made the musket so inaccurate that, on average, a soldier could not consistently hit a man-sized target at any distance beyond fifty yards. Because of its inherent inaccuracy, the musket had no need of a rear sight and only a single blade front sight was provided for the soldier to use in aiming.

To overcome the deficiencies of the musket as a firepower weapon, armies developed tactical systems based on mass and close-order drill that would enhance the effects of the weapon's firepower through concentration. Concentration meant packing the largest number of soldiers into the smallest possible space, twenty by nineteen inches for each soldier. Because of the musket's lack of accuracy, individual fire by dispersed soldiers would have only limited effect. But, if the soldiers were compressed as much as possible in their ranks, and release of their fire was controlled and directed toward targets designated by the officers, the effect of the fire would be exponentially increased. And not only would effectiveness be increased, but the range to which that effectiveness could be projected also would be increased. Soldiers firing *en masse*—volley fire—could be effective against enemy formations at up to two hundred yards, whereas soldiers firing individually were usually not effective beyond fifty yards. For soldiers to load, fire, and otherwise handle their weapons in tightly packed ranks, and for officers to maneuver those formations to and on the battlefield with speed and agility—the domain of minor tactics—dictated a need for uniform and precision movements on the part of each

individual: in other words, soldiers well practiced in a system of tactical close-order drill.¹²

This same tactical system of massed formations and close-order drill also was the most effective method for producing the infantry's other form of combat power, the shock action of the bayonet. The bayonet was the more traditional infantry weapon, a direct descendant of the pikes that infantrymen carried in the days when firearms were little more than a novelty. In order to use it, the soldier had to be brought into close physical contact with the enemy. Necessarily, the bayonet would be least effective if the soldiers fought individually, with commanders gambling that the individual soldier's skill, fitness, and fortitude at the point of decision was superior to that of the enemy. Battle, in such a case, would be reduced to a gladiatorial contest of the best champions put up by each side. But, through a tactical system of close-order drill, massed formations of soldiers with leveled and dressed bayonets could be brought against an enemy force, applying the awful power of a disciplined, controlled phalanx at the point of decision.

Under this system of tactics, the musket and the bayonet perfectly complemented each other through the use of two basic formations (figures 3 and 4). For maximum firepower, the line of battle was the best formation because every soldier was able to fire to the front. A regiment in line of battle would mean that all ten companies would form in line of battle side by side. For developing shock action, a column formation was best because it

¹² William P. Craighill, *The Army Officer's Pocket Companion, Principally Designed for Staff Officers in the Field* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1862), 65.

was solid and unwavering in maneuver, and because its depth added physical strength. A regiment could form in either a column by company in which each company was in line of battle with the companies arranged one behind the other, or in a column by division in which two companies in line of battle would form side by side—a division—backed up by the remaining eight companies in the same formation—four more divisions.¹³

In the offensive battle, where the momentum of the attack was most important, the column formation was used. In a column formation, the regiment approaching the enemy

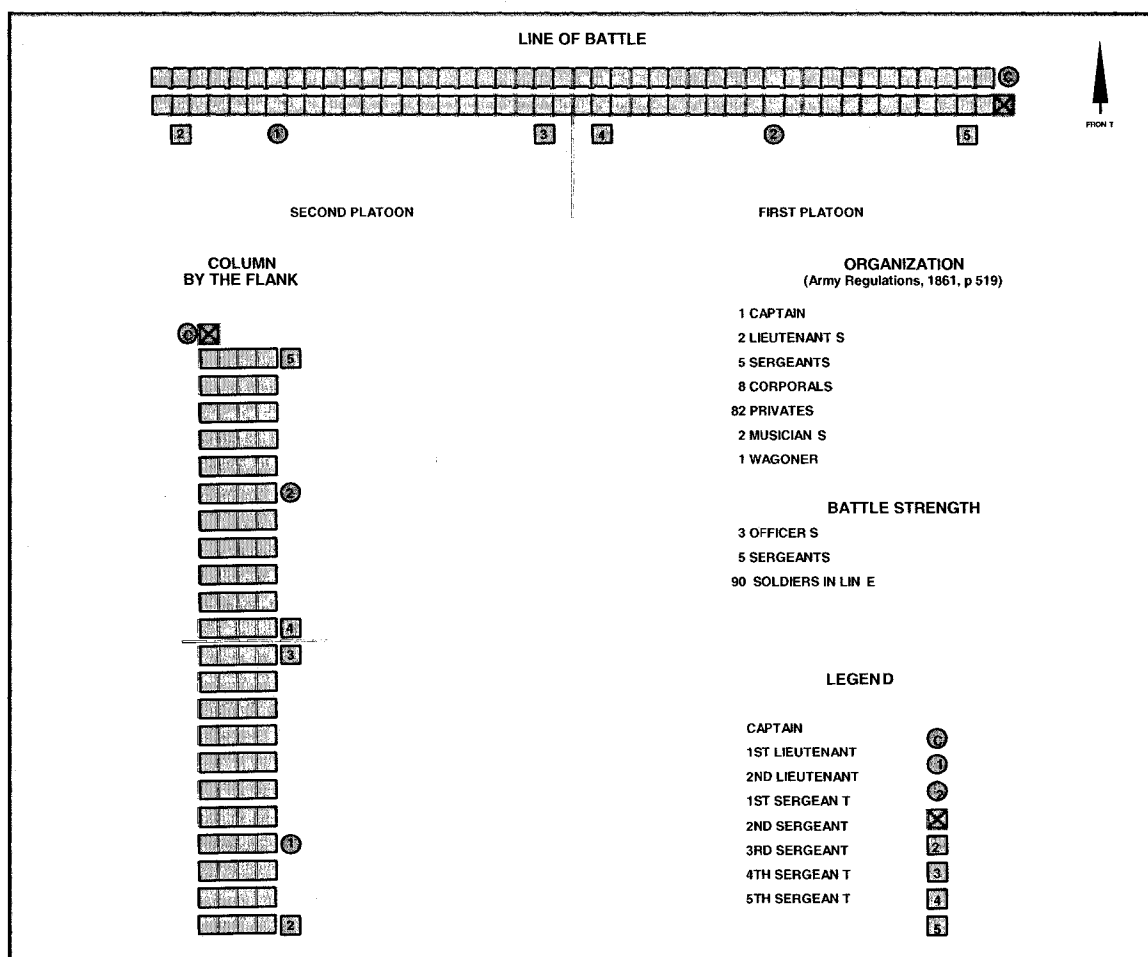


Figure 3: The Infantry Company.

¹³ Craighill, 66, 73.

line could disdain the use of fire altogether and rely solely on its speed and the weight of the charging column behind its bayonets to punch through the enemy's defensive line. Halleck wrote that the moral effect produced by the charge of an infantry column was such "that they frequently carry positions without ever employing their fire." If some

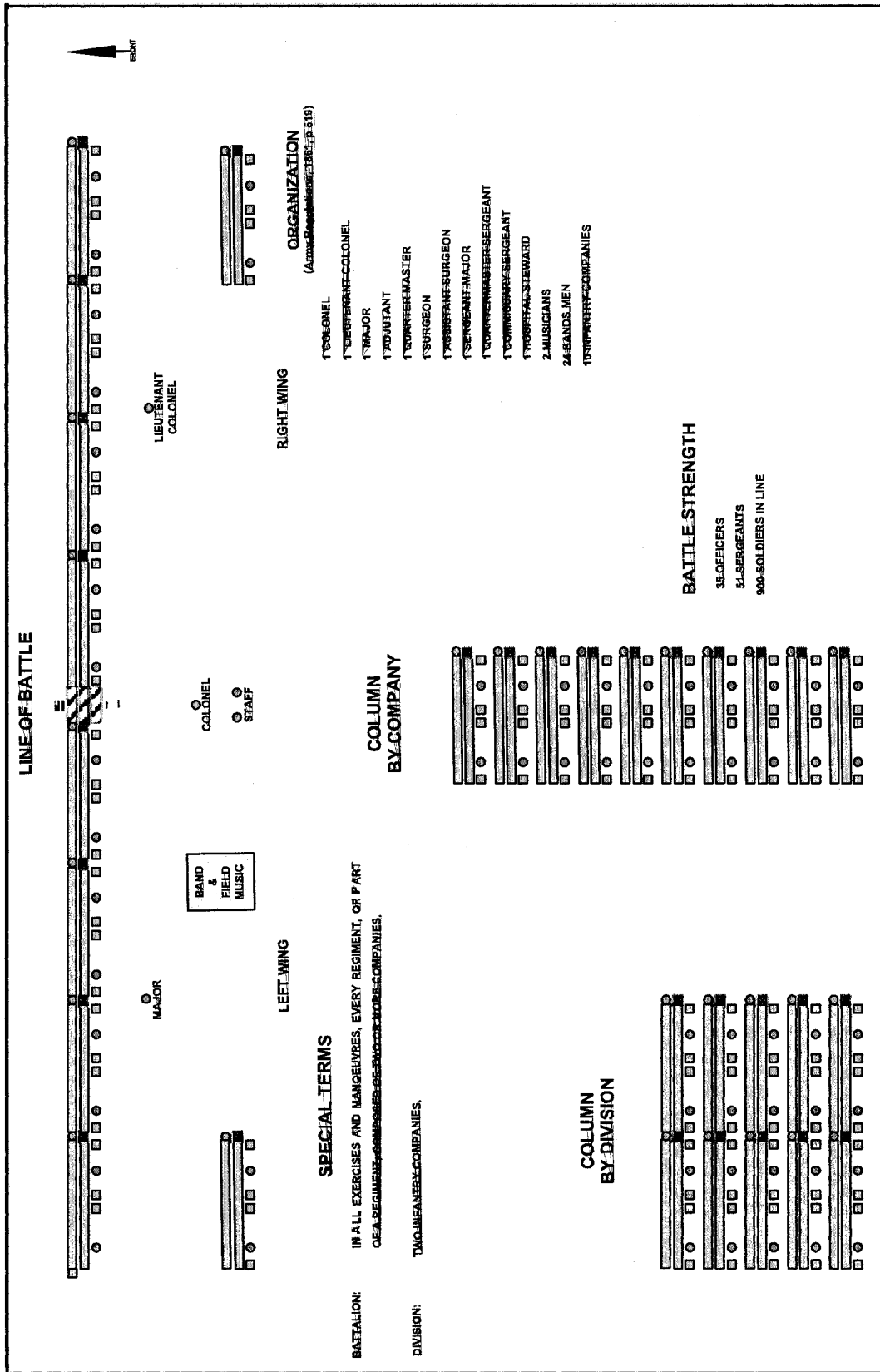


Figure 4. The Infantry Regiment.

firepower was called for, however, the company or companies at the front of the column could provide it, but even that use of firepower was discouraged because it required stopping to fire, and that meant sacrificing the momentum of the column while it was under fire. Jomini, cautioned, “We must not forget that a column of attack is not intended to fire, . . . for if it begins to fire while marching, the whole impulsive effect of its forward movement is lost.”¹⁴

If the battle were to be fought on the defensive, however, the regiments of the front line would be formed in line of battle, so that they could use their firepower to stop the enemy’s attacking formations. But because of the short range of the musket, it was problematic as to whether this could be done at all, and the thin line of battle formation was extremely vulnerable to being broken by the shock action of the enemy’s assaulting columns. Accordingly, a second defensive line had to be formed with the regiments in a column formation to counterattack using the bayonet should the fire of the first line fail to stop the attack. Mahan advised that “a charge by a column, when the enemy is within 50 paces, will prove effective, if resolutely made.”¹⁵

The procedures for going from column to line of battle, changing front while in line of battle, and going back to column were the heart of the system of infantry minor tactics in 1862. The more quickly and efficiently these movements could be accomplished, the

¹⁴ Halleck, 124; Jomini, 294.

¹⁵ Dennis Hart Mahan, *An Elementary Treatise on Advanced-Guard, Out-Post, and Detachment Service of Troops, and the Manner of Handling Them in Presence of an Enemy*, 2d ed. (New York: John Wiley, 1862), 50.

more maneuverability and agility the infantry regiments would have on the battlefield. Maneuverability and agility, in turn, gave commanders the ability to develop a maximum of combat power at the right time and place, whether it was shock action through the use of the bayonet, or firepower through the use of the musket. Either way, the precise and skillful execution of the movements—the drill—as specified in the infantry tactical manuals meant a greater chance of survival, as well as success in battle.¹⁶

The equilibrium that existed between the musket and the bayonet as the infantry's sources of combat power, and the tactical system of massed formations and close-order drill that made possible the optimum employment of those weapons was seriously upset in 1855 when the United States Army adopted the rifled musket as the infantry's new firearm. In appearance and handling, the rifled musket was little different from the musket that it replaced. For the soldier, the process of loading and firing the rifled musket was exactly the same as for the musket. Indeed, the major difference between the two was not to be found in the weapons themselves, but in the projectiles that they fired. Rather than a plain ball, the rifled musket fired a cylindrical shaped projectile with an ogive nose and a flat base hollowed out in the shape of a cone. This projectile was perfected by a French army captain, Claude Étienne Minié, in the 1830s, and would be called the minie ball by American soldiers of the Civil War. As with the standard musket ball, the minie ball loaded easily into the barrel of the rifled musket because its diameter was smaller than that of the bore of the barrel. The rifled musket, therefore,

¹⁶ Halleck, 125.

retained all of the advantages of the musket in that it could be loaded and fired rapidly and repeatedly. On firing, however, the propellant gases acting on the hollow base of the minie ball caused it to expand to the limits of the barrel, creating a gas seal. Because of this seal, none of the propellant gas could escape as was the case with the musket ball, so the full force of the gas was made to act upon the minie ball, greatly increasing muzzle velocity and consequently range. Where the maximum range of the musket was only 250 yards, the maximum range of the new rifled musket was 1,250 yards.

In addition, because of the expansion of the minie ball, it now made sense to rifle the barrel. The soft lead of the expanding minie ball would fill the rifle grooves in the barrel, so that as it traveled down the barrel a spin would be conveyed to the projectile causing it to travel in a true direction once it left the barrel. In short, this made the rifled musket accurate to a great distance. Where the average soldier with the musket, firing individually, was unable to hit a man-sized target beyond fifty yards, that same soldier armed with a rifled musket could be effective as an individual firing against targets at 300 yards. A soldier who was an exceptional marksman could successfully engage targets at distances up to five hundred yards.

The introduction of the rifled musket increased the firepower of the infantry exponentially. Indeed it made infantry fire dominant on the Civil War battlefield. But in doing so, it upset the established system of infantry tactics. In the defense, a regiment of infantry armed with the new rifled musket and formed in line of battle now had the ability, in terms of range, accuracy, and volume of fire to stop any column of attack sent

against it. Where a regimental column of attack was capable of crossing a field of musket fire of two hundred yards to break the enemy's formation with the bayonet, that same column would be completely decimated if it attempted to cross a field of rifled musket fire of 350 yards against the same enemy force. And therein lay the tactical dilemma with regard to infantry combat. If the shock action power of the bayonet could no longer be effectively applied in the attack, how were infantry attacks to be made using firepower alone? Because the rifled musket was still a muzzle-loading weapon, full development of a unit's firepower meant that the soldiers had to remain stationary and standing. The development of an effective volume of fire could not be accomplished while the formations were moving or lying on the ground. Therefore, using fire in the attack meant moving a formation into the enemy's zone of fire to establish a stationary firing line. In addition, the firing line had to remain a massed formation, because the volume of fire developed with the rifled musket was no greater than with the musket. A dispersed formation would sacrifice volume of fire, and would be especially vulnerable to the massed fire of the enemy, as well as to a bayonet charge by an enemy column.

Within the army corps, the corps commander, division commanders, brigade and regimental commanders all had to be concerned with this problem in carrying out their responsibilities in the domains of grand and minor tactics. Moreover, the new dominance of infantry firepower on the battlefield was not clearly understood at the beginning of the Civil War even by the most experienced officers. When the rifled musket was introduced in 1855, a new set of infantry tactics, *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics* by Lieutenant

Colonel William J. Hardee, was adopted by the War Department. This new infantry tactical manual was supposed to modify the infantry tactical system to deal with the greater firepower capabilities of the rifled musket. But other than simplifying some of the drill procedures, the only thing that Hardee's manual did toward that end was to quicken the marching pace of battle formations from the old rate of 110 to 140 steps per minute to a new rate of 165 to 180 steps per minute. The rationale was simple, using the faster pace, infantry formations could cover ground more quickly while under fire, negating the range advantage of the rifled musket. In theory, the faster pace would restore the effectiveness of infantry shock action in battle. The reality would be very much different.¹⁷

To complicate matters further, infantry on both sides in the early years of the Civil War would be armed with a combination of muskets and rifled muskets. Even though adopted in 1855, production of the new rifled musket did not begin at the national armories at Springfield, Massachusetts and Harper's Ferry, Virginia until 1857. Between 1857 and the outbreak of the war in 1861 only about 67,673 of the new arms were produced, not nearly enough to arm the large armies being raised by both sides. Consequently, many, if not most, of the regiments raised in 1861 and some raised in early

¹⁷ War Department, Adjutant General's Office, General Orders No. 2, 28 February 1857, General Orders and Circulars of the War Department and Headquarters of the Army, 1809-1860, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's to 1917*, F808, R7, M1094, RG 94. It is generally believed that Hardee's manual replaced Scott's. But the decision of the War Department was that only those regiments actually armed with the rifled musket and serving as light infantry should drill according to Hardee's system.

1862 had to be armed with muskets even though the rifled musket was the new standard. The rearming of regiments that had been issued muskets in 1861 and 1862 would have to await an increase in production of the new rifled arms, and would extend at least until late 1863. So within the infantry of the army corps of September 1862, there would be a mix of muskets and rifled muskets. That mix would extend to the division and brigade level, and, in some cases, even to the regimental level.¹⁸

III

The second source of combat power in the army corps was the artillery battery, and the combat power of the battery lay entirely in its fire. The basic field piece of the artillery was operated by a crew of nine soldiers. It was loaded through the muzzle in much the same way as the infantryman's musket, with the powder charge and projectile being rammed to the breech. Also like the musket, the field piece was a direct-fire weapon, aimed by the gunner through the use of a front sight permanently affixed to the muzzle of the gun, and a detachable rear sight that was set in place by the gunner for aiming, but removed before the gun was fired. The gun was fired through the use of a friction primer that was set in a vent at the breech of the gun that led to the main powder charge. The gun had no recoil mechanism so it had to be repositioned and re-aimed after each firing. A well drilled gun crew working rapidly was capable of loading and firing

¹⁸ Claud E. Fuller, *The Rifled Musket* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1958), 8-9. The figure of 67,673 includes the production of rifled muskets, cadet rifled muskets, and rifles, all of which were serviceable arms for the infantry.

up to four rounds per minute. The normal sustained rate of fire, though, was two rounds per minute.

Until 1860, all of the army's field guns had been smoothbores. The standard field gun was the Model 1857 Twelve-Pounder Gun-Howitzer, commonly called the Twelve-Pounder Napoleon or just the Napoleon because it had been developed by the French during the reign of Emperor Napoleon III. Its chief improvement over the previous standard field gun, the Model 1841 Twelve-Pounder Gun, was that at 1,227 pounds, the Napoleon was 530 pounds lighter than the Model 1841. Like all smoothbore field pieces, the Napoleon was capable of firing four types of rounds. Solid shot, a solid iron ball, had a range of 2000 yards and was used for battering down fortifications or against masses of troops. Shell, which also had a range of 2000 yards, was a hollow cannon ball, filled with eight ounces of gun powder. Spherical case shot, another hollow cannon ball, was filled with seventy-six musket balls and a bursting charge, and had a range of 1500 yards. Both shell and spherical case shot were intended for use against troop formations, but their actual effect was often more moral than physical. To begin with, their explosive charges were relatively small. Second, both were exploded through the use of a time fuse—the Borman Fuse—that had to be cut by the gunners before the round was loaded based on the estimated time of flight of the projectile to the target. The fuse was ignited when the gun was fired, and, if everything worked as it was supposed to, the round would explode just as it reached the target. If the target was large and stationary, this system could work well, but if the target was small, particularly in its lateral dimension, or moving as in

oncoming infantry in line of battle, getting the round to explode at exactly the right moment was problematic. Accuracy also was a problem when using shot, shell, or spherical case shot since these rounds, like the musket ball, had to be smaller than the bore of the gun to facilitate loading. The most effective round of the smoothbore guns, in terms of producing casualties, was canister. The canister round was little more than a tin can filled with twenty-seven cast iron shot that were about three times the size of a musket ball. When the gun was fired, the tin container disintegrated, spreading the shot as if it came from a giant shotgun. Canister was intended for use against troops, but, although very deadly, its effective range was limited to 300 yards.¹⁹

The first rifled field artillery piece was purchased by the army in 1860. During the war, many different types of rifled field pieces were used by both sides. The benefits of rifled guns over smoothbore guns were similar to the benefits of the rifled musket over the musket, greater range and accuracy. Rifled rounds were generally cylindrical and there were several different methods used to expand a round so that it would engage the rifling when the gun was fired. As with the smoothbore gun, rifle projectiles could be solid, shell, or case shot. For the shell and case shot, there were two types of fuses, percussion and time fuse. Both screwed into the nose of the projectile. The percussion fuse depended on the impact of the round to set it off. But with the percussion fuse, the round had to hit the target nose first, and the target itself—or the ground around it—had

¹⁹ War Department, A Board of Artillery Officers, *Instruction for Field Artillery* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1863), 8-9.

to be hard enough to detonate the fuse. If the round did not strike nose first, or if it did not strike a solid object, the round would not explode. If conditions in the area of the target were unlikely to detonate a percussion fuse, then the time fuse could be used, but the time fuse for the rifled guns had the same limitations as the time fuse used with the smoothbore guns. There were also canister rounds for rifled guns, but because the bores of the rifled guns were considerably smaller than those of the smoothbore guns, it was not as effective as the canister round used in the smoothbores.

There was considerable debate during the Civil War concerning the usefulness of rifled guns over smoothbores. While the rifled guns had greater range and accuracy, terrain frequently offset this advantage. In wooded or hilly country, the gunners usually could not fire on targets at longer ranges simply because they could not see them. In the Civil War, there was no such thing as indirect fire against unseen targets. In battles at shorter ranges, particularly within canister range, the smoothbore guns were clearly more effective. For this reason, in organizing the Army of the Potomac, McClellan originally intended that two-thirds of the artillery pieces should be Napoleons and one-third rifled, because, as he wrote in his memoirs, "The country in which operations were to be conducted was so obstructed by forests as to present few favorable opportunities for the employment of long-range artillery." But the nation's capability for manufacturing rifled guns that were made of iron proved to be much greater than its capability for manufacturing Napoleons that were made of bronze. Because of this, McClellan recalled, "When the army took the field [March 1862] less than one-third were Napoleon guns, and

it was only during the reorganization for the Antietam campaign that it was possible to approach the proportions originally fixed upon.”²⁰

The standard field artillery battery was organized with six guns. For moving, the guns were hooked to a limber, a single-axle carriage with an ammunition chest, that was pulled by six horses harnessed together in tandem in pairs and controlled by drivers mounted on the left horse of each pair. For each gun there was a caisson, another single-axle carriage with two ammunition chests, a spare wheel, and a spare pole. Like the gun, the caisson was hooked to a limber and pulled by six horses controlled by three drivers. In each battery, there also was “a *travelling forge*, with smiths’ and armorers’ tools and stores, for shoeing and ordinary repairs, and a *battery wagon* for stores, materiel, and the tools of the carriage-maker, wheelwright, saddler, and harness-maker.”²¹

The battery was commanded by a captain, assisted by four lieutenants, eight non-commissioned officers, twelve corporals who were the gunners and chiefs of caissons, six artificers, two buglers, fifty-two drivers, and seventy cannoneers for a total compliment of five officers and 150 enlisted men. A full strength battery was also to have 110 horses. In mounted batteries that accompanied the infantry, the gun crews walked beside their guns, but could, when swifter movement was necessary, ride on the ammunition chests. In horse batteries that supported the cavalry, the cannoneers were all mounted on their

²⁰ McClellan, *McClellan’s Own Story*, 117.

²¹ *Instruction for Field Artillery*, 2, 13. The amount of ammunition that could be carried in each ammunition chest would vary according to the type of gun and the mix of rounds carried. The figures given here are for the Napoleon.

own horses. Since there were three ammunition chests for each gun, and each ammunition chest held approximately thirty-two rounds, the battery could carry into battle a basic load of 576 rounds, ninety-six rounds for each gun.²²

With so many men, horses, and carriages to be controlled and work together in battle, the key to the effective tactical operation of a battery was drill. Three basic formations were used: the order in battery, the order in line, and the order in column (figures 5 and 6). The order in battery was the firing formation, in which the guns were unlimbered, and

²² *Instruction for Field Artillery*, 4.

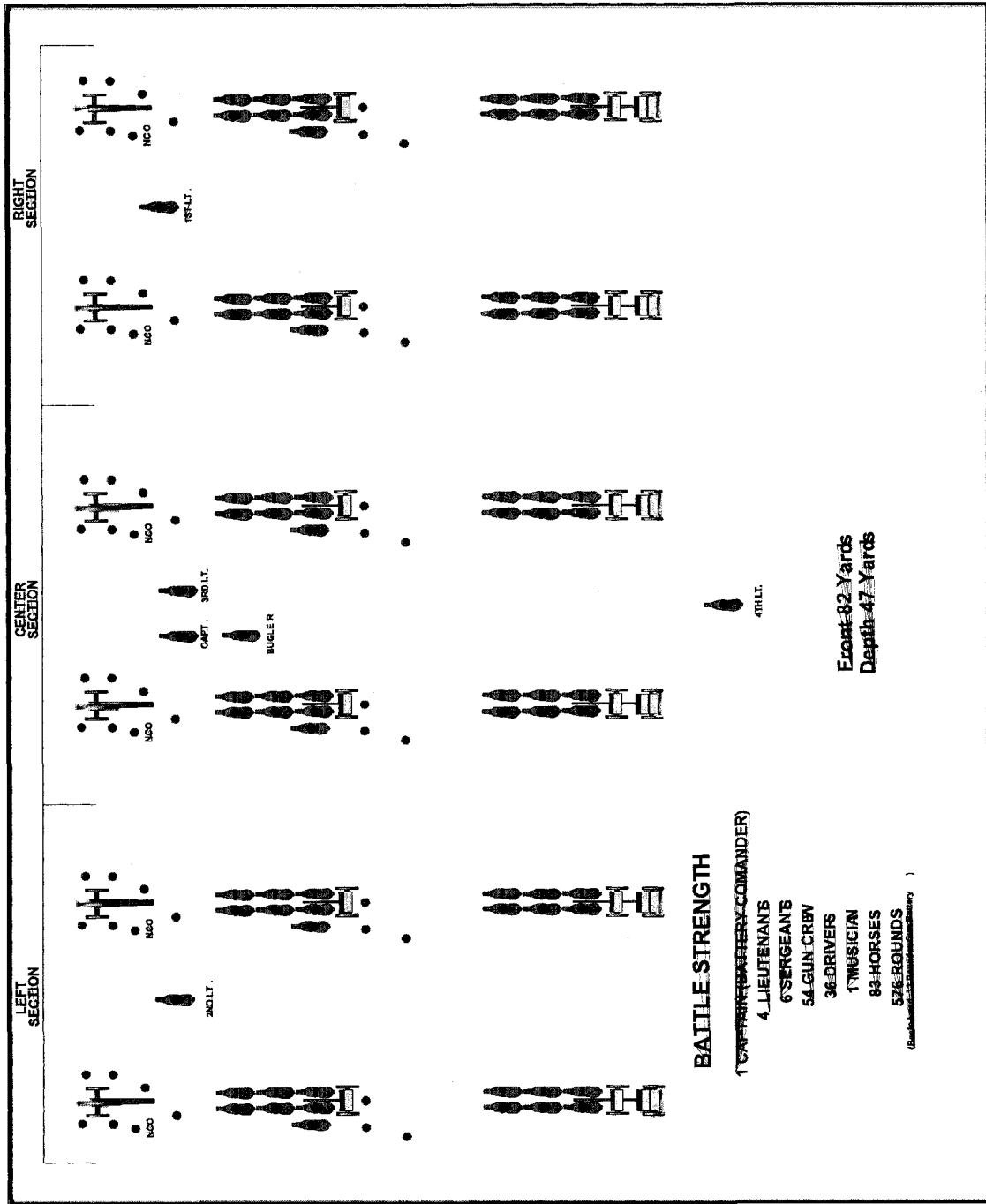


Figure 5: Field Artillery Battery Order in Battery

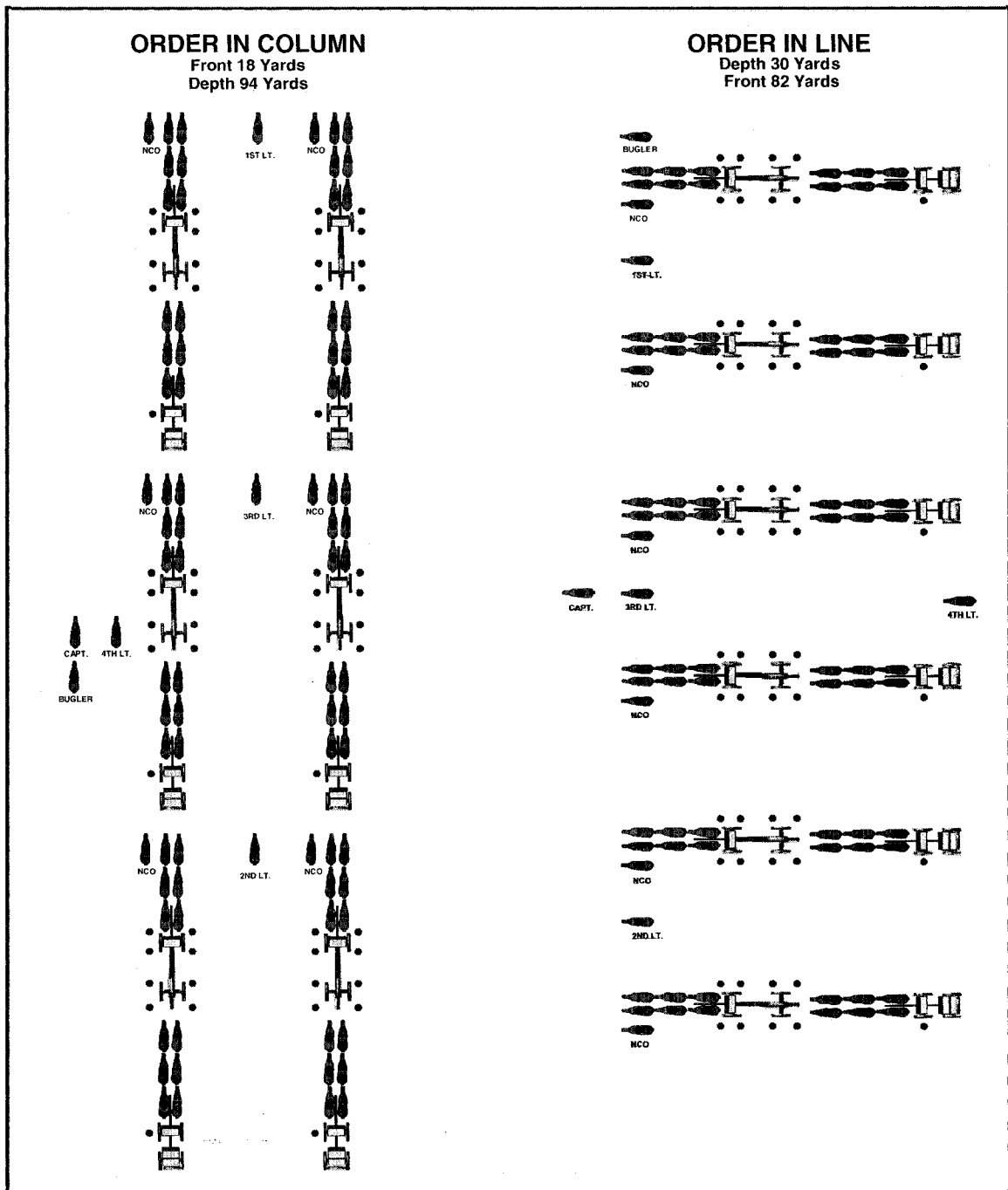


Figure 6: Field Artillery Battery, Order in Column and Order in Line.

ready to fire to the front. The order in line was essentially the same formation, except that the guns were limbered and the battery was ready to move, especially to the front to go into firing position. The order in column was the marching formation of the battery used for moving the battery from place to place, and for bringing the battery into and taking it out of action. As with the infantry drill, there were complex procedures in the field artillery manuals for changing the position of the battery and for going from one formation to another. These procedures were critical to the tactical operation of the battery and worked well if the battery was thoroughly practiced—drilled—in their execution. Every two guns with their caissons formed a section under the supervision of one of the lieutenants. A battery could advance or retire by sections, a method that insured several guns were always ready to fire during a movement, or the sections could be assigned to fire against different targets.

When organizing the army in the autumn of 1861, McClellan had assigned four batteries to each division. When army corps were organized in early 1862, the artillery of the divisions became an asset of the corps. The corps commanders then had the option of leaving the batteries assigned to the divisions under the direct control of the division commanders, organizing them into a corps artillery reserve under the control of a corps chief of artillery who reported directly to the corps commander, or a combination of both. Leaving the batteries assigned to the divisions meant that the divisions would be combined arms organizations, and division commanders would have the capability of using their own artillery to support the division in combat. Organizing a corps artillery

reserve meant that there would be batteries that could be used in general support of the corps, or sent to the direct support of the divisions as the situation might dictate. The existence of a corps artillery reserve and a corps chief of artillery provided the corps commander great flexibility in the employment of that arm. Under this form of organization, not only could batteries at the division level be reinforced or replaced by batteries from the corps reserve, but the divisional batteries also could be directed from the corps level if the situation required central control or concentration.²³

The adoption of the rifled musket had a considerable effect on how artillery could be used in battle, compounding the dilemma already faced by the corps and division commanders in “combining, disposing, and handling troops on the field of battle.” In the age when infantry was armed entirely with muskets, artillery could be used to lead an infantry attack. Batteries would be sent out ahead of the assaulting infantry columns to go into firing positions between two hundred and three hundred yards from the enemy infantry line. At this distance, the batteries would be beyond the effective range of the enemy’s muskets, but within range for using the batteries’ most effective round, canister. Firing canister and double canister, the batteries would attempt to create a gap in the enemy infantry line. The friendly assaulting infantry columns would then move rapidly through the batteries to charge with the bayonet and finish the job, while the fire of the batteries was shifted to protect the flanks of the infantry columns.²⁴

²³ OR 5, 67.

²⁴ Mahan, *Outpost*, 32.

When infantry was armed with the rifled musket, however, artillery batteries could no longer be sent out ahead of an attack to set up within canister range of the enemy because in doing so they would be well within the effective range of the enemy's rifled muskets, and all of the batteries' men and horses would likely be shot down before the guns could be unlimbered to fire. Therefore, during the Civil War, artillery was limited to supporting infantry attacks with long-range ammunition that was not nearly as effective as canister.

In a defensive situation, artillery batteries were still very deadly if they were closely supported by infantry either on line with the batteries or directly behind them. In this kind of a situation, assaulting enemy infantry would be forced to attempt to capture the batteries as part of the attack. Protected from capture by their own infantry, the batteries could stay in position until the enemy's columns were within three hundred yards and then break the final assault with canister and double canister.

IV

In the era of the musket, cavalry had a very important battlefield role, and in Napoleon Bonaparte's original concept of the corps as a combined arms unit a division of cavalry was included. In the battles of that era, heavy cavalry would closely follow the infantry in the attack, and through the shock action of its massed charge with saber or lance complete the destruction of the enemy after his infantry formations had been broken by artillery and an infantry bayonet charge. With the enemy's army routed, light cavalry

would be sent in pursuit of the fleeing enemy soldiers to insure their complete dispersal and to prevent them from reforming.

In forming the original corps of the Army of the Potomac, McClellan initially followed Napoleon's principle of combined arms by giving each corps commander one or more regiments of cavalry. Cavalry, however, would quickly prove to be almost useless on the Civil War battlefield because the firepower of infantry armed with the rifled musket would be capable of destroying cavalry formations at great distances, well before the shock action of those formations could be effective. During the Civil War, the mission of the cavalry became one of conducting reconnaissance and screening the movements of the army. For this purpose, control of the cavalry was better left at army level, and McClellan would quickly withdraw almost all cavalry regiments from the army corps and reorganize them in cavalry brigades, divisions, and, eventually, a cavalry corps.

V

As pointed out by Jomini, the army corps was a small army in itself. If organized archetypically with three divisions of three brigades each, each brigade with three regiments of infantry and supported by one artillery battery for each brigade, the strength of the corps would be on the order of thirty thousand infantry and nine artillery batteries. In the domain of grand tactics, the corps commander would have to direct the corps as a combat organization in which the regiments would have to work together as brigades, the brigades together as divisions, and the divisions together as a corps with the artillery

batteries supporting the whole. Effectiveness would depend on how well the corps commander could make timely decisions, communicate those decisions to the division and brigade commanders, and supervise and motivate their subordinate officers and soldiers in carrying out those decisions. No single commander, no matter how able, skilled, or competent, could hope to carry out this function alone. The corps commander, as well as his subordinate division, brigade, and regimental commanders required a well organized staff of officers to assist them in the completion of their duties.

It was the staff officers of the corps who attended to the details of administration, and generally saw to it that the regulations and directives of the War Department and the army commander, as well as the directives and orders of their own commander were carried out. While on the march and particularly during a battle, the staff officers carried the orders of their commander to subordinate commanders, and reported back to him concerning the command's situation. In an era that lacked any other means of mechanical communication for controlling large units, the staff officers were the primary communications system of their command. As such, staff officers exercised a great deal of authority and could use that authority to issue orders to subordinate commanders in the name of their commander that, even in the heat of battle, had to be obeyed.

In 1862, the United States was well behind the major European nations in the developing the concepts of staff organization. Within the United States Army there was no established corps of trained staff officers as in the French, Prussian, and British armies. Various Congressional acts provided for staff departments at the War

Department level consisting of a number of officers assigned to supervise functional bureaus called departments. These included the Adjutant General, the Inspector General, the Quartermaster General, the Commissary General of Subsistence, the Surgeon General, the Pay Department, the Chief of Ordnance, and the Chief of Engineers. In addition, each general officer was authorized by law a certain number of aides-de-camp, the number depending on rank. Beyond this, no permanent staffs existed other than at the regimental level, since the pre-war army had no brigades, divisions, or corps. In a letter to Simon Cameron on 15 November 1861, McClellan pointed out that, "One of our chief difficulties consists in the scarcity of instructed staff officers." He went on to comment, "it is simply impossible to improvise staff officers—mere intelligence & courage will not answer—a good military education is absolutely necessary." McClellan then recommended that the curriculum of the Military Academy at West Point be temporarily modified to produce trained staff officers, and that a separate temporary school for training staff officers be established. Neither recommendation was adopted, so commanders at all levels had to continue to "improvise" by finding and relying on men of "mere intelligence & courage" in forming their staffs. In addition, the organization of staffs to assist Civil War commanders in the field was left to their own judgment. Some commanders opted for no staff other than a few aides, while others organized staffs that were more extensive, practical, and functional.²⁵

²⁵ Herman Hattaway and Archer Jones, *How the North Won: A Military History of the Civil War* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 104-7; Craighill, 48-51; McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 134.

In building the Army of the Potomac, McClellan improvised what was undoubtedly the most extensive staff that any American field army had ever had. It included a chief of staff—the first time that such a position had been officially designated in an American army—a chief of artillery, an inspector general’s department, an engineer department, a topographical engineer department, a medical department, a quartermaster department, a subsistence department, an ordnance department, a provost-marshal’s department, a staff judge-advocate department, a signal corps, a telegraphic section, a commandant of general headquarters, and a large number of aides-de-camp. This extensive staff organization frequently inspired the corps commanders and division commanders to organize their staffs along similar lines, though the exact organization and arrangement varied from corps commander to corps commander. In this way, they could insure that functional directives emanating from the army commander’s staff in his name were carried out in a seamless fashion throughout their own commands.²⁶

VI

In addition to the operational domains of strategy, grand tactics, and minor tactics, Jomini, Mahan, and Halleck also included the functional domain of logistics as absolutely necessary for the successful operations of an army and the conduct of a campaign. Jomini defined logistics by calling it “the art of moving armies,” and included within its scope

²⁶ OR 5, 22-31; Hattaway, 107.

“the orders and details of marches and camps, and of quartering and supplying troops.” Halleck defined logistics in the same way, and wrote that it included “the preparation of all the necessary materials for fitting out troops for a campaign and for putting them in motion; the regulating of marches, convoys, the means of transportation for provisions, hospitals, munitions, and supplies of all kinds; the preparation and protection of magazines; the laying out of camps and cantonments; in fine, every thing connected with preparing, moving, and guarding the *impedimenta* of an army.” Just as with the domains of strategy, grand tactics, and tactics, many of the tasks assigned to the domain of logistics were clearly the responsibility of the field army commander. The majority of the tasks, however, would be accomplished within the army corps, and were, therefore, the responsibility of the corps commander.²⁷

Unlike the development of combat power, which was achieved through the proper management and tactical employment of infantry regiments and artillery batteries, corps logistical support was achieved through a complex system of staff supervision and management of specific physical assets assigned to the corps for that purpose. Proper logistical support could be realized only when staff officers at the regimental, brigade, division, and corps levels coordinated their efforts among themselves and with the staff at the army and War Department levels. Within the corps there were two specific logistical responsibilities that had to be attended to while on campaign: supply and resupply, and medical evacuation and treatment.

²⁷ Jomini, 69, 252; Halleck, 88.

Supply and resupply while on campaign basically involved seeing that the soldiers of the corps were issued rations on a regular basis, and that they were kept supplied with ammunition. In addition, a supply of fodder was required to feed its large number of horses and mules. The primary responsibility for supply fell to the chief quartermaster on the corps staff and the quartermasters on the division, brigade, and regimental staffs. On some corps and division staffs, the responsibility was shared with commissary staff officers who specialized in overseeing the supply and distribution of rations, and ordnance officers who tended to the ammunition supply. Staff officers at the corps level, however, were not responsible for developing sources of supplies. Their job involved calling for, collecting, verifying, and consolidating requisitions from within the corps that were then forwarded or carried to the proper staff officer at the army level or taken directly to a depot to pick up what was needed. The main problem that the corps staff officers responsible for the supply and resupply faced during a campaign was one of transportation, because the corps' capability for carrying supplies was extremely limited.

In the transportation equation there were two elements, the individual soldier and the corps trains. The individual soldier was supposed to carry much of what he would require to sustain himself throughout the duration of the campaign. In addition to the uniform that he wore and the weapon that he carried, a soldier was expected to carry up to sixty rounds of ammunition, a canteen of water, extra clothing such as a spare shirt, a spare pair of drawers, spare socks, an extra pair of shoes, mess articles such as a tin plate, tin cup, tin knife and fork, blanket, rubber blanket, one half of a shelter tent, and an

overcoat. The reality, however, was that on campaign the soldiers quickly learned to carry as little as possible, and much of the “spare” clothing and equipment was soon discarded or turned in to be carried as regimental baggage and reissued as the situation might require. The soldier also could carry up to five days rations at one time in the form of salt pork or bacon, hard bread, and coffee, thereby greatly reducing the frequency with which rations had to be brought up and issued.

The corps trains consisted of army supply wagons that were used to haul everything else that the corps would need. The standard army wagon was covered by canvas stretched over hoops and drawn tight at the ends. Each wagon was drawn by either two or three pairs of horses or mules driven by a hired civilian teamster, and could carry up to approximately four tons of material. Just how far a wagon could move in one day depended entirely on road conditions.²⁸

The corps trains were under the general direction of the corps quartermaster, and usually operated under the direct command of officers assigned to the staff of the corps quartermaster or the divisional quartermasters. Within the train, some wagons were dedicated to carrying the baggage of specific units that would include tents, camp equipment, some extra clothing, blankets, and weapons, and the officers’ baggage. Some wagons carried the tents, equipment, and field records necessary to set up a unit headquarters. The remaining wagons carried medical equipment and supplies,

²⁸ OR Series III 5, 243. The army would find that mules were the better choice for this kind of work.

ammunition, and forage and rations. All of these wagons might be consolidated into a single train to follow behind the corps, or they could be separated out into divisional trains if the divisions marched along separate routes. Trains were also organized according to what they were carrying. Wagons that carried unit equipment and baggage were considered baggage trains and these would continually move forward with the corps. Supply trains consisted of the wagons that carried expendable items such as ammunition, rations, and forage for animals. These trains would have to be sent back periodically to the depots established by the army along the route of march in order to renew their loads.²⁹

Just how many wagons a corps or the army as a whole needed was always a matter of great concern. Wagon trains could fill up roads for miles on end. If they were too large or not properly managed they could slow the forward progress of the army or even inhibit its ability to maneuver. For this reason, McClellan in General Orders 153 of 10 August 1862, established a limit to the number of wagons that each corps within the Army of the Potomac could have. In addition to a corps supply train under the direction of the corps quartermaster, each corps headquarters was authorized four wagons, each division and brigade headquarters three, six for each infantry regiment, and three for each artillery battery. The order reduced the amount of baggage that each corps would carry by limiting the number of wall tents authorized and what could be included in an officer's

²⁹ Russell F. Weigley, *Quartermaster General of the Union Army: A Biography of M.C. Meigs* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959), 269.

baggage. The order also specified that those “wagons allowed to a regiment or battery must carry nothing but forage for the teams, cooking utensils for the men, hospital stores, small rations, and officer’s baggage.” One of the regimental wagons had to be used exclusively for hospital stores, and grain for the horses of the regimental officers had to be included in the load of the headquarters wagon.³⁰

VII

Although included by Jomini, Mahan, and Halleck as a part of the domain of logistics, one area of responsibility that increasingly demanded special attention was medical service. The medical responsibilities of the corps commander on campaign included the evacuation of wounded soldiers from the battlefield, the establishment of corps hospitals for the treatment of their wounds, and the proper disposition of the remains of those killed. Unlike the other operational and functional domains with which the corps commander had to deal, the successful accomplishment of the corps’ medical responsibilities required the direct involvement and supervision of medical professionals. Within the corps, every infantry regiment had a surgeon, assistant surgeon, and a hospital steward. Additional surgeons and stewards could be found on the brigade, division, and corps staffs. All of these personnel worked under the supervision of the Corps Medical Director.

³⁰ OR 11, pt. 3, 365-6.

Within the Army of the Potomac, real direction of the medical effort, however, did not originate at the corps level even if it had to be carried out there. Rather, it came from the army level in the form of a new medical director of the Army of the Potomac, Jonathan Letterman. Letterman was a career army surgeon who took up his duties on 4 July 1862 while the Army of the Potomac was taking position at Harrison's Landing. On his arrival, Letterman noted, "The nature of the military operations unavoidably placed the medical department, when the army reached this point, in a condition far from being satisfactory." Letterman immediately set about to remedy the problem that he saw as being three fold: the troops were exhausted and suffering needlessly from diseases that could be easily prevented, medical supplies had been largely exhausted or abandoned during the recent Seven Days battles, and the organization of the medical assets of the army, especially of the ambulance service, was not as effective as it could be.³¹

The problem of exhaustion and disease Letterman attacked quickly, putting the emphasis for correction at the corps level. Through the publication of General Orders No. 139 on 11 July, he made it the responsibility of each corps medical director to "detail daily an officer from the reserve corps of surgeons of each division, whose duty it will be minutely to inspect the police and sanitary condition of the Division." At the end of his tour of duty, the officer was required to submit a written report to the corps medical director, who, in turn, would submit a weekly report to Letterman. Any violations of the rules of camp police and sanitation, however, were to be reported immediately to the

³¹ OR 11, pt. 1, 210-1.

corps commander for correction, and the order specified that, “Commanders of corps will afford every facility to medical officers in the performance of these duties.” Letterman’s effort to improve the health of the army continued with a letter of recommendation on camp procedures and sanitation to McClellan on 18 July. Among other measures, he called for the issue of fresh rations, especially fresh vegetables and bread, the development of new sources of fresh water, the careful regulation of the amount of exercise and sleep that the soldiers were getting, and strict rules of camp sanitation. These recommendations were accepted by McClellan and published to the army as General Orders No. 150 that “enjoined upon corps and other commanders to see that they [the orders] are fully carried out.”³²

The problem of the lack of medical supplies and equipment had to be solved largely at the army level. The corps medical directors were required to monitor the status of medical supplies and equipment and to report deficiencies to Letterman. It then became his responsibility to procure what was needed and supervise its distribution to the corps. Procurement of medical supplies and equipment normally meant requisitioning through the War Department Surgeon General, which Letterman did not hesitate to do, but he was also given the extraordinary authority by the Surgeon General “to call directly upon the Medical Purveyors at New York, Philadelphia, and Washington, for all that I considered necessary.” Ultimately, Letterman was able to report that, “While the army remained at this place [Harrison’s Landing] supplies of every kind appertaining to the medical

³² OR 11, pt. 1, 212-3; pt. 3, 316-7, 349-50.

department were abundant and large amounts were issued; as it was found necessary to resupply almost the entire army.”³³

To improve the efficiency of the army’s medical department, Letterman reformed procedures for the establishment of hospitals, and created a new organization for the employment of ambulances. Traditionally, treatment of the sick and wounded had been accomplished at the regimental level in hospitals established by the regimental surgeon and his assistants. If the army was encamped and the medical case load relatively light, this system was efficient enough because it provided medical care for the soldier at the lowest possible level, and kept the soldier with his regiment so that he could be returned to duty as quickly as possible. On campaign, however, when case loads reached staggering proportions because of harsh conditions and combat, the system of regimental hospitals often broke down and did not make effective use of medical personnel and equipment found at higher levels. Accordingly, Letterman began to place more and more of the responsibility for medical care and treatment, and for the establishment of hospitals on the corps and divisional medical directors.³⁴

This trend was initially evident in Letterman’s organization of an ambulance corps. Under this plan, published as Army of the Potomac Special Orders No. 147 on 2 August 1862, the corps medical director would have overall responsibility for the ambulance

³³ Jonathan Letterman, *Medical Recollections of the Army of the Potomac* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1866), 17; OR 11, pt. 1, 213-4.

corps and the process for evacuating the corps' wounded during a battle. A captain was to be appointed to command all of the ambulances and ambulance personnel within the corps, assisted by a first lieutenant for each division, a second lieutenant for each brigade, and a sergeant for each regiment. Within the ambulance corps there would be one transport cart—a two wheeled ambulance—two two-horse ambulances and one four-horse ambulance for each regiment, a two-horse ambulance for each battery, and two two-horse ambulances for the corps headquarters and each of the division and brigade headquarters. Each transport cart was to be manned by a driver, and each ambulance—two horse or four-horse—by a driver and two attendants. All personnel of the ambulance corps were to be selected from within the corps by the corps commander, the officers particularly to be “active and efficient” individuals.³⁵

VIII

Given the extent and the scope of all that was to be accomplished within the *corps d'armée*, it quickly became the primary operational organization of the Civil War. While corps commanders took no responsibility for the domain of strategy other than offering advice and council to the army commander when asked, they were fully responsible through the direction of their corps for the accomplishment of the strategic plans developed by the field army commander. Jomini defined the difference between the

³⁴ George W. Adams, *Doctors in Blue, The Medical History of the Union Army in the Civil War* (New York: Henry Schuman, 1952), 63, 67; Letterman, 39.

³⁵ OR 11, pt. 1, 217-9; Letterman, 24-30.

domain of strategy and the domain of grand tactics as the difference between conducting a war on a map and actually fighting it upon the ground. While field army commanders were never too far removed from combat, it was the corps and division commanders who directed the fighting. As such they were the battle captains, and no campaign or battle of the war can be understood without considering the corps level of command, for it determined the effectiveness, the success or failure, of the army during a campaign or battle.³⁶

As the battle captains, it was the corps and division commanders who had to deal the tactical dilemma of the war, the highly accurate, long range fire of the rifled musket. No experience with this new weapon had prepared them for this role, and no theorists had suggested any adjustment in tactics to deal with it. Exactly how infantry and artillery would be used on the battlefield under the new circumstances would have to be worked out on campaign and on the battlefield by each corps' senior commanders.

The corps and division commanders would also be the ones to deal first hand with another phenomena of the war, the volunteer soldier. The Constitution of the United States gave to Congress the authority to declare war, and to raise the armies necessary to fight those wars by "calling forth the militia." The Constitution, though, left with the states the authority for appointing the officers of the militia, "and the authority of training

³⁶ Jomini, 69; Dennis Hart Mahan, *An Elementary Treatise on Advanced-Guard, Out-Post, and Detachment Service of Troops, and the Manner of Handling Them in Presence of an Enemy*, 2d ed. (New York: John Wiley, 1862), 32, hereinafter cited as *Outpost*. Halleck defined grand tactics as "the art of combining and conducting battles of all descriptions." See page 114.

the militia according to the discipline prescribed by Congress.” Under these provisions, the Congress had never deemed it fit or necessary to maintain a large standing army. The regular army of the United States at the beginning of the war numbered only 1,105 officers and 15,259 enlisted soldiers and was little more than a frontier constabulary. Accordingly, the North and the South would have to rely on regiments and batteries of volunteers that were raised by the states in response to calls issued by their respective national governments. In these armies of unprecedented size, relying on untested technology, and demanding increased professionalism, the principal reliance would be placed on untrained volunteer officers and soldiers.³⁷

The officers of the regular army, who would quickly become the corps and division commanders, had little experience leading volunteers, and what experience they did have had not been good. Volunteer regiments had been raised for the Mexican War, but for the most part they had proven less than adequate, and the greater reliance on campaign and in battle was on the regular regiments and batteries. For the North, the experience of First Bull Run had further demonstrated that volunteers could not be relied upon. After Bull Run, however, the senior officers had to face the reality of a long war, and a war that would primarily be fought by armies made up of hundreds of thousands of volunteers.

It was under these conditions that George B. McClellan began assembling the corps of the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Virginia in Maryland in September 1862 for what would prove to be one of the most critical campaigns of the war.

³⁷ U.S. Constitution, art 1, sec. 8; Hattaway, 9.

CHAPTER 3
THE SECOND ARMY CORPS

I

Of the two army corps that formed the line of battle north of Rockville, Maryland on the sixth of September 1862, the stronger in terms of numbers, experience, fitness, ability and command was unquestionably the corps under Major General Edwin V. Sumner, the Second Army Corps of the Army of the Potomac. This corps was one of the original army corps created in response to President Lincoln's General War Order Number 2 on 8 March 1862, and at that time was commanded by then Brigadier General Sumner. According to the order, the corps was to consist of Sumner's own division, which would henceforth be commanded by Brigadier General Israel B. Richardson, as well as the divisions of Brigadier Generals Louis Blenker, and John Sedgwick. Although established by the Army of the Potomac general order of 13 March, the corps would not actually come together as a unit until mid-May 1862, well after the army had moved to the Peninsula and begun its drive on Richmond. Even then, it would never be joined by Blenker's division for in late March that unit had been reassigned to Major General John Charles Frémont's Mountain Department in western Virginia.¹

¹ War Department, *War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 71 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), series I, vol. 5, 18, 50, hereinafter cited as OR, all references are to Series I unless

In its two-division configuration, the Second Army Corps would fight with distinction throughout the Peninsular Campaign. When Confederate commander General Joseph E. Johnston attacked the exposed Fourth Army Corps of the Army of the Potomac near Fair Oaks Station and Seven Pines on 31 May, it was the Second Corps that forced its way across the suddenly rain swollen Chickahominy River to come to the rescue. A month later when the Federal army was attacked by the new Confederate commander, General Robert E. Lee, in a series of battles that would come to be known as the Seven Days, the Second Corps assisted the Army of the Potomac's withdrawal to the James River by checking the Confederate advance at Savage Station on 29 June, and then withdrawing in good order to repeat that performance at White Oak Swamp and at Frayser's Farm on the thirtieth. The Second Corps was again in the line of battle on Malvern Hill with the rest of the army on the first of July though none of the disastrous Confederate attacks of that day came within its sector.

On the second of July, the Army of the Potomac and the Second Corps withdrew from Malvern Hill to Harrison's Landing on the James River, where they remained until early August, when the new General-in-Chief, Henry Halleck, ordered the Army of the Potomac back to northern Virginia to combine with Pope's Army of Virginia for a new drive on Richmond. In the withdrawal of the Army of the Potomac back down the

otherwise noted; George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story* (New York: Charles & Company, 1887), 222; Francis A. Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Olde Soldier Books, n.d.), 5.

Peninsula to Hampton Roads, the Second Army Corps acted as the rear guard with the last of its units leaving Harrison's Landing on 16 August. By 20 August the corps was at Yorktown from which it was ordered to march to Newport News to embark on transports for the trip up the Chesapeake and the Potomac.²

The corps began landing at Aquia Creek on 26 August with orders to march to Falmouth and then north and west along the Rappahannock River to connect with the left of Pope's army, which was then confronting Lee's Army of Northern Virginia across the upper reaches of the river from Kelly's Ford to White Sulfur Springs. But by that time, Pope's situation on the upper Rappahannock was changing rapidly. Between 24 and 26 August the command of Stonewall Jackson marched north from White Sulfur Springs through Thoroughfare Gap, completely turning Pope's right flank and breaking his line of communications—the Orange and Alexandria Railroad—at Bristoe Station and Manassas Junction. As the Second Corps was landing and beginning its move toward Fredericksburg, Pope was turning away from the Rappahannock to pursue Jackson. Accordingly, late on the afternoon of 27 August, the Second Corps was ordered back to Aquia Creek to reembark for Alexandria.³

The corps began arriving at Alexandria on the twenty-eighth, and marched two miles west of the town making camp for the night along the Little River Turnpike, although

² OR 12, pt. 3, 590, 607; Congress, Senate, Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 3 pts., 37th Cong., 3rd sess., 1863, Rep. Com. 108, pt. 1, 365-6.

³ OR 12, pt. 3, 692; Walker, 89.

several regiments were sent to forts in the vicinity of the Chain Bridge about ten miles north of Alexandria. On the afternoon of the twenty-ninth, the corps was ordered to take position across the Potomac from Georgetown, and accordingly made a march of approximately ten miles during the night of 29-30 August. No sooner had the corps reached this new position, however, than it was ordered to march with all possible speed via Fairfax Court House to reinforce General Pope who was thought to be in the vicinity of Manassas Junction. The corps was on the road again by 2:30 p.m. that afternoon and by the evening of 31 August was within three miles of Centreville, completing that twenty-mile march in about twenty-four hours.⁴

Following his defeat at Manassas on the thirtieth, Pope had withdrawn to a position around Centreville. As the Second Corps arrived there on the morning of the first of September, it was sent out to take position on Pope's right, north of the town. With the exception of one brigade, which was sent on a reconnaissance toward Chantilly, the corps remained in position during the day and then withdrew to Fairfax Court House as the rear guard of Pope's army during the night of 1 to 2 September. At Fairfax, the corps went into position during the day north of that town on Flint Hill. During the night of 2 to 3 September, the withdrawal of Pope's army to the defenses of Washington continued with the Second Corps again acting as its rear guard. By the morning of the third, after only some light skirmishing with the enemy, the corps reached the vicinity of the Chain Bridge

⁴ OR 11, pt. 1, 97-8; 12, pt. 3, 706, 745, 747-8; *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 366-7; McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 514.

where the troops were able to get a few hours rest. But, no sooner had the corps arrived at the bridge than it received further orders to cross the Potomac, and to advance to Tennallytown and take up a position to defend the capital district from the impending attack from the north.⁵

II

As the Second Army Corps entered into the Maryland Campaign in September 1862 (figure 7), its commander was among the most experienced and competent career officers in the regular army. Born in Boston in January 1797, Sumner was sixty-five in 1862, the oldest active general officer in the Federal army. Commissioned directly into the 2nd Infantry Regiment in 1819, his career spanned forty-three years of continuous active service. In 1833, he was appointed captain in the newly formed 1st Dragoons and

⁵ OR 12, pt. 2, 44, 81, 82; *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 367.

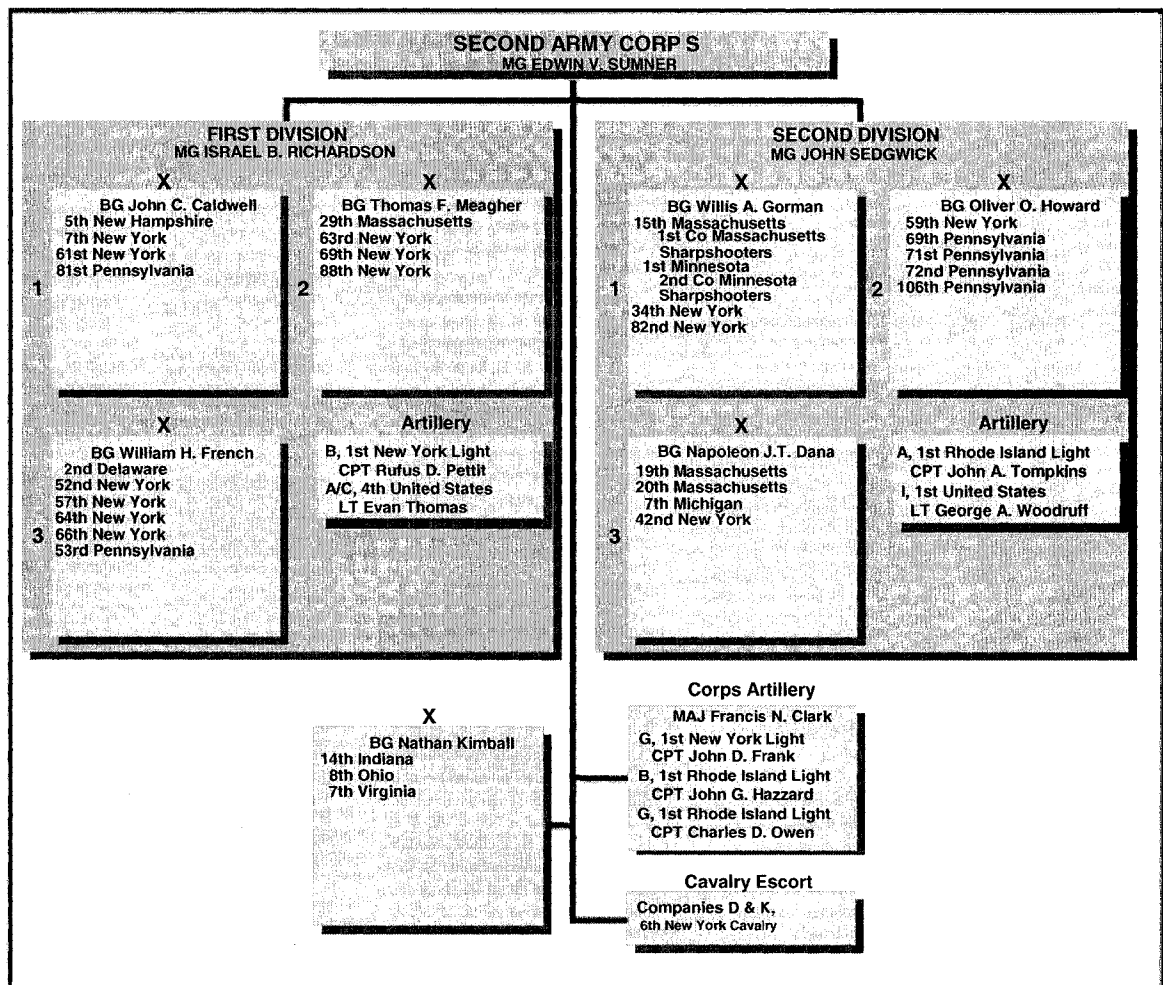


Figure 7: Organization of the Second Army Corps, 6 September 1862.

thereafter until the beginning of the Civil War almost all of his service would be with the mounted arm and on the western frontier.

As the war with Mexico began in 1846, Sumner was promoted to the rank of major in the 2nd Dragoons. In January 1847, as Major General Winfield Scott was assembling an army to invade Mexico through Vera Cruz and capture Mexico City, he selected Sumner over William S. Harney, the colonel of the 2nd Dragoons, to command the regular cavalry of the expedition as the “much safer and more efficient commander.” Harney appealed

the decision and was eventually given command of the cavalry, but Scott compensated Sumner with command of a new regiment of mounted rifles. Throughout the expedition to Mexico City, Sumner distinguished himself as not only a brave officer, but as a competent and skillful leader. For his distinguished service in the Mexican War, Sumner received brevet promotions to lieutenant colonel and colonel.⁶

After the war, Sumner returned to frontier service and in 1848 received a regular promotion to lieutenant colonel of the 1st Dragoons. In April 1851, he was selected by the Secretary of War to command the military department of New Mexico to respond to raids by bands of Navajo. Sumner quickly established military posts closer to the Navajo strongholds to interdict further incursions, concluded an agreement with them, and even provided them with agricultural supplies and equipment. Sumner's efforts were successful enough that the Secretary of War was able to report to Congress in his Annual Message for 1852 that Sumner "has not only succeeded in arresting the incursions of the Indians within his command, but has greatly reduced its expenditures."⁷

⁶ House, *Messages of the President and Correspondence Relative to the Mexican War*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 1848, Executive Document No. 8, Serial No. 515, 266, 276, 394, 400; House, *Correspondence between the Secretary of War and Generals Scott and Taylor, and between General Scott and Mr. Trist*, 30th Cong., 1st sess., 1848, Executive Document No. 56, Serial No. 518, 44, 56; Justin H. Smith, *The War with Mexico*, 2 vols. (New York: MacMillan Company, 1919; reprint, Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1963), 2:350.

⁷ Senate, *Report of the Secretary of War, 1851*, 32nd Cong., 1st sess., 1851, Executive Document No. 1, Serial No. 611, 106, 125-6; Senate, *Report of the Secretary of War, 1852*, 32nd Cong., 2nd sess., 1852, Executive Document No. 1, Serial No. 659, 3-4; Clifford E. Trafzer, "Politicos and Navajos," *Journal of the West* 13 (1974): 13.

In 1855, Sumner was promoted to colonel of the newly organized 1st Cavalry with headquarters at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas Territory. In this position, Sumner commanded the only national military force available in 1855 and 1856 to help keep the peace during the crisis of "Bleeding Kansas." Despite his personal opposition to slavery, he did much to quell the violence and preserve order by cooperating with and supporting the territorial governor, and by dispersing armed bands of both sides. In 1857, Sumner led a force that consisted of infantry, cavalry, and artillery west from Fort Leavenworth to "punish" a band of Cheyenne for a massacre of settlers in the fall of 1856. The campaign lasted four months taking Sumner's multiple columns as far west as Fort Laramie and the upper reaches of the Arkansas River in what is now Colorado before finally confronting, defeating, and dispersing a much superior force of Cheyenne at Solomon's Fork on the Kansas River in July 1857. Of this campaign, Percival G. Lowe, who had charge of the expedition's transportation, wrote, "He did the best that an earnest preserving commander could do, . . . and I think that the general verdict of his command was that he did well, and that is the highest court by which a man can be tried."⁸

In 1858, Sumner was made commander of the Department of the West at St. Louis, a position that he held until February 1861 when General-in-Chief Winfield Scott ordered him to Illinois to take personal charge of providing security for President-elect Abraham Lincoln as he made the trip east to Washington for his inauguration. A few days later on

⁸ Percival Green Lowe, *Five Years a Dragoon and Other Adventures on the Great Plains* (Kansas City, MO: F. Hudson Publishing Co., 1906; reprint, Norman, OK; University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 185, 228.

16 March, Sumner was promoted to the rank of brigadier general making him one of the senior officers of the regular army. Scott then gave Sumner orders to go at once to California to take over command of the Department of the Pacific from Brevet Brigadier General Albert Sidney Johnston whose loyalty to the Union was suspect because of his southern background. Sumner arrived at San Francisco on 24 April and reported that the command "was turned over to me in good order." As he had done in Kansas in 1855 and 1856, Sumner worked closely with civilian authorities in California and used his military forces judiciously and unpretentiously in maintaining order, helping to insure that California remained in the Union. With the situation secure, Sumner was recalled to Washington in late October and assigned to command of a division in the Army of the Potomac, and then to the command of the Second Corps upon its creation in March 1862.⁹

As a corps commander, Sumner was demanding and a stickler for military discipline, process, and procedure. He was the consummate professional officer given the task of creating a first class combat organization from the raw material of volunteers. An officer of the Irish Brigade remembered Sumner as "an accomplished soldier of more than forty years' experience: cool, thoroughly trained, and competent for all the emergencies of war." The soldiers of the Second Corps would come to call him "Old Bull," a nickname that carried over from the old army. This sobriquet was derived from his great booming

⁹ OR 50, pt. 1, 456, 472.

voice that, it was said, could be heard clearly from one end of a regiment to the other even in the thunder of combat. Another story, though, had it that the byname was "Bull-Head" and resulted from a rumor that a musket ball had been seen to bounce off of his head without doing noticeable damage. What the soldiers would remember most about Sumner, though, was that he was a fighting general who would not hesitate to commit himself and his command to battle when he believed it was necessary. Among them it was said that when commanders like McClellan went to the front there would be no battle that day, but when "Old Man Sumner goes to the front, look out for a fight."¹⁰

George B. McClellan, as Sumner's immediate superior, recognized the value of that general's soldierly qualities, but was not always happy with Sumner because of his reputation for impetuosity in battle. After a rear guard action at Williamsburg, Virginia on 5 May 1862 that was directed by Sumner, McClellan wrote his wife, "Sumner had proved that he was even a greater fool than I had supposed & had come within an ace of having us defeated." But McClellan's tune changed after the Battle of Fair Oaks, during which he sent orders for the general to go to the aid of the Fourth Corps. Army engineers, however, told Sumner that the bridges over the Chickahominy, which he had constructed for just such an eventuality, were so severely damaged by a flood from rains the night before that a crossing was impossible. "Impossible!" Sumner roared. "I tell you

¹⁰ D. P. Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns* (Boston: Patrick Donahoe, 1869; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1987), 105; Frederick L. Hitchcock, *War from the Inside: The Story of the 132nd Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry in the War for the Suppression of the Rebellion, 1862-1863* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1904; reprint, Alexandria, VA, Time-Life Books,

I can cross. I am ordered." And with that he pushed the Second Corps across and marched to Fair Oaks arriving just in time to keep the Fourth Corps from being overwhelmed. In dispatches to the Secretary of War, McClellan complimented Sumner saying, "He displayed the utmost energy in bringing his troops into action, & handled them with the utmost courage in action. He repulsed every attack of the enemy, & drove him wherever he could get at him." At Savage Station during the Seven Days, Sumner again demonstrated his qualities as a fighting general by successfully conducting a rear guard action as McClellan withdrew the rest of the army toward the James. But Sumner, believing that the Army of the Potomac should stand and fight, moved away from Savage Station that night only after being ordered to do so directly by McClellan. Whatever misgivings McClellan may have had concerning Sumner's abilities as a corps commander they were not aired officially. McClellan made no disparaging remarks in his official reports concerning Sumner's performance and did not attempt to have him removed or reassigned. Throughout the Peninsula Campaign, McClellan paid due regard to Sumner as the senior corps commander. Whenever two or more of the corps were operating beyond his direct control, McClellan appointed Sumner as the overall commander. When Secretary of War Stanton nominated Sumner and McClellan's other corps commanders for promotion to major generals of volunteers on 5 July 1862, McClellan made no

1985), 40.

objection. And it was Sumner that McClellan entrusted with the rear guard during the withdrawal of the Army of the Potomac down the Peninsula in late August.¹¹

Like Sumner, the Second Corps' two division commanders were also experienced, professional officers. The First Division was commanded by Major General Israel B. Richardson, forty-six years old, and a graduate of the West Point Class of 1841. Commissioned in the 3rd Infantry, Richardson served first in Florida against the Seminole, and was with his regiment as it fought with Scott's army in the campaign to take Mexico City. At the battle of Cerro Gordo, he showed himself to be such an aggressive combat leader that he was given the nickname "Fighting Dick," one that would stick with him all his life. For his gallant conduct at the battles of Contreras, Churubusco, and Chapultepec, Richardson received brevet promotions to captain and major. After the war, he continued to serve with the 3rd Infantry on the southwest frontier until he resigned his commission in 1855 to take up farming in Pontiac, Michigan. When war came in 1861, he recruited and organized the 2nd Michigan and reentered Federal service as the regiment's colonel. He commanded a brigade at the First Battle of Bull Run, and managed to bring it off the field in good order in spite of the general panic all around him.

¹¹ George B. McClellan, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865*, ed. Stephen W. Sears (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 257, 286; William Child, *A History of the Fifth Regiment, New Hampshire Volunteers in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (Bristol, NH: R.W. Musgrove, Printer, 1893; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD; Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1988), 63; Oliver Otis Howard, *Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard, Major General United States Army*, 2 vols. (New York: Baker & Taylor Company, 1907; reprint, Harrisburg, PA: Archive Society, 1997), 1:237; OR 51, pt. 1, 716.

In the months after Bull Run, Richardson earned a solid reputation as an organizer and disciplinarian. In August 1861, he was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers and his brigade was assigned to the division of Brigadier General Samuel Heintzelman.

When corps commands were formed in March 1862 and Sumner moved up to command the Second Corps, Richardson was reassigned to that corps to take command of Sumner's old division. He commanded this unit throughout the Peninsula Campaign and was promoted to the rank of major general of volunteers in July.

The commander of the Second Division was Major General John Sedgwick.

Sedgwick would celebrate his forty-ninth birthday during the Maryland Campaign and was an 1837 graduate of West Point. Like Richardson, Sedgwick began his army career serving in the war against the Seminole in Florida. In the War with Mexico, he served under both Zachary Taylor and Winfield Scott and won brevet promotions to captain and major. When the 1st Cavalry Regiment was formed in 1855, Sedgwick, although to that point in his career an artillery officer, was appointed its major and served directly under Sumner as Sumner tried to maintain the peace in Kansas in 1855 and 1856. Sedgwick also commanded one of Sumner's columns in the campaign against the Cheyenne in 1857 and again in 1858. Still serving on the frontier in May 1861 as a lieutenant colonel, he was ordered to Washington where in August he was assigned to command a brigade in the defenses of Washington and was promoted to colonel. In February 1862, McClellan selected Sedgwick for promotion to brigadier general of volunteers and assigned him to take over the division of Brigadier General Charles P. Stone in the Army of the Potomac.

It was this division with Sedgwick as its commander that was assigned to the Second Army Corps in March 1862. Sedgwick commanded this unit throughout the Peninsula Campaign, and was wounded at Frayser's Farm on 30 June. Along with Richardson, he was promoted to major general of volunteers in July 1862. To the men of his division, Sedgwick would be known as "Uncle John" in recognition of his kindly attitude and his consideration for the soldiers under his command.

For the most part, the brigade commanders of the Second Corps also were men of competence and experience, if not always military experience. In the First Division under Richardson there were Brigadier Generals John C. Caldwell, Thomas F. Meagher, and William H. French.

At twenty-nine years of age, Caldwell was the youngest of the brigade commanders. He had graduated from Amherst College in Massachusetts, and then took up teaching. By 1861, he was the principal of Washington Academy in East Machias, Maine. He entered the service as colonel of the 11th Maine in November 1861, was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers in the spring of 1862, and assigned to temporary command of the First Brigade of Richardson's division on 4 June after its original commander, Brigadier General Oliver O. Howard, was severely wounded during the Battle of Fair Oaks. When Howard returned to the Second Corps in late August, however, Sumner kept Caldwell in position as the commander of this brigade, giving Howard command of one of the brigades in Sedgwick's division.¹²

¹² OR 11, pt. 3, 214; Howard, *Autobiography*, 1:267.

Easily the most colorful of all of the corps' brigade commanders was Thomas Meagher. The son of a wealthy Irish merchant, he was born in Waterford, Ireland in 1823. Educated at Stonyhurst College in Lancashire, Meagher became an ardent Irish nationalist. He was implicated in the rebellion of 1848 and sentenced to death by a British court, but was eventually exiled to Tasmania from which he escaped to the United States in 1852. In New York, he became something of a celebrity by lecturing and publishing a newspaper called the *Irish News*. Active in New York political and social circles, he raised a company of three month volunteers called the "Irish Zouaves" when the war broke out in 1861, and commanded it as a part of the 69th New York Militia at the First Battle of Bull Run. Back in New York in the late summer and autumn of 1861, he set out to raise an all Irish brigade, which he did. In February 1862, he was commissioned a brigadier general of volunteers and given command of the brigade that was then already a part of Sumner's division.

The last of Richardson's brigade commanders, William French, was a professional officer. He was born in Baltimore, Maryland in 1815 and attended the Military Academy, graduating in the same class with John Sedgwick in 1837. Receiving his commission in the 1st Artillery, French, like both Sedgwick and Richardson, began his active service fighting against the Seminole in Florida. In the Mexican War, he won brevet promotions to both captain and major for gallantry and meritorious conduct. In 1861, French was a captain in the 1st Artillery serving in Texas when that state seceded from the Union and Brevet Major General David E. Twiggs surrendered the Department of Texas to state

forces. French, acting as a brevet major, followed orders from the War Department and marched five companies of his regiment four hundred miles overland from Fort Duncan at Eagle Pass to a steamer awaiting him at Brazos Santiago where he embarked for Fort Taylor at Key West. Subsequently, in the fall of 1861, he was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers and assigned to command of a brigade in the Army of the Potomac that eventually became part of Sumner's division.

In Sedgwick's division, the brigade commanders were Brigadier Generals Willis A. Gorman, Oliver O. Howard, and Napoleon J.T. Dana. Gorman was a forty-six year old lawyer and politician from Indiana. During the War with Mexico he had served as major of the 3rd Indiana and colonel of the 4th Indiana, both volunteer regiments. Between the wars, Gorman served in the House of Representatives, and for four years as the governor of the Minnesota Territory appointed by President Franklin Pierce. After his stint as governor of that territory, Gorman remained in St. Paul to practice law. He became a member of Minnesota's state constitutional convention and was elected to its state legislature. When the war began in April 1861, Gorman was commissioned colonel of the 1st Minnesota, which he commanded at First Bull Run. He was promoted to brigadier general of volunteers in September and given command of his brigade, then in the division of Brigadier General Stone. Gorman continued to command the brigade after Sedgwick became the division commander and throughout the Peninsula Campaign, except during the Seven Days Battles when due to illness he was forced to turn command over to Colonel Alfred Sully of the 1st Minnesota.

Howard was born in Leeds, Maine in 1830. He graduated from Bowdoin College in 1850 and then attended the Military Academy, graduating fourth in the class of 1854. Taking his commission in the Ordnance Corps, Howard's service in the regular army prior to the outbreak of the war included tours at the Watervliet Arsenal in New York and the Kennebec Arsenal in Maine, two years as Chief of Ordnance in the Department of Florida, and from 1857 to 1861 as a professor of mathematics at West Point. He resigned his regular army commission in June 1861 in order to serve as the colonel of the 3rd Maine. He commanded a brigade at First Bull Run that was driven from the field in disorder, but still received a promotion to brigadier general of volunteers in September. Howard was then given a new brigade in the provisional organization formed by McClellan that autumn. It was this brigade that Sumner selected for inclusion in his division in November. Howard was severely wounded at the Battle of Fair Oaks forcing the amputation of his right arm. He spent the summer on recuperative leave, rejoining the Second Corps in late August during its brief stop at Aquia Landing. Rather than return Howard to his old brigade, however, Sumner assigned him to Sedgwick's division to command the brigade of Brigadier William W. Burns, who had been severely wounded at Savage Station and was not expected to return for some time.¹³

Napoleon Dana was forty years old in 1862 and the son of a regular army officer. He had entered West Point at sixteen and graduated with the class of 1842. He was with the

¹³ Oliver O. Howard to Elisabeth Anne Howard, 28 August 1862, Oliver Otis Howard Papers, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, ME.

7th Infantry under Scott in Mexico and was so severely wounded at the battle of Cerro Gordo that he was left for dead on the battlefield for nearly two days. Dana resigned his commission in 1855 to enter the banking business in St. Paul, but he remained active in military affairs as a brigadier in the Minnesota militia. In the autumn of 1861, he reentered active Federal service as colonel of the 1st Minnesota to replace Gorman who had been promoted to brigadier general. Dana himself was advanced to brigadier general of volunteers in the Spring of 1862 and given command of his own brigade in Sedgwick's division, which he led throughout the Peninsula Campaign.

As the Second Corps entered the Maryland Campaign in September 1862, it had one other brigade that was not assigned to either Richardson's or Sedgwick's divisions. This was the brigade of Brigadier General Nathan Kimball. Kimball was born in Indiana in 1822. After two years of college, he taught school for a while in Independence, Missouri, before taking up the practice of medicine. During the Mexican War, he was a captain in the 2nd Indiana Volunteers that served under Major General Zachary Taylor. At the Battle of Buena Vista, the 2nd Indiana fled the field in a panic, but Kimball was able to somehow rally his own company and keep it in the fight. After the Mexican War, he continued the practice of medicine in Indiana until the beginning of the Civil War when he was appointed colonel of the 14th Indiana. He led his regiment during McClellan's campaign in western Virginia in the spring of 1861, at Cheat Mountain that autumn, and as the senior colonel commanded a brigade under Brigadier General James Shields in the Shenandoah Valley in the spring of 1862. On 23 March, Kimball, due to the wounding of

Shields the night before, commanded Shields's division at the Battle of Kernstown, where he inflicted a rare reverse on Stonewall Jackson. In June of 1862, Kimball, now a brigadier general of volunteers, was transferred along with his brigade to the Army of the Potomac. They arrived at Harrison's Landing on 2 July, just after the Seven Days, and were subsequently assigned to the Second Corps.

In September 1862, the staff of the Second Army Corps would include the following: Lieutenant Colonel Joseph H. Taylor was the Adjutant General and acted as the Corps Chief of Staff, Lieutenant Colonel Paul J. Revere, who reported to Sumner on 4 September, was Inspector General, Lieutenant Colonel C.D. Blanchard was the Chief Quartermaster, Major Francis N. Clarke the Chief of Artillery, Surgeon Alexander G. Jones the Medical Director, Captain John M. Garland the Chief of the Ambulance Corps, Major Lawrence Kip the Senior Aide-de-Camp, and Captains William Graham Jones, Joseph C. Auderried, and Samuel S. Sumner—the younger of General Sumner's two sons—were the junior Aides-de-Camp.¹⁴

On Richardson's staff was Major John M. Norvell, Assistant Adjutant General, Captain Charles H. Hoyt, Division Quartermaster, Captain C.S. Fuller, Commissary, Lieutenant James M. Rorty, Ordnance Officer, Surgeon John H. Taylor, Medical Director, together with Captain James P. McMahon and Lieutenants D.W. Miller, Wilber L. Hurlbut, and C. Stuart Draper as Aides-de-Camp. With Sedgwick as his staff were Major William D. Sedgwick—a cousin—Assistant Adjutant General, Lieutenant William R.

¹⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 110, 276-7.

Steele, Ordnance Officer, and Captain Church Howe and Lieutenant Charles A. Whittier, Aides-de-Camp. At the brigade level, the staffs usually consisted of a brigade adjutant general, a quartermaster, possibly a brigade surgeon or medical director, and from two to four aides-de-camp.¹⁵

III

On 6 September 1862, the infantry of the Second Army Corps was comprised of thirty volunteer regiments. The regiment that could claim the distinction of being the oldest in the corps was the 1st Minnesota, which began recruiting when Lincoln on 15 April 1861 called on the states for seventy-five thousand militia for ninety days to deal with “combinations too powerful to be suppressed by the ordinary course of judicial proceedings.” Based on this call, the 1st Minnesota was mustered into Federal service on 29 April. When Lincoln on 3 May called on the states to raise 42,034 volunteers for three years service, however, the 1st Minnesota was reorganized and re-mustered for the longer period, making it the first Federal regiment to be mustered in for three years. Two other Second Corps regiments, the 7th New York and the 71st Pennsylvania, also could trace their beginnings to Lincoln’s April call for volunteers, while another four regiments were recruited and organized on the call of 3 May. The remaining twenty-three regiments were all recruited and organized during the late summer and autumn of 1861 based on a 25 July Congressional authorization for the enlistment of up to five hundred thousand

¹⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 282-3, 307, 320, 328.

volunteers. The last regiment of the corps to complete muster was the 88th New York in January 1862. The corps, therefore, was born of the sentiment of '61, that complex mix of patriotism, sense of duty, excitement, desire for adventure, fame, and glory, or just the opportunity to get away from home for a while that motivated the men of the North to sign up for three years of active military duty. As such, the men of the corps were willing soldiers who for the most part realized from the beginning that their service would not be easy.¹⁶

By September 1862, all of the regiments of the corps were manned by hardened and disciplined veterans with a solid reputation to uphold. They were among the best trained and most experienced in the Army of the Potomac. With the exception of the regiments of Kimball's brigade and the 59th New York in Howard's brigade, all of the regiments were with the corps throughout the Peninsula Campaign and saw action at Fair Oaks and during the Seven Days. The regiments of Kimball's brigade had fought in western Virginia in the fall of 1861 and in the campaigning in the Shenandoah Valley in the late winter and spring of 1862. The regimental commanders were all prominent men in their states, coming from various different careers, and appointed to their positions by their state governors.

¹⁶ Ethan S. Rafuse, *A Single Grand Victory: The First Campaign and Battle of Manassas* (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 2002), 19; William Lochren, "Narrative of the First Regiment" in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Company, 1891), 2-4.

In brigading together the regiments of the corps, little attention was paid to state or even regional cohesion. Five of the thirty regiments came from New England, one from New Hampshire and four from Massachusetts, and these were spread among four of the seven brigades. The largest regional representation came from the middle Atlantic states with nineteen regiments, thirteen from New York and six from Pennsylvania. There was at least one of these regiments in every brigade except Kimball's. The western states were represented in three of the brigades by four regiments that came from Ohio, Indiana, Michigan, and Minnesota. Even the South was represented in the corps by two regiments from slave holding states, Delaware and Virginia. The strangest matching of regiments was in Meagher's Irish Brigade where the aristocratic 29th Massachusetts was thrown in with three regiments of New York Irishmen. Until the assignment of the 59th New York in early August 1862, all of the regiments in Howard's brigade had come from Philadelphia, and it was known as the Philadelphia Brigade.

Because the regiments were all recruited in 1861, they were armed with the mix of muskets and rifled muskets available at the time. Since the War Department did not require the submission of regimental quarterly ordnance returns until the end of 1862, there is no single source that lists how each of the thirty infantry regiments of the Second Corps were armed in September 1862. Other records and sources, such as regimental

histories, inspection reports, and official and personal correspondence, however, do occasionally mention what arms were carried by a particular unit.¹⁷

In Richardson's division, the mix of muskets and rifled muskets was about even. Two out of the five regiments in Caldwell's brigade, the 5th New Hampshire and 61st New York, carried Enfield Rifled Muskets, Model 1853. These arms were imported from Great Britain in .577 and .58 caliber and were every bit as good as their American counterparts, the U.S. Rifled Musket, Model 1855 and U.S. Rifled Musket, Model 1861, both of which were .58 caliber. Two more of Caldwell's regiments, the 7th New York and 64th New York, were armed with .54 caliber rifles, either made by E. Remington & Sons of Ilion, New York or imported from Austria. These rifles had shorter barrels than the rifled musket, and although slightly smaller in caliber, when firing a minie ball, they generally achieved the same battlefield range and accuracy as the rifled musket. Caldwell's last regiment, the 81st Pennsylvania, was carrying some rifled muskets, either Model 1855s or 1861s, but the majority of its arms were .69 caliber rifled muskets, older muskets that the army had converted to rifled muskets before the war by cutting rifle

¹⁷ War Department, *Summary Statements of Quarterly Returns of Ordnance and Ordnance Stores on Hand in Regular and Volunteer Army Organizations*, Fourth Quarter 1862, Microfilm Roll 4, M1281, National Archives. The Quarterly Ordnance Return for the Fourth Quarter 1862 can be used as an indicator of the types of weapons that were carried by Federal regiments during the Maryland Campaign. In nearly every case where the type of weapon carried by a particular regiment in September 1862 can be determined from an authentic source, that is the type of weapon reported by the regiment in the return for the Fourth Quarter. Apparently, there was little, if any, rearming of the older regiments in the latter part of 1862.

grooves into the barrels and adding rear sights. While these weapons out performed the musket, they did not have all of the range and accuracy of the newer rifled muskets.¹⁸

In Meagher's brigade, the 29th Massachusetts was armed with the Enfield rifled musket, but the other three regiments, the 63rd, 69th, and 88th New York, carried the .69 caliber U.S. Musket, Model 1842. The Model 1842 was the army's last standard musket before the adoption of the rifled musket in 1855. This weapon, though much inferior in range and accuracy to the rifled muskets, was actually Meagher's choice for his brigade. In close combat, at ranges of one hundred yards or less, the Model 1842 could be very deadly because being a smoothbore it could be loaded with double ball, buckshot, or both ball and buckshot. In battle, Meagher believed in getting up close to the enemy, and trusting to the impetuosity of his Irishmen and the bayonet. For that kind of fighting, the Model 1842 was well suited.¹⁹

¹⁸ War Department, John C. Caldwell to John M. Norvell, 7 August 1862, Letters Received, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 41, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives; Inspection Report, 22 December 1862, Miscellaneous Reports, Lists, and Orders, 1862-65, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Box 1, Entry 69, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

¹⁹ William C. Goble, "Irish Brigade Ordnance at Antietam," in "My Sons Were Faithful and They Fought," *The Irish Brigade at Antietam: An Anthology*, ed. Joseph G. Bilby and Stephan D. O'Neill (Hightstown, NJ: Longstreet House, 1997), 61, 64; War Department, Inspection Report, 21 December 1862, Miscellaneous Reports, Lists, and Orders, 1862-65, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Box 1, Entry 69, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

In the last of Richardson's brigades, French's, two regiments, the 57th and 66th New York, were armed with Enfield rifled muskets, while three, the 2nd Delaware, 52nd New York, and 53rd Pennsylvania, were armed with muskets.²⁰

In Sedgwick's division, fully eleven of the thirteen infantry regiments were armed with rifled muskets, while the remaining two regiments, the 1st Minnesota and the 82nd New York in Gorman's brigade, carried a mixture of muskets and rifled muskets. In addition, the division had two sharpshooter companies that carried special breech loading rifles. The 1st Company, Massachusetts Sharpshooters, attached to the 15th Massachusetts, had Merrill Rifles, while the 2nd Company, Minnesota Sharpshooters, attached to the 1st Minnesota, carried Sharps Rifles. These breech loading rifles were arguably the finest military arms of the day. Not only were they capable of seven to ten rounds per minute with accuracy equal to that of the rifled musket, but they could also be fired effectively from a prone position where the muzzle loading weapons could not.²¹

²⁰ War Department, Inspection Report, 20 December 1862, Miscellaneous Reports, Lists, and Orders, 1862-65, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Box 1, Entry 69, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

²¹ *Summary Statements of Quarterly Ordnance Returns*, Fourth Quarter 1862, Microfilm Roll 4, M1281, National Archives; Andrew E. Ford, *The Story of the Fifteenth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, 1861-1864* (Clinton, MA: Press of W.J. Coulter, 1898), 59, 129; *History of the First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1864* (Stillwater, MN: Easton & Masterman, Printers, 1916), 12, 67; Louis N. Chapin, *A Brief History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment, N.Y.S.V.* (New York, 1903), 11; George A. Bruce, *The Twentieth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), 9.

The three regiments of Kimball's brigade were almost uniformly armed with rifled muskets, either the standard US models or Enfields.²²

The mixture of weapons of different capabilities within the corps, its divisions and brigades, or even within single regiments, as in the case of the 81st Pennsylvania, 1st Minnesota, and 82nd New York, created a unique environment for commanders who had to deal the problem of firepower created by the introduction of the rifled musket. It also created unique logistical problems for the quartermasters in that a supply of different calibers and different types of ammunition would have to be kept up within the same unit.

IV

In the artillery organization of the Second Army Corps, one regular army battery and one volunteer battery were assigned to the support of each of the corps' divisions. Both Richardson and Sedgwick as West Point trained officers were well acquainted with the tactical capabilities and employment of artillery, and Sedgwick had begun his career as an artillery officer. Assigned to Richardson's division was Battery B, 1st New York Light Artillery under the command of Captain Rufus D. Pettit, and Battery A/C, 4th US Artillery under the command of Lieutenant Evan Thomas. Pettit's battery was armed with six Ten-Pounder Parrotts, the most popular of the rifled guns, while Thomas's battery had six Twelve-Pounder Napoleons. The two batteries in Sedgwick's division

²² *Summary Statements of Quarterly Ordnance Returns, Fourth Quarter 1862*, Microfilm Roll 4, M1281, National Archives.

were Battery A, 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery commanded by Captain John A. Tompkins, and Battery I, 1st US Artillery commanded by Lieutenant George A. Woodruff. Sedgwick's division had the same rifled/smoothbore balance of artillery firepower as did Richardson's with Thompson's battery having six Parrotts and Woodruff's having six Napoleons.²³

The remaining three batteries of the Second Corps were volunteer batteries, and were organized as a corps artillery reserve under the supervision of Major Francis N. Clarke, a regular army officer who was the corps' chief of artillery. The three batteries of the corps artillery reserve were Battery G, 1st New York Light Artillery commanded by Captain John D. Frank, Battery B, 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery under Captain John G. Hazard, and Battery G, 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery under Captain Charles D. Owen. Both Frank's and Hazard's batteries were armed with six Napoleons each, while Owen's battery had six 3-Inch Ordnance Rifles.²⁴

After McClellan's consolidation of the cavalry during the Peninsula campaign, the only cavalry that remained assigned to the Second Corps was two companies of the 6th New York, which would be used almost exclusively as couriers, orderlies, headquarters guards, and wagon guards.

²³ OR 5,19; 19, pt. 1, 280; Curt Johnson and Richard C. Anderson, *Artillery Hell, The Employment of Artillery at Antietam* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 71-2.

²⁴ McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 115; OR 5, 19; Johnson, 72.

V

Exactly how many wagons the Second Army Corps had during the Maryland Campaign cannot be known. If the corps had the full authorization of wagons specified in General Orders 153 then it would have had 232 vehicles assigned to carry the baggage of the corps, division, and brigade headquarters, the infantry regiments, and the artillery batteries. In addition, there could have been as many as another two hundred and fifty wagons in the corps supply train for a total of 482 wagons. This estimate seems reasonable given a report on the means of transportation in the Army of the Potomac compiled by Lieutenant Colonel Rufus Ingalls, the Chief Quartermaster, on 19 July 1862, that showed that the Second Corps had a total of 364 wagons. A similar report on 1 October—after the corps had grown to three divisions—showed the corps with 440 wagons, and a 1 November report put the number at 515. The estimate also is in line with the general ratio of twenty-nine wagons for every one thousand soldiers in the Army of the Potomac during the Maryland Campaign given by Montgomery C. Meigs, the War Department Quartermaster General, in his annual report for 1862, considering that the corps' strength during the campaign rose to approximately eighteen thousand. That plenty of wagons were available to the Army of the Potomac at the beginning of the campaign is evident from a letter to McClellan dated 9 September 1862 in which Meigs

estimates that in the Washington area there were approximately six thousand wagons available for the army's use.²⁵

Under Letterman's plan of 2 August 1862 for the organization of the ambulance corps, the Second Army Corps on entering on the Maryland Campaign would have had one captain, two first lieutenants, seven second lieutenants, thirty sergeants, and 381 men assigned to ambulance duty. In addition, the corps would have needed thirty transport carts, 261 two-horse ambulances, and ninety four-horse ambulances. It is doubtful that the ambulance corps was up to strength, or any where near up to strength, during the Maryland Campaign. In the 19 July report on the means of transportation, the corps claimed to have only eighteen four-horse and thirty-three one-horse ambulances. Letterman pointed out that the order establishing the ambulance corps was delayed in being printed, and was not distributed "until within a few days previous to the evacuation of Harrison's Landing," so that there was little time to put the new organization into effect before the army embarked for Washington. He goes on to say, however, that as the army reached the vicinity of Frederick during the early stages of the campaign, two hundred ambulances were distributed among the corps of the army. Letterman also singles out Captain John M. Garland, the Second Corps' ambulance chief, for his notable

²⁵ War Department, Statement of Means of Transportation and of Cavalry and Artillery Horses in the Army of the Potomac, 19 July 1862, Letters Received, 1861-1865, Division and Department and Army of the Potomac, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Box 5, Entry 3976, Pt. 1, RG 393, National Archives; OR 19, pt. 1, 97; pt. 2, 225; OR Series III 2, 798.

“exertions” that resulted in the Second Corps being “more fully equipped than any other corps” during the campaign.²⁶

²⁶ War Department, Statement of Means of Transportation and of Cavalry and Artillery Horses in the Army of the Potomac, 19 July 1862, Letters Received, 1861-1865, Division and Department and Army of the Potomac, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Box 5, Entry 3976, Pt. 1, RG 393, National Archives; OR 11, pt. 1, 219; 19, pt. 1, 107, 110; Letterman, 34, 42-3. The number of ambulances reported by the corps on 19 July seems exceptionally low considering Letterman’s remark about the Second Corps being the best equipped during the Maryland Campaign. It is interesting that on the first return following the Maryland Campaign (1 October), the corps did not report the number of ambulances that it had, and on the 1 November return claimed to have only thirty-five. See OR 19, pt. 1, 97.

CHAPTER 4
PREPARING FOR A NEW CAMPAIGN
6 TO 8 SEPTEMBER 1862

I

When the Second Army Corps stood down from its line of battle north of Rockville, Maryland on the evening of 6 September 1862, it was a corps that was ready for a new campaign in terms of morale and fighting spirit, but it was also a corps in need of extensive reconditioning. To begin, the soldiers needed rest. General Sumner reported upon landing at Alexandria on 28 August, that his men were “very much jaded and worn out from their long marches and voyage.” From then until its arrival at Rockville on 6 September, the corps had marched another seventy-four miles, most of it in consecutive night marches over roads rendered almost impassable by torrents of rain, and through a country made desolate by almost a year and a half of constant warfare. General Sedgwick wrote his sister that one of these marches “for its length and rapidity has not been equalled [*sic*] in this war; in thirty-six hours we made fifty miles, and after a rest of a few hours twenty-five miles more.” A young officer of the 57th New York, Lieutenant John M. Favill, remembered these marches as being particularly fatiguing for the men because

they were “interrupted constantly by the breakdown of wagons, as well as by stragglers and invalids.”¹

In Maryland, however, the corps and the army entered a country little affected by the war. It was a picturesque land of rolling farm country interspersed with fields of ripening corn, meadows and woodlots, accentuated by flowing streams and trimmed by vistas of distant blue mountains. The weather, too, was particularly agreeable with fair warm days and clear cool nights. In addition, the population was friendly and viewed the marching columns of the Second Corps with wonder and excitement. Favill recalled that “crowds of women and youngsters surrounded us, offering fruit, flowers, and water, and gazed with admiration at our dress and accoutrements [*sic*]. We took kindly to the glory of finding ourselves the heroes of the hour, and reciprocated the crowd’s interest, parting with many of our buttons to the prettiest girls.” A lieutenant in the 19th Massachusetts, John G.B. Adams, remembered that “our march through Maryland was delightful; the farther we got into the interior the more loyal the people became, and our welcome was cordial.” For Lieutenant Colonel Francis W. Palfrey of the 20th Massachusetts, Maryland was “a land where fresh vegetables and poultry were not rare” and “wood and water were easy to find, instead of requiring weary searches at the end of a weary day.” All in all the

¹ Congress, Senate, Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 3 pts., 37th Cong., 3rd sess., 1863, Rep. Com. 108, pt. 1, 367; John Sedgwick, *Correspondence of John Sedgwick, Major-General*, 2 vols. (New York: De Vinne Press, Printed for Carl and Ellen Battle Stoeckel, 1902-3), 2: 79-80; Josiah Marshall Favill, *The Diary of a Younger Officer Serving with the Armies of the United States During the War of the Rebellion* (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1909), 178.

move into Maryland and the fact that the corps would remain encamped at Rockville undisturbed for two days did as much to alleviate the exhausted condition of the soldiers as any formal program of rest and relaxation could have done.²

II

While insuring that the soldiers got what rest they could was important, the greater concern for the senior officers of the army was the fact that the strength of all of the corps that McClellan would order into Maryland had been seriously depleted by a summer of campaigning. Few infantry regiments ever made it to the Civil War battlefield at full strength. Even before a volunteer regiment became part of a field army, its numbers likely would be significantly reduced by sickness and disease, while the physical demands of camp and campaign, the casualties of battle, and the lack of a viable replacement system—at least on the Federal side—would reduce the strength of the regiment even more. As a result of the Seven Days fighting alone, the Second Corps reported losses totaling 2,420; 201 officers and men killed, 1,195 wounded, and 1,024 captured or missing. As the corps reached Yorktown and prepared to depart for Aquia Creek on 20 August, it reported a total present for duty strength of only 789 officers and 16,069 men.

² Favill, 182; John G.B. Adams, *Reminiscences of the Nineteenth Massachusetts Regiment* (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Company, 1899), 44; Francis Winthrop Palfrey, *The Antietam and Fredericksburg*, vol. 5, *Campaigns of the Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1882), 8-9.

Had the corps been at or near full strength on 6 September, it would have had approximately 1,158 officers and 29,960 men.³

Even though the Second Corps was numerically the largest of all the corps that would participate in the Maryland Campaign, it was still a matter of concern that most of its infantry regiments were well below full strength. General Sedgwick mentioned in a letter to his sister that some regiments were “reduced to two hundred and two hundred and fifty men.” If Sedgwick was speaking about his own division, however, this was a pessimistic assessment. According to the consolidated morning report that Sedgwick had submitted just two weeks prior on 19 August, the smallest regiment in his division was the 42nd New York with a present for duty strength of 442 officers and men. The largest regiment was the 72nd Pennsylvania, which was nearly full strength with 952 officers and men. Still, the average present for duty strength of the division’s regiments was only 594. The average in Howard’s brigade being 704, in Gorman’s brigade 610, and in Dana’s brigade 493. In Richardson’s division, though, the averages were much lower. The regiments of

³ War Department, *War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 71 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), series I, vol. 11, pt. 2, 26, hereinafter cited as OR with all references to Series I unless otherwise noted; War Department, Second Army Corps Consolidated Morning Report, 20 August 1862, *Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1780’s to 1917*, Box 3, Entry 65, RG 94, National Archives. According to War Department General Order 85, 1 October 1861 (see OR III, 1, 549) all Federal commands were to submit returns of unit strengths on the 10th, 20th, and last day of each month. The return of 20 August 1862 is used here and in the following analysis because a copy of the complete return of the Second Corps showing troop strengths down to regiment and battery level can be found in RG 94 of the National Archives. The returns for 31 August and 10 September have not been found, except for a return for Sedgwick’s division dated 12 September. An abstract of the 20 August return which shows the strength of the corps of the Army of the Potomac can be found in OR 11, pt. 3, 380.

Meagher's brigade had a mean present for duty strength of 448, those of French's brigade 420, and those of Caldwell's brigade only 387, lowering the divisional average to 419. The strongest brigade of the corps in regimental average strength—though not total strength—was Kimball's at 755. Overall, the corps' regiments averaged just a little over 50% of full strength at 528 officers and men.⁴

The dilemma faced by McClellan and the army's senior leaders in regard to maintaining and rebuilding the strength of the infantry regiments was that they had few, if any, real options for correcting the problem. The deficiency itself stemmed from the fact that the regiments were volunteer organizations raised by the states from specific geographical areas. Once recruited and organized, they were mustered directly into Federal service as individual units. By September 1862, the War Department had created no system to provide a regular flow of individual replacements to these regiments even though their strength was being continually depleted as a consequence of their service. Such a system for developing a replacement pool had been devised by McClellan as General-in-Chief in December 1861, and actually was put into effect in January 1862. This plan called for the establishment of a recruiting service in each of the northern states under the direction of an army general superintendent who would set up "general depots for the collection and instruction of recruits." To do the actual recruiting, each volunteer regiment serving in the field would send back to its home area a detail of two

⁴ Sedgwick, 2:80; War Department, Second Army Corps Consolidated Morning Report, 20 August 1862, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's to 1917*, Box 3, Entry 65, RG 94, National Archives.

commissioned officers and four non-commissioned officers or privates authorized to enlist individuals and send them to a general depot as replacements for their regiment. But, no sooner had this system been established than Secretary of War Stanton discontinued it in April 1862. As a result, the matter of recruiting and forwarding replacements remained in the hands of the individual states, whose governors more often than not preferred raising new regiments to recruiting replacements. Raising new regiments gave the governors the opportunity to appoint more regimental officers, which repaid political favors or ensured future political support.⁵

In the crisis of the summer of 1862, some steps were taken to revive McClellan's system. A War Department general order of 6 June officially reestablished the volunteer recruiting service, but orders actually implementing it were not issued until 25 July. War Department General Order Number 88 of that date directed regimental commanders to appoint two commissioned officers from the regiment and one non-commissioned officer or private from each company to serve as a recruiting detail. In the Army of the Potomac and the Second Army Corps these recruiting parties were put together during early and mid-August and dispatched to their home states. In many cases, they found their work made easier by citizen committees that already were attempting to find recruits for them. Four of the five regiments of Howard's brigade came from Philadelphia. As these four

⁵ OR III, 1, 722; 2, 2; Fred Albert Shannon, *The Organization and Administration of the Union Army, 1861-1865*, 2 vols. (N.P.: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1928; reprint, Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith, 1965), 1: 265-6; Sedgwick, 2:80; Charles A. Fuller, *Personal Recollections of the War of 1861* (Sherburne, NY: News Job Printing House, 1906), 54-5.

regiments were putting together their recruiting parties in early August, a War Department letter sent to McClellan directed that they were to travel so as to arrive in the city together. It seems that a committee of citizens had been formed to direct and assist in the recruiting effort, and wanted to take full advantage of the publicity that would be generated by the arrival of the brigade's recruiting details.⁶

In addition to sending home recruiting parties, some regimental commanders, who were, after all, political appointees, attempted to exercise their influence with their governors. On 7 September, Colonel Edward W. Hincks of the 19th Massachusetts endorsed a letter by his lieutenant colonel, Arthur F. Devereux, to Governor John A. Andrew requesting 332 new recruits to fill the regiment to standard. In his endorsement, Hincks made clear to Andrew the larger scope of the problem faced by the 19th Massachusetts. While Devereux's request for 332 replacements would fill the regiment to its maximum on paper, Hincks pointed out, "six hundred recruits will be required to fill it to the maximum in the field, as we have a large number absent (wounded, sick, etc.,) who will never rejoin us."⁷

In terms of producing a sufficient number of replacements to fill or even significantly increase the strength of the army's infantry regiments for the Maryland Campaign, the

⁶ OR III, 2, 109, 250; War Department, Adjutant General's Office to George B. McClellan, 4 August 1862, Division and Department and Army of the Potomac Letters Received, 1861-65, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Box 4, Entry 3976, pt. 1, RG 393, National Archives.

⁷ Ernest Waitt, *History of the Nineteenth Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865* (Salem, MA: Salem Press Co., 1906), 121.

volunteer recruiting service would prove inadequate. In fact, during the whole of the war the system would never produce an adequate number of replacements. Ultimately, the government had to resort to the nation's first conscription act, but this measure never satisfied the need, and later in the war many veteran volunteer regiments were mustered out of service for lack of men.

Nonetheless, the army did receive some individual replacements in late August and early September. In the Second Corps, the 20th Massachusetts found seventy-five new men waiting for it as the regiment arrived at Alexandria on 29 August. But these recruits could not be incorporated into the regiment in time for the march to Centreville because they had not been provided arms, and it would not be until 10 September that they would be armed and able to join the regiment. The 15th Massachusetts was at Rockville on 8 September when it received "a considerable number of recruits from Worcester County," a result of the fact that the regiment had had a recruiting officer at home in Worcester County working with citizen committees to recruit and periodically forward replacements to the regiment since November 1861.⁸

One option that could be taken at the corps level with regiments that were heavily depleted in strength was temporary consolidation. As the Maryland Campaign was getting under way, this was employed in the Second Corps in the case of the 61st and 64th New York regiments in Richardson's division. When it reached Rockville, the 61st,

⁸ George A. Bruce, *The Twentieth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), 143, 151; Andrew E. Ford, *The Story of the Fifteenth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, 1861-1864* (Clinton, MA: Press of W.J. Coulter, 1898), 132-3, 188.

a part of Caldwell's brigade, had only about 105 soldiers, though it had very nearly its full compliment of officers. For tactical purposes, the regimental commander, Colonel Francis C. Barlow, had organized the regiment into just three companies of thirty-five men each. The 64th New York, which during the Peninsula campaign was assigned to French's brigade, also was severely under strength, and, in addition, had none of its field officers present for duty. So the 64th was moved to Caldwell's brigade and combined with the 61st to fight as one regiment. During the Maryland Campaign this consolidated regiment was commanded by Barlow.⁹

Any consolidation, though, even if it was just internal to a regiment, could only be temporary, and only undertaken as a field expedient. Even as regimental commander, Barlow could not have permanently reassigned all of the officers and soldiers of one company to another company because it would have the effect of deactivating the first company. Thus, in the 61st, the soldiers continued to be carried on the rolls of the companies into which they had enlisted and been mustered into Federal service, even though they were marching and fighting as part of another company. The excess company officers were treated as supernumeraries and followed along with the regiment. The problem was even more acute at the regimental level. No officer in the army from the commander-in-chief on down had the authority to deactivate a regiment. Consolidation was a politically sensitive matter because the soldiers had enlisted for

⁹ Fuller, 54; War Department, Second Army Corps Consolidated Morning Report, 20 August 1862, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's to 1917*, Box 3, Entry 65, RG 94, National Archives.

service with one company of one regiment, and the officers had been commissioned for their particular regimental positions by the state governor. So it was that when Barlow made his report concerning his command of the consolidated 61st and 64th New York at the Battle of Antietam, he was very careful to treat the role of each regiment in the battle separately. Such political sensitivity even extended to the providing of available replacements. On 9 September, the Office of the Adjutant General, State of New York advised Brigadier General Winfield Scott Hancock, commanding a brigade in the Sixth Army Corps, that there were a number of “detached companies in the State ready to join the old Regiments,” but only if they could do so in “their company organizations continuing under their own officers.” Thus these reinforcements could be sent only to New York

regiments, and then only to regiments that had been mustered in with fewer than ten companies.¹⁰

The largest source of reinforcements for McClellan's assembling army at the beginning of the Maryland Campaign was new volunteer infantry regiments. During the summer of 1862, the Federal government issued two separate calls for new troops. The first, made on 2 July, called on the states to raise three hundred thousand new volunteers for a period of service of three years. However, the governors of several states reported that recruiting three year volunteers was difficult at best, but that raising men for a lesser period of service would be much easier and quicker. Accordingly, a second call for another three hundred thousand men was issued by the War Department on 4 August. Unlike the call for additional volunteers on 2 July, the 4 August call was based on the militia laws of 28 February 1795 and 17 July 1862, and was technically a calling out of a portion of the state militias for a period of nine months service, the maximum allowed by the law. In theory, the state militias were supposed to be ready for service, but the reality was that enlisting men for nine months of militia service was easier—as the governors had predicted—than signing them up for three years of Federal service. As predicted, the call of 4 August quickly produced new nine month regiments, which also called themselves volunteers. Along with many of the new three year regiments of volunteers, the nine month regiments were mustered into Federal service beginning in mid-August

¹⁰ Fuller, 54; OR 19, pt. 1, 289-90; War Department, Frank M. Rotch, Asst. Adjutant General to Brigadier General Winfield S. Hancock, 9 September 1862, Miscellaneous Records, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Box 3, Entry 70, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

and were becoming available for service in the field by the end of that month. As a result of these two calls for more troops, McClellan would have available in the vicinity of Washington thirty-six new regiments in early September. Four of these new regiments would assigned to the Second Corps on 6 September.¹¹

In whatever corps of the army these new regiments were assigned, their presence was obvious. They were better uniformed and equipped than most of the older regiments, if only because their equipment and uniforms were new, complete, and unworn. In many cases, they were better armed than the old regiments because they drew their weapons from stocks of new rifled muskets that resulted from a year of increased production at the Federal armory at Springfield, Massachusetts, deliveries on contracts with private arms manufacturers, and foreign purchase. Moreover, the new regiments were two or three times the size of the old regiments, because they had not suffered any attrition of their strength. In some cases, a new regiment would be nearly as large as a brigade made up of three or four old regiments.

The first of the new regiments to arrive in the Second Corps was a nine month regiment from Pennsylvania, the 132nd. Recruited in the northeastern part of the Keystone state, this regiment had been mustered into Federal service between 11 and 18 August, and was at Camp Whipple, a camp of instruction opposite Georgetown on the Virginia side of the Potomac in early September. Receiving orders to join the Second Corps, the regiment marched out to Rockville during the night of 6-7 September in order

¹¹ Shannon, 1: 271-3, 277-8: OR 19, pt. 2, 197.

to avoid making its first long march—eighteen miles—in the heat of the day. Arriving at Second Corps headquarters at three o'clock in the morning, the regimental commander, Colonel Richard A. Oakford, and his adjutant, Lieutenant Frederick L. Hitchcock, found General Sumner asleep in a headquarters wagon. After Oakford reported who he was and the strength of his regiment, Sumner told him, "I wish you had ten times as many, for we need you badly." Then Sumner told Oakford to have his regiment get some rest and that he would assign it to a brigade in the morning.¹²

Sumner assigned the 132nd Pennsylvania to Kimball's brigade, which was still independent of either of the corps' two divisions. In terms of the number of regiments, Kimball's at that time was the smallest of all of the corps' brigades because it had just lost one of its four regiments. The ranks of the 4th Ohio had been so overwhelmed by sickness as it marched into Maryland that it had to be left behind in Tennallytown to convalesce. The 132nd Pennsylvania would be its replacement, at least for the time being.¹³

On that day, 7 September, three other new regiments also arrived at the Second Corps encampment at Rockville. They were the 14th Connecticut, the 108th New York, and the 130th Pennsylvania. The 14th Connecticut and the 108th New York both were new

¹² Frederick L. Hitchcock, *War from the Inside: The Story of the 132nd Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry in the War for the Suppression of the Rebellion, 1862-1863* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1904; reprint, Alexandria, VA, Time-Life Books, 1985), 13, 17-9.

¹³ Hitchcock, 20; Franklin Sawyer, *A Military History of the 8th Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry: Its Battles, Marches, and Army Movements* (Cleveland, OH: Fairbanks & Co., Printers, 1881), 69-70.

three-year regiments that had been mustered into Federal service in late August, while the 130th Pennsylvania was a nine-month regiment like the 132nd, mustered in between 10 and 15 August. The 14th Connecticut, aside from having a strength of almost 1,015 men, was also particularly well armed. Eight of its companies had just been issued new Springfield rifled muskets, while two companies, A and B, carried Sharps breech loading rifles.¹⁴

Rather than assign these three, new, large regiments among the veteran brigades of the corps as he had done with the 132nd Pennsylvania, Sumner used them to create an entirely new brigade. On first analysis, this seems a curious move considering that these new and untried regiments might have been better served had they been brigaded with some that were more experienced. In creating this new brigade, however, Sumner was putting into effect an army plan that had been in the making for some time, and that was to create within the corps an entirely new division (figure 8).

¹⁴ Charles D. Page, *History of the Fourteenth Regiment, Connecticut Volunteer Infantry* (Meriden, CT: Horton Printing Co., 1906; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1987), 16, 25.

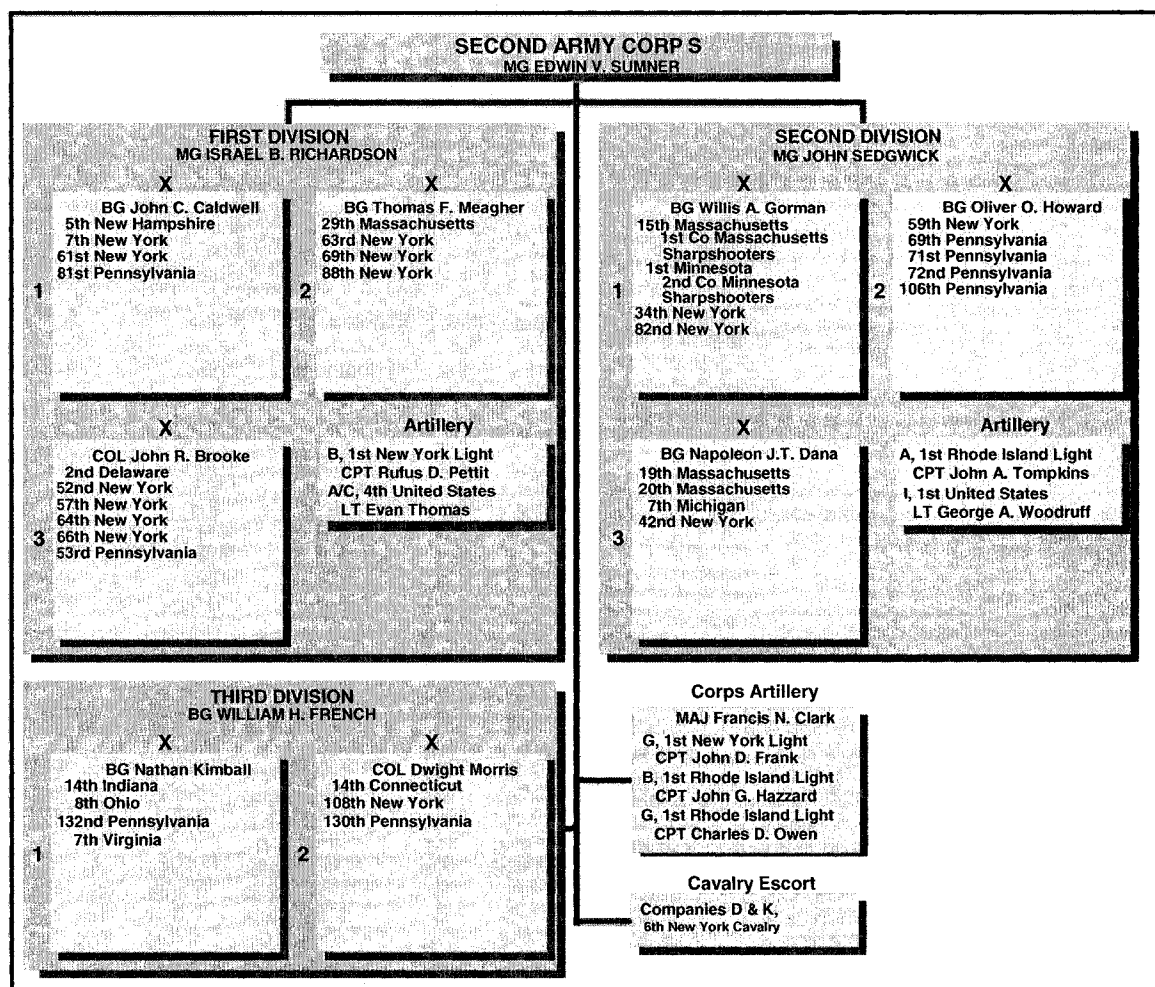


Figure 8: Organization of the Second Army Corps, 9 September 1862.

Lincoln's War Order Number 2 and Army of the Potomac General Orders Number 151, which created the corps organizations in March of 1862, envisioned corps of three divisions each. Triad arrangements had been a favorite of military thinkers for centuries. The classic formation of a Roman legion for battle was in three ranks, and Napoleon's original concept of the corps called for it to have three infantry divisions. In American armies of the 19th Century, brigades usually consisted of three regiments, and divisions of three brigades. This arrangement gave commanders a great deal of flexibility. In

almost any situation, a commander could use two of his maneuver units as the main force, while reserving the last to exploit success or to save the situation in the case of a reverse. In keeping with this concept, a third division—Blenker's—originally had been assigned to the Second Corps in March 1862, but it had been reassigned to another department before it ever joined the corps, and the corps had operated throughout the Peninsula Campaign with just two divisions. Actually, the lack of a third division was a problem in all of the corps that McClellan was assembling for the Maryland Campaign, and he was working to solve that problem by adding whatever units were available to each corps to create a third division.¹⁵

The new third division of the Second Army Corps would consist of Kimball's previously unassigned brigade and this new one to be formed by the 14th Connecticut, 108th New York, and 130th Pennsylvania. To command this two brigade division, Sumner chose, with the permission of the War Department and General McClellan, one of Richardson's brigade commanders, General William French. In selecting French, Sumner was departing with army traditions of seniority, because French was not the senior of the corps' seven brigade commanders. All of these officers held their positions by virtue of the fact that they were commissioned by Congress as brigadier generals of volunteers. Going by their dates of commission, Howard, who had received his on 3 September 1861, was the senior brigade commander ahead of Gorman, who had received

¹⁵ OR 5, 18; R. Ernest Dupuy and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History from 3500 B.C. to the Present*, 2d ed. (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1986), 97; Antoine-Henri Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. G.H. Mendell and W.P. Craighill (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1863), 279.

his on 7 September 1861, and French, who had not been commissioned until 28 September of the same year.¹⁶

Sumner may well have selected French ahead of Howard and Gorman because he felt that French was the best of all of the corps' brigade commanders. In a letter to Army of the Potomac Chief of Staff, Brigadier General Randolph B. Marcy, on 8 September, Sumner referred to French as "an able officer" whose appointment as commander of the new division would be in the best interest of the service.¹⁷ French and his brigade had been part of Sumner's original division during the winter of 1861-1862, and had performed well under Richardson throughout all of the battles of the Peninsula campaign. But, French's selection may also have indicated a prejudice on the part of Sumner as a career regular officer. Of the three senior brigade commanders both Howard and French were West Point graduates, and both had seen service prior to the war as regular officers. Gorman was neither a West Point graduate, nor had he ever been a part of the regular army despite exemplary service as a volunteer officer during the Mexican War. If this limited the selection to Howard and French, then the regular service of the two may have made the difference in Sumner's mind. French graduated from West Point in the class of

¹⁶ Edwin V. Sumner to Randolph B. Marcy, 7 September 1862, *Papers of George Brinton McClellan*, Series I, Volume 78, Item 15786, Library of Congress; War Department, Randolph B. Marcy to Edwin V. Sumner, 7 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

¹⁷ War Department, Edwin V. Sumner to Randolph B. Marcy, 8 September 1862, Division and Department of the Army of the Potomac, Letters Received, 1861-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Box 7, Entry 3976, Pt. 1, RG 393, National Archives.

1837—the same class as Sedgwick—and had served as an artillery officer since then, winning brevet promotions during the Mexican War and reaching the regular rank of captain in 1848. Howard, junior in age to French by fifteen years, had not graduated from West Point until 1854, did not take his commission in one of the combat arms—infantry, artillery, or cavalry—as French had done, and had only reached the rank of first lieutenant when he resigned his regular commission in 1861 to be appointed a colonel of volunteers by the governor of Maine. In addition, Howard had been severely wounded at Fair Oaks on 1 June and so did not command a brigade during the Seven Days.

There is evidence, however, that Sumner may have rejected Howard for other reasons. On the night of 7 September, Sumner visited Howard's headquarters and told him that he would have been given command of the new division except that it was reported that he preferred to command a brigade under Sedgwick to having a division of his own. In a letter written the following night, Howard confessed to his wife that, "I did intimate something of the kind, that I feared increased responsibility just now." At this time, Howard was still recuperating from the wound that he had received at Fair Oaks, and was just learning to function in the field without the right arm that the wound had cost him. It is apparent from his letters of this period that he had not yet regained complete confidence in himself, something that may well have been noted by Sumner. In his letter of 8 September, Howard went on to say that he was, "quite disappointed after all when I found it [the division] given away and I was not asked to take it." A deeply religious man, Howard quickly reconciled his loss. "Now I feel it is all for the best. God knoweth

what is fit and proper for me.” If Sumner also visited Gorman that night to explain the selection of French, there is no record of it.¹⁸

The larger question with regard to the creation of French’s division, however, was the fact that Sumner allowed French to brigade together his three new infantry regiments under the command of the colonel of the 14th Connecticut, Dwight Morris. Prior to his commissioning as the colonel of his regiment in May 1862, Morris had had no previous military experience. He was forty-five years old in 1862, and an 1832 graduate of Union College. His career had been largely political. He practiced law in Bridgeport, Connecticut, served six years in that state’s general assembly, and for a time was judge of probate for the District of Bridgeport. His only qualification to recommend him as the brigade commander was the fact that his state commission predated the state commissions of the other two regimental commanders in the brigade by about two and a half months.¹⁹

Certainly, given the condition of both the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Virginia following the recent campaigns, Sumner was unlikely to find a suitable brigadier general from outside the corps. If Sumner had wanted, he could have assigned to the new brigade one of the veteran brigade commanders of the Second Corps. Perhaps the reason that he did not was because he felt that there was already enough turmoil within the corps’ command structure at the brigade level. In an age when leading a brigade during a campaign and in battle—minor tactics—was very much a matter of immediate, personal

¹⁸ Oliver O. Howard to Lizzie Howard, 8 September 1862, Oliver Otis Howard Papers, Bowdoin College, Brunswick, Maine.

¹⁹ Page, 14.

direction of the movements of the regiments, successful leadership demanded the development of a close bond of confidence and reliance between the soldiers and the commander. Once this bond or working relationship had been established, it was a grave matter to tamper with it, and in the months prior to September 1862, the brigade command structure of the corps already had been extensively modified.²⁰ In Richardson's division, Caldwell had been brought in after Fair Oaks to replace the wounded Howard, and it was Caldwell who led that brigade through the battles of the Seven Days. Even on Howard's return to the corps in late August, Sumner declined to change that new but apparently successful relationship and assigned Howard to a different brigade. Meagher had personally recruited three of his four regiments and led them throughout all of the Peninsula Campaign. The bond between Meagher and the men of the Irish Brigade was the strongest and closest of any in the corps, if not the army. French, of course, was being moved to command the new third division, so his brigade was going to require a new commander. In Sedgwick's division, Gorman was just returning to duty after the illness that had kept him away since before the Seven Days, and Howard had commanded his brigade for only a few days—in his correspondence Howard was still referring to it as Burns's brigade. Therefore, Dana was the only one of the brigade commanders who had been with the division and his brigade throughout the

²⁰ Gilbert Frederick, *The Story of a Regiment, Being a Record of the Military Services of the Fifty-Seventh New York State Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865* (Chicago: C.H. Morgan Co., 1895), 81. Of the transfer of French, Frederick says, "General French, the first live brigadier we ever knew, who had commanded the Third Brigade since its organization, had given drill and discipline to us when raw recruits, had led us into our first battle and taught us how to fight, was now ours no longer."

Peninsula Campaign. In French's new division, both Kimball and his brigade, though experienced, were relatively new to the corps and had not yet been in battle with it.

Under these circumstances, it is understandable that Sumner saw as the only alternative allowing a new colonel of a new regiment to command the new brigade, at least temporarily.

To command French's brigade in Richardson's division, Sumner also had no alternative other than to allow the senior regimental commander of the brigade to step up. This was Colonel John R. Brooke of the 53rd Pennsylvania. Not a professional soldier, Brooke had seen his first military service as a captain in the 4th Pennsylvania, a regiment which served for only ninety days at the beginning of the war in the spring of 1861, and did not even see service at First Bull Run because it chose to march home to be mustered out rather than participate in the battle. Subsequently, Brooke was appointed colonel of the 53rd Pennsylvania when it was organized and mustered in late in 1861. He led this regiment successfully throughout the Peninsula Campaign under French.

Aside from having only two brigades, French's new division also lacked assigned artillery. Although the corps had received four new infantry regiments, no new artillery batteries were forthcoming. Apparently, Sumner did not see this as a major concern, or at least he did not see it as enough of a problem to cause him to assign any of the corps reserve batteries to the division. If French's division needed direct artillery support, Sumner could meet the need from his level of command.

While maintaining the strength of the army's infantry regiments was problematic at

best, maintaining the strength of its artillery batteries was another matter entirely. An infantry regiment depended on the massing of its soldiers to produce combat power. When seriously decreased in strength it could still continue to function, even if that meant temporary internal reorganization or consolidation as in the case of the 61st and 64th New York regiments. But the men of an artillery battery created combat power through the servicing of their guns, and a serious loss of strength could mean a loss measured not only in men but in the number of guns that could be effectively served. Accordingly, it was critical to maintain the strength of the batteries. To do this the infantry regiments could be polled for volunteers to serve in the batteries. Usually, this would not seriously affect the capability of the infantry regiments, while it insured the maintenance of the batteries' firepower.

As the Second Army Corps artillery assembled at Rockville on the seventh, its batteries, while not full strength, were sufficiently manned to insure that all of their forty-two guns would be with the corps during the Maryland Campaign. Pettit's and Thomas's batteries of Richardson's division were the strongest in terms of manpower, having with them 283 of the three hundred cannoneers that would constitute full strength, though Thomas—commanding a regular battery—reported that ninety of his 137 men were from the ranks of the volunteer regiments. The total for the two batteries of Sedgwick's division was only slightly less at 227. The level of manpower in the three batteries of the corps artillery reserve was comparable. Hazard's and Owen's batteries had a combined enlisted strength of 232. Frank's battery had the lowest strength of any in the corps, but

its ninety-eight enlisted men were still more than sufficient to maintain and serve the battery's six guns throughout the campaign.²¹

III

As McClellan prepared the army for participation in the Maryland Campaign, it was, perhaps, in the worst condition logistically that it would be during the entire war. Indeed, the corps of both armies that McClellan was moving into Maryland had been constantly on campaign in Virginia since March with little opportunity for refitting. The clothing, accouterments, and weapons of the individual soldiers, along with the horses, harness and vehicles of the regiments, brigades, divisions, and artillery batteries was rapidly becoming worn and unserviceable. Equipment of every description had been lost or destroyed during the Peninsula and Second Manassas Campaigns. The poor condition of the army as it entered Maryland was such that McClellan was to remark in his memoirs that “nothing but sheer necessity justified the advance of the Army of the Potomac to South Mountain and Antietam in its then condition.”²²

While there would not be time to correct all of the logistical deficiencies of the army before it would be required to resume its march into Maryland, the corps were fortunate that during the early stages of the new campaign, they were in the vicinity of the great

²¹ War Department, Second Army Corps Consolidated Morning Report, 20 August 1862, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's to 1917*, Box 3, Entry 65, RG 94, National Archives.

²² McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 552.

supply depots that had been built up in and around the District of Columbia since the beginning of the war. This was especially true for the Second Corps that was at Tennallytown in the northern reaches of the District on the fourth and fifth of September, and just a few miles farther north at Rockville from the sixth until the morning of the ninth. This gave Sumner and his staff some opportunity to improve the condition of their corps. Perhaps it was this opportunity that led Sumner to name the encampment at Tennallytown, Camp Confidence. Even as the corps was still arriving, Sumner published a circular directing commanders to “at once take the necessary measures to provide their respective commands with all that is necessary to render their equipment and outfit complete.” Special attention was to be paid to the need for shoes and stockings, and commissary officers were to “take the requisite steps to provide the troops with vegetables if they were to be had.”²³

Since the army was so near the Washington depots as it entered Maryland, the real problem in refitting was largely one of wagon transport. On 9 September, both Halleck and the army Quartermaster General, Brigadier General Montgomery C. Meigs, indicated to McClellan that all of the requisitions of the various corps for the supplies needed for the coming campaign had been received at the depot, but could not be filled because the depot commander, Colonel Daniel H. Rucker, lacked the wagons with which to transport the supplies. Meigs told McClellan that he believed the army assembling north of the city

²³ War Department, Second Army Corps Circular, 3 September 1862, Second Army Corps, General Orders, March 1862 to March 1863, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 46, pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

had six thousand wagons and thirty thousand animals to draw them. These included the wagons and teams that the Army of the Potomac brought back from the Peninsula, those that had been with Pope's army, and a number that belonged to the independent corps of Major General Ambrose Burnside. Accordingly, Meigs strongly suggested that it was up to McClellan to account for the transport available in his army, insure its proper distribution and use by the various corps, and then have the wagons sent back to the depot to pick up the supplies. In reply, Lieutenant Colonel Rufus Ingalls, McClellan's chief quartermaster, informed Meigs that the Army of the Potomac had only 2,400 wagons and that they were all accounted for and under the control of unit quartermasters. The problem, Ingalls went on to say, was twofold. First, many of the Army of the Potomac's wagons were still en route from the Peninsula and not yet available for hauling supplies. Second, Ingalls said that thus far he had been unable to learn the number and location of the wagons belonging to the corps of the Army of Virginia and Burnside's corps partly because he doubted that "the commander of the Army of Virginia ever knew how many wagons there were," and partly because "the trains are scattered, going and coming with supplies." But, Ingalls added, "The supplies are really coming forward quite abundantly, and I hope soon to reduce the transportation to a uniform and efficient system."²⁴

In the Second Army Corps, the trains had been the last element to leave the Peninsula. As with the artillery, wagons were often loaded on one group of transports and draught animals on another. When the Second Corps marched away from Alexandria to join

²⁴ OR 19, pt. 2, 220, 225, 235-6.

Pope, it had to do so without its trains because they had not arrived. Only after the corps reached Tennallytown on the fourth did the baggage and supply wagons begin to catch up. Possibly responding to an inquiry from Sumner, Army of the Potomac Chief of Staff Marcy on 7 September suggested that Sumner send all of his wagons back to army headquarters at Rockville, which was not far from of the Second Corps encampment. At the same time, Ingalls had army headquarters issue orders for all corps to send their available wagons back to the depots in Washington. The orders noted that if any corps still found itself deficient in transportation, Ingalls would provide additional wagons if the need was “absolutely necessary.” To this, Sumner replied on the eighth requesting seventy wagons for distribution within his corps. These represented the balance of the corps’ wagons that had yet to arrive from the Peninsula. As to how Ingalls responded to Sumner’s request there is no record, but Ingalls did note that the missing seventy wagons of the Second Corps arrived in the Rockville area on the tenth. The corps, therefore, was able to enter Maryland with at least the compliment of trains that it had during the latter stages of the Peninsula Campaign.²⁵

Despite the fact that a significant portion of the army’s wagons were not available during the early stages of the Maryland Campaign, there is ample evidence that every

²⁵ Fuller, 53; Louis N. Chapin, *A Brief History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment, N.Y.S.V.* (New York, 1903), 60; War Department, Randolph B. Marcy to Edwin V. Sumner, 7 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives; War Department, Second Corps, Army of Virginia Circular, 7 September 1862, Miscellaneous Reports, Lists, and Orders, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Box 6, Entry 69, pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives; OR 19, pt. 2, 235.

effort at refitting the corps was made during this time. In the Second Army Corps, Captain Janvrin W. Gravins of the 5th New Hampshire in Richardson's division recalled that when the regiment reached Tennallytown, "We refitted there, drew clothing shoes, etc., and the next day plenty of supplies came up from Washington." Theodore Reichardt of Tompkins's battery in Sedgwick's division noted in his diary that the men of the battery received new clothes on the night of 5-6 September after the battery reached Rockville. The men of Battery B, 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery, corps artillery reserve, also received new clothing while at Rockville on 7 September, while the men of the 8th Ohio were able to get clean clothes when their baggage wagons caught up with them on the tenth at Clarksburg. Apparently, even mail was made available to the troops as evidenced by the fact that Headquarters, Army of the Potomac and Headquarters, Second Army Corps both had to remind the officers in charge of the mail that they needed to ensure that mail bags were returned expeditiously to the post office. While the army and the Second Army Corps were certainly not as prepared for the new campaign as either McClellan or Sumner would have liked, it also seems that they effectively directed their staffs in doing as much as could be done between the fourth and ninth of September to ready the troops for what was coming.²⁶

²⁶ William Child, *A History of the Fifth Regiment, New Hampshire Volunteers in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (Bristol, NH: R. W. Musgrove, Printer, 1893; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1988), 108; Theodore Reichardt, *Diary of Battery A, First Regiment, Rhode Island Light Artillery* (Providence: N. Bangs Williams, Publisher, 1865), 62; Rhodes, 119; Sawyer, 70; War Department, Headquarters, Second Army Corps Extract of Headquarters, Army of the Potomac Special Order, 4 September 1862, Records of the 1st-4th Divisions, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 68, pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

CHAPTER 5
CAMPAIGNING IN MARYLAND
9 TO 13 SEPTEMBER 1862

I

On the third of September, as the Second Army Corps march toward Tennallytown, Lieutenant Colonel Paul J. Revere, a grandson of the Revolutionary patriot Paul Revere, reported to General Sumner as the new inspector general of the corps. Previously, Revere had been the major of the 20th Massachusetts in Dana's brigade of Sedgwick's division. Sumner had selected and offered the staff position to Revere in late July, and the official appointment, which included promotion to lieutenant colonel, was made on 10 August. But this was on the same day that Revere was granted a leave of absence from the army for twenty days "for the benefit of his health." Since then, Revere had been at home in Boston, and on the third when he reported to Sumner near Tennallytown, he was just returning from that leave. From Rockville on the eighth of September, Revere, the only volunteer officer at that point on Sumner's staff, wrote home to his wife that "my position is thus far even more pleasant than I had anticipated and provided that I can feel that I am of service I shall be entirely satisfied." He added that, "Genl. S. [Sumner], although very strict as regards discharge of duty, is a most kindly disposed man." In the same letter, he

also expressed to her his hope that the corps would remain in its very pleasant encampment near Rockville for some days. Such, however, was not to be the case.¹

As Revere was writing home McClellan, the field army commander was attempting to develop a strategy for the coming campaign. At 8 p.m. he telegraphed Halleck that while he was not yet convinced that the enemy had crossed to the Maryland side of the Potomac “in any large force,” he had the army in position to prevent any attack on Baltimore or on Washington on that side of the river and to attack any enemy force that attempted to cross the Potomac south of the Monocacy (figure 9). For the time being, McClellan’s strategy would be one of the now all-too-familiar caution and delay he had exhibited during the Peninsula Campaign. He informed Halleck that he felt his knowledge of the enemy was “still entirely too indefinite to justify definite action.” For that reason, he had ordered reconnaissances for the morning in all directions, but especially well to the north and northwest. Nothing was being lost, McClellan told Halleck, by not moving the

¹ Paul J. Revere to Lucretia Revere, 27 July and 8 September 1862, and Headquarters, Army of the Potomac, Special Order Number 232, 10 August 1862, Reel 4, Revere Family Papers, 1764-1964, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston. Revere was one of two grandsons of Paul Revere serving with the Second Army Corps in the Maryland Campaign. The other was Edward Hutchinson Robbins, an assistant surgeon in the 20th Massachusetts. Both had been commissioned in the 20th Massachusetts in 1861, both were wounded at Ball’s Bluff on 21 October 1861 and imprisoned in Richmond until paroled on 22 February 1862, and both were later exchanged enabling them to return to their regiment for the Peninsula Campaign. See James Grant Wilson and John Fiske, ed., *Appleton’s Cyclopaedia of American Biography*, 7 vols. (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1888), 5:225.

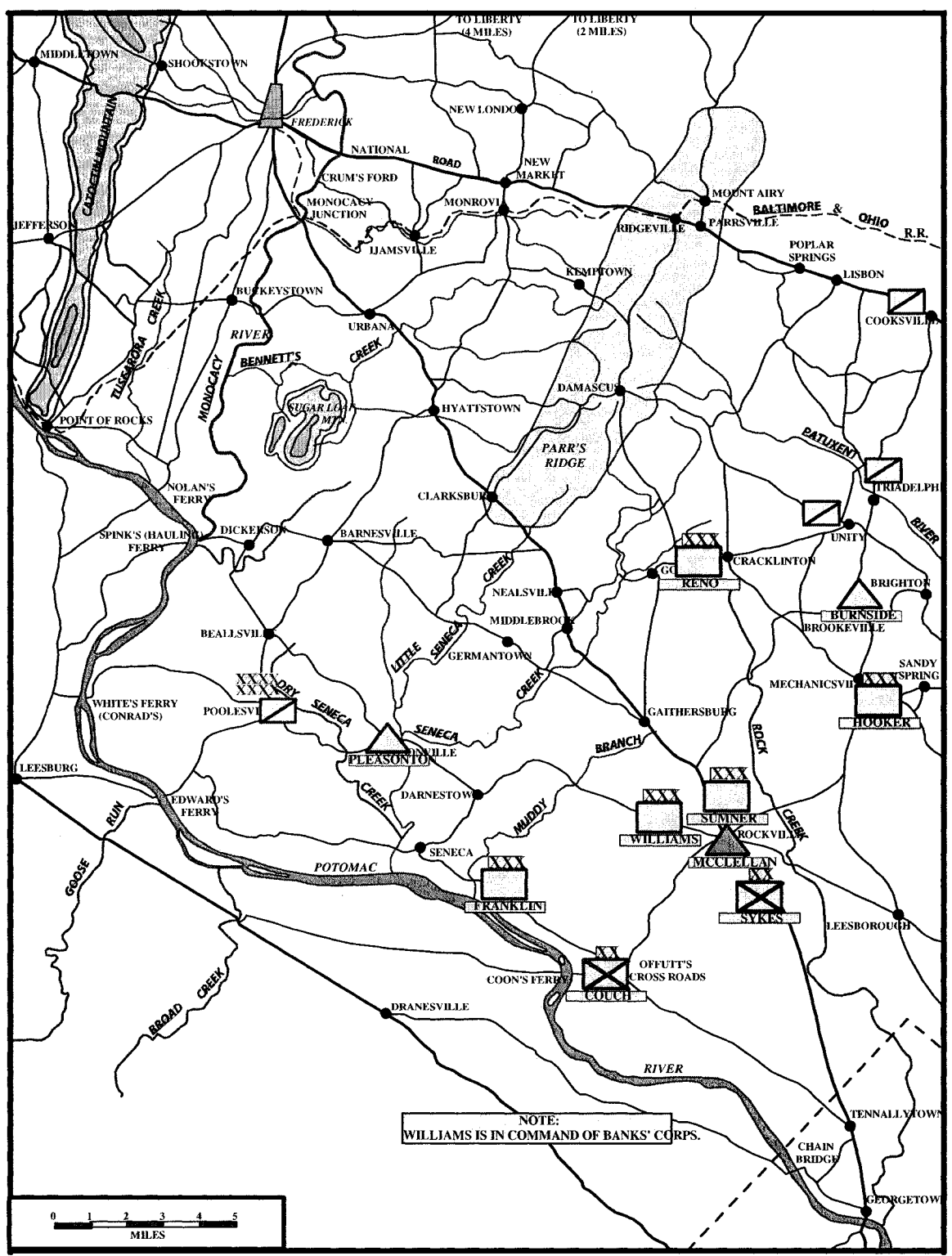


Figure 9. Positions of the Army of the Potomac, Evening, 8 September 1862.

army forward because the “time occupied in ascertaining their [the enemy’s] position, strength, and intentions will enable me to place the army in fair condition,” a reference to the army’s problems with supply and transportation. McClellan closed by making Halleck the usual promise that “as soon as I find out where to strike, I will be after them without an hour’s delay.”²

By 10 p.m., however, McClellan had rethought the entire situation in Maryland and telegraphed Halleck again. This time he told the General-in-Chief that “after full consideration, I have determined to advance the whole force to-morrow.” The right wing of the army would go out as far as Goshen and Cracklinton, the center toward Middlebrook, and the left wing beyond Darnestown.³

In sending this dispatch, McClellan for the first time referred to a command arrangement for the army that would remain in effect up until it reached Antietam Creek on 16 September. The right wing that McClellan spoke of would be under the command of Major General Ambrose Burnside and consist of his heretofore independent Ninth Corps under Major General Jesse L. Reno and the Third Corps, Army of Virginia, under Major General Joseph Hooker. The center would be under Sumner and consist of his own corps and the Second Corps, Army of Virginia, the corps of Major General Nathaniel P. Banks. Banks, however, had been assigned by McClellan to organize and command

² War Department, *War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 71 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), series I, vol. 19, pt. 2, 211. Hereinafter cited as OR. All references are to Series I unless otherwise noted.

³ OR 19, pt.2, 211.

the defenses of Washington, so his corps was temporarily under one of its division commanders, Brigadier General Alpheus S. Williams. The left at this point in the campaign was the Sixth Corps, Army of the Potomac, under Major General William B. Franklin. In addition to these forces, McClellan also had with him the First Division, Fourth Corps, Army of the Potomac, under Major General Darius N. Couch, and the Second Division, Fifth Corps, Army of the Potomac under Brigadier General George Sykes. For the time being, both of these divisions would remain under McClellan's direct control as a reserve. The cavalry of the army was under the command of Alfred Pleasonton who directed reconnaissance operations on the left and center, while Burnside had several regiments of cavalry with him and directed reconnaissance on the right.⁴

McClellan left behind no record as to exactly what caused him to change his mind and his strategy between 8 and 10 p.m. that night, but quite possibly it was the receipt of a 6:30 p.m. dispatch from Burnside that had been addressed to both McClellan and Halleck. In the dispatch, Burnside announced that his headquarters was established at Brookeville, and that two divisions of Reno's corps were in position as far north and east

⁴ This command arrangement is the cause of considerable controversy with regard to the conduct of the Battle of Antietam. In his official report of the campaign, Burnside said that he was assigned to command the right wing, consisting of Reno's and Hooker's corps on the seventh. See OR 19, pt. 1, 416. That the arrangement was in effect from the ninth to at least the sixteenth of September is evident from the communications of army headquarters and the communications of Burnside and Sumner to their subordinates. McClellan also discusses it in his memoir. See George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story* (New York: Charles & Company, 1887), 554. A handwritten, unnumbered special order assigning Burnside to command the right wing composed of his own and Hooker's corps, and assigning Williams's corps to Sumner was sent to both men on the fourteenth. See OR 19, pt. 2, 290 and War Department, Seth Williams to Edwin V. Sumner, 8 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

as Goshen and Cracklinton with orders to hold the bridge across Seneca Creek on the road between Goshen and Nealsville. Burnside also announced that a regiment of cavalry was at Unity with pickets out as far as Triadelphia and Cooksville, the latter of which was well north on the main turnpike between Frederick and Baltimore, the National Road.⁵

Throughout the day, McClellan had gradually been coming to the conclusion that if the Confederates had any large force in Maryland it was now north of the Monocacy in the vicinity of Frederick. The announcement by Burnside that Reno was on upper Seneca Creek certainly tended to reinforce that conclusion, as did the fact that no enemy forces were reported at Triadelphia or on the National Road. In addition, late in the afternoon a brigade of cavalry under Colonel John F. Farnsworth had occupied Poolesville, well in front of McClellan's left, after a skirmish with rebel cavalry that retired in the direction of Barnesville. These developments clearly indicated to McClellan that not only would it be safe for the army to move forward on the ninth, but necessary as well. If there was a major rebel force in Maryland and if it had gone in the direction of Frederick, McClellan could not afford to allow it to get too far ahead of him. Nor could he allow the security of his own army to be compromised as it moved forward. Burnside's corps were now well in advance of Sumner's which were still just a little north of Rockville. This created a gap between McClellan's right and his center that could be exploited if the rebels moved down the road from Frederick to attack Washington. Accordingly, McClellan decided that on the ninth the whole army would move forward to the line of Seneca Creek.⁶

⁵ OR 19, pt. 2, 213.

⁶ OR 19, pt. 2, 210.

By 10:30 p.m., Marcy had drafted and dispatched instructions to Sumner concerning his movements for the ninth. This communication informed Sumner that Franklin's corps would advance to Darnestown and throw out advanced guards of infantry and artillery on the road to Poolesville to hold the crossings of Seneca and Dry Seneca Creek and the road junction at Dawsonville. Burnside's command would occupy Goshen and Cracklinton, hold the crossing of Seneca Creek on the road between Goshen and Nealsville, and the road junction north of Cracklinton on the road between Unity and Damascus. The cavalry under the direction of Burnside would occupy Unity, Triadelphia, Poplar Springs, and Ridgeville and conduct a reconnaissance north of Cooksville in the direction of Franklinville and Liberty. Sumner was to advance his command toward Middlebrook taking up position to hold the crossings of Seneca Creek on the Frederick Road and on the road between Gaithersburg and Germantown. Once in position, he was to establish communications with both Franklin and Burnside. Sumner could begin his movement at whatever hour he saw fit, but he was to be in position by nightfall. Care was to be taken that the troops be as little fatigued by the march as possible.⁷

II

Given that the two corps of his command would have less than ten miles to go on the ninth, Sumner did not issue orders for the movement until early that morning. In keeping with his grand tactical responsibilities, the orders were detailed and precise. The march

⁷ War Department, Randolph B. Marcy to Edwin V. Sumner, 8 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

would not begin until noon, and when it did French's division, possibly because it had never before made a movement as a division and had so many new regiments, was to march in column using the Frederick Road. This division would be in the center of both corps and would be the regulating division for the march. Richardson's and Sedgwick's divisions, with more experience at cross country marches, would move in parallel columns off to the right of the road and French. The two divisions of Williams's corps would be in matching parallel columns on the left. Artillery, ambulances and wagons were to follow French's division using the road. When the command reached Seneca Creek, the divisions would go back into line, taking up positions in the same order that they had been in at Rockville, presumably the same order that the divisions were marching in. This would put French's division in the center covering the bridge across Seneca Creek on the Frederick Road, Richardson's division extending the line to the right along the creek, while Sedgwick's division secured the flank to the right of Richardson. Williams's divisions would extend the line along the creek in a similar manner to the left and insure that the Seneca Creek crossing on the Gaithersburg-Germantown road was covered.⁸

⁸ War Department, Headquarters, Second Corps Circular, 9 September 1862, Records of the 1st-4th Divisions, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 68, pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives; William A. Osborne, *The History of the Twenty-Ninth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Late War of the Rebellion* (Boston: Albert J. Wright, Printer, 1877), 181. The circular specifies that each of the five divisions will be in a separate column parallel to one another. In Sedgwick's endorsement of the circular, however, he tells Gorman to follow Richardson's division. Howard's brigade will follow Gorman's, and Dana's will follow Howard's. Osborne recalled that his regiment of Richardson's division stopped for the night at Seneca Mills. Period maps show several mill sites along Seneca Creek north of the Frederick Road.

Ernest Waitt of the 19th Massachusetts in Sedgwick's division recalled years later that the parallel column formation that Sumner specified for this short march was typical for a movement of the corps during the Maryland Campaign. He said, "It was the custom to have a column take the road on one day and the field the next, so that once in three days each column had the easier route along the highway." According to Waitt, the soldiers in the columns marched along at the

"Route Step" which simply meant "go as you please," keeping up the general formation but relaxing tension and carrying the musket in the easiest position. If a fellow kicked up too much dust in this way, however, he had to "settle" with those immediately behind him. When the bugle sounded "Attention" from the head of the column, every gun was brought to the "Carry," the formation was regulated and everyone within the sound of the bugle listened, wondering what was up.

It was customary to march forty minutes and rest twenty in each hour and the order "Halt" was never misunderstood. In an instant the men sought the nearest tree on either side of the road and, lying flat on their backs, to which their knapsacks were strapped, dropped off to sleep.⁹

At 9 p.m. that evening McClellan reported to Major General John Ellis Wool, the area departmental commander at Baltimore, that the day's moves all had gone well (figure 10). In addition to the advance of the five corps under Franklin, Sumner and Burnside, this included the occupation of Barnesville by Farnsworth's cavalry after a skirmish with

⁹ Ernest Waitt, *History of the Nineteenth Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865* (Salem, MA: Salem Press Co., 1906), 128.

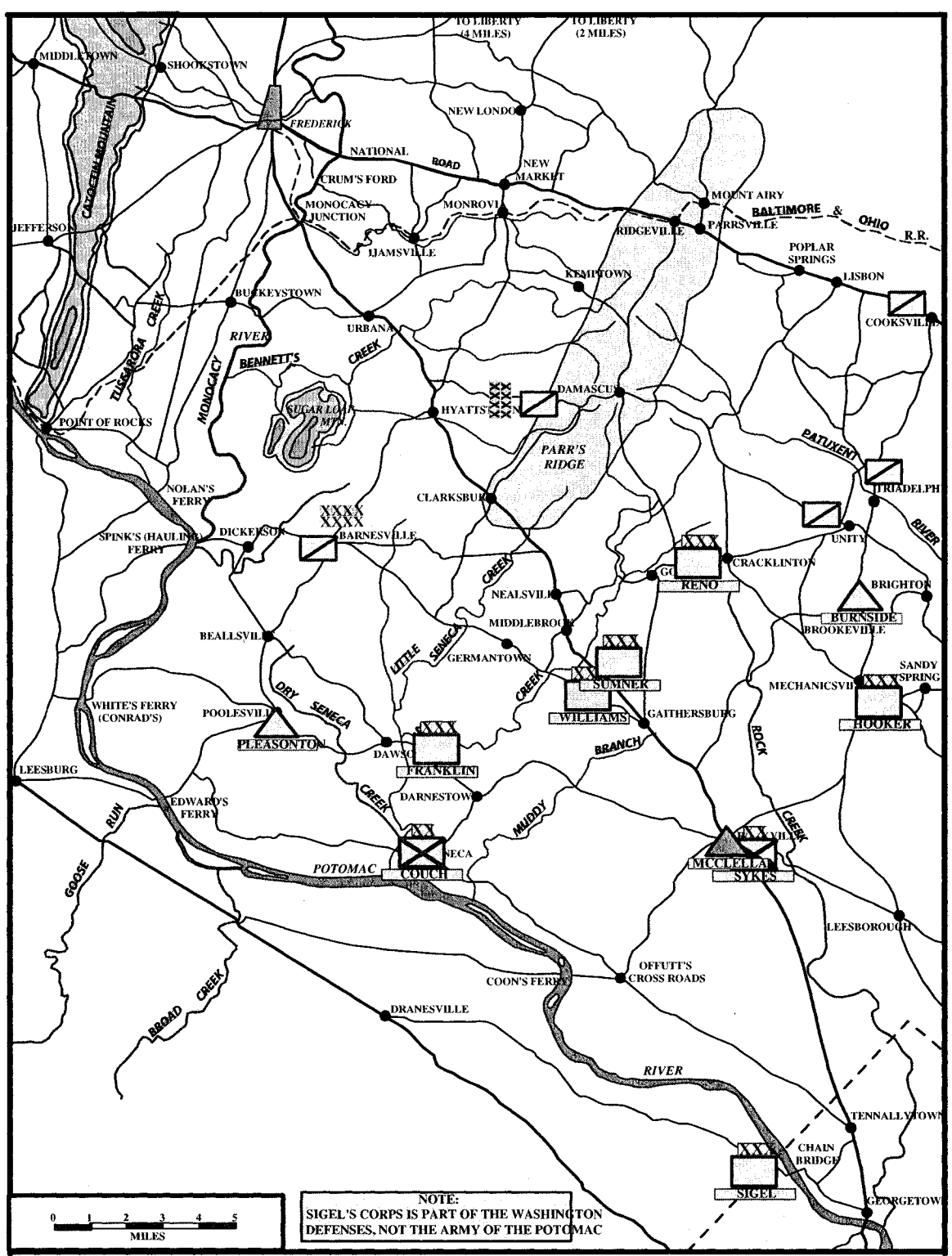


Figure 10. Positions of the Army of the Potomac, Evening, 9 September 1862.

enemy cavalry, a move by Couch's division from Offutt's Cross Roads to a position near the mouth of Seneca Creek, the advance of Sykes's division from Tennallytown to Rockville, and the arrival of the First Corps, Army of Virginia under the command of Major General Franz Sigel near the Chain Bridge on the Virginia side of the Potomac. A little earlier, McClellan had telegraphed his close friend, Major General Fitz-John Porter at Arlington, that "the army is tonight well posted to act in any direction the moment the enemy develops his movements."¹⁰

McClellan spent most of the day near his headquarters at Rockville awaiting news, trying to determine what the movements of the enemy would be, and considering the next strategic move of his own army. By the end of the day, he concluded that the enemy's main force, which he estimated at one hundred thousand men, was generally in the vicinity of Frederick. The headquarters of "Stonewall" Jackson, he was told, was some eight miles east of Frederick at New Market and that of J.E.B. Stuart seven miles to the southeast at Urbana. This last bit of information led McClellan to conclude that the Confederates intended to move on Baltimore, or at least to make a demonstration in that direction. Accordingly, at 10:00 p.m., he sent orders to Burnside to have his cavalry make an immediate reconnaissance to Damascus and Ridgeville, and beyond Ridgeville, if possible, as well as north of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad in the direction of Westminster. He further told Burnside that if the enemy made a move in the direction of Baltimore, he (Burnside) should allow their columns to get well in motion and then attack them vigorously on the flank. If this occurred, McClellan would support Burnside with

¹⁰ OR 19, pt. 2, 220, 221.

all available forces. Last, he asked Burnside to go to his telegraph office in person so that they could talk directly over the wire.¹¹

Whether or not McClellan and Burnside were able to communicate directly with one another by telegraph that night is not known, but at 10:15 p.m. Burnside wired McClellan—and Halleck—that a cavalry reconnaissance conducted during the day encountered enemy cavalry pickets two and a half miles east of Hyattstown on the Damascus road. The cavalrymen reported being told by area residents that the enemy could be found in force with cavalry at Ridgeville on the National Road. Some of the information about the Confederates being in force on the National Road east of Frederick also was reported by Pleasonton at about this time. These reports combined with those that had been coming in throughout the day may well have confirmed in McClellan's mind that the enemy was in fact about to make a move in the direction of Baltimore, for during the early hours of 10 September he decided on another bold and immediate forward movement of the army to block it.¹²

The objective would be the occupation of Parr's Ridge, a belt of high ground between the Monocacy and Patuxent River valleys stretching from Clarksburg in the south to beyond Ridgeville in the north. McClellan believed this high ground would offer a good

¹¹ OR 19, pt. 2, 222-3.

¹² OR 19, pt. 2, 219, 223; David Hunter Strother, *A Virginia Yankee in the Civil War, The Diaries of David Hunter Strother*, ed. Cecil D. Eby, Jr. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), 103, and "Personal Recollections of the War," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 36 (February 1868): 274. Strother is mistaken in both publications about Sugarloaf Mountain being already occupied by Federal forces on 9 September.

defensive position from which the army could block an enemy move toward Baltimore along the National Road, while continuing to cover the direct approach to the capital. Accordingly, Burnside with his two corps was ordered to march immediately. "No time is to be lost," McClellan told him, "I regard this movement as decisive, if successful." The movement was to be in two columns. The first column was to use the road through Damascus to Ridgeville, which was to be occupied "in force as soon as possible." The second column would go via Cooksville and along the National Road to Ridgeville. In support of this move, Sumner with his command would be ordered to occupy Damascus and Clarksburg so that Burnside could use his whole force to hold Ridgeville and be prepared to observe and occupy Franklinville to the northeast, if necessary. McClellan also told Burnside that he would take care of Poolesville and Barnesville, and move army headquarters well forward in Burnside's direction.¹³

At 3:15 a.m., army headquarters began issuing orders to the rest of McClellan's forces. Sumner was told of Burnside's immediate move to occupy Ridgeville, and ordered to at once move one of his corps to Damascus and the other to Clarksburg. It was important, the order said, that the corps moving on Damascus be in position so that "this place should be held continuously, and that no interval should intervene between the passing of Burnside's troops and its occupation by your forces." Sumner was informed that Franklin would march at once to occupy Barnesville, and that he (Sumner) should keep in communication with both Burnside and Franklin and occupy all important points between the two. At 3:20 a.m. a similar order was sent to Franklin informing him of the

¹³ OR 19, pt. 2, 233, 239; Strother, *A Virginia Yankee*, 103.

general movement and giving him instructions for his move to Barnesville. At 3:30 a.m. Couch was informed of Franklin's dispositions and ordered to move his division up from the mouth of Seneca Creek to Poolesville from there to keep an eye on the Potomac fords until other troops could be brought out from Washington to take over that duty. The last order, also sent out at 3:30 a.m., went to Pleasanton informing him of the moves of Burnside, Sumner, Franklin, and Couch, but giving him no specific instructions.¹⁴

III

The exact time at which Sumner received his orders to move on Clarksburg and Damascus is not known. An effort by signal officers to establish semaphore communication among Sumner, Franklin, Couch and army headquarters had not been successful on the ninth, and there is evidence that Sumner was unable to communicate with army headquarters by telegraph even though he was located along the main road between Washington and Frederick. Still, Sumner's Seneca Creek position was only eight miles from army headquarters at Rockville, and it would not have taken a courier very long to cover that distance with orders in hand, giving Sumner every opportunity for an early start. Williams's corps, to which Sumner gave the mission of occupying Damascus, got on the road first because it had the longer distance to march, and because

¹⁴ OR 51, pt. 1, 805, 806-7, 808, 810.

it needed to be in position when Burnside's troops cleared that town. Once Williams' corps was on the road, Sumner got his own started.¹⁵

At 10:30 a.m., though, McClellan changed his mind concerning the movements of his army and issued orders to Burnside, Sumner and Franklin to suspend their march, but hold their commands ready to move at a moment's notice. McClellan's reason for doing this was explained to Lincoln in a noon telegram. Cavalry scouts sent out by Burnside during the night had passed through Ridgeville and gotten to within three miles of New Market before encountering enemy pickets. Their report said that Stuart's cavalry occupied New Market, and that the main body of the Confederate army was still massed in the vicinity of Frederick. From this report, McClellan drew the conclusion that the enemy was not preparing immediately to move on Baltimore as he had thought, but was still massed in a position from which the entire force could strike McClellan's advance along any of several avenues of approach. The situation, he now believed, required additional reconnaissance before undertaking any move (figure 11). Accordingly, McClellan ordered the suspension of his general movement, while he ordered Burnside to send one division on a reconnaissance in force through Damascus to Ridgeville. Through this reconnaissance, Burnside was to determine if Parr's Ridge between Damascus and

¹⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 127; 51, pt. 1, 805, 815-6. As late as 11 September, army headquarters was informing subordinate units that communications going to Middleburg and Clarksburg must be sent by courier.

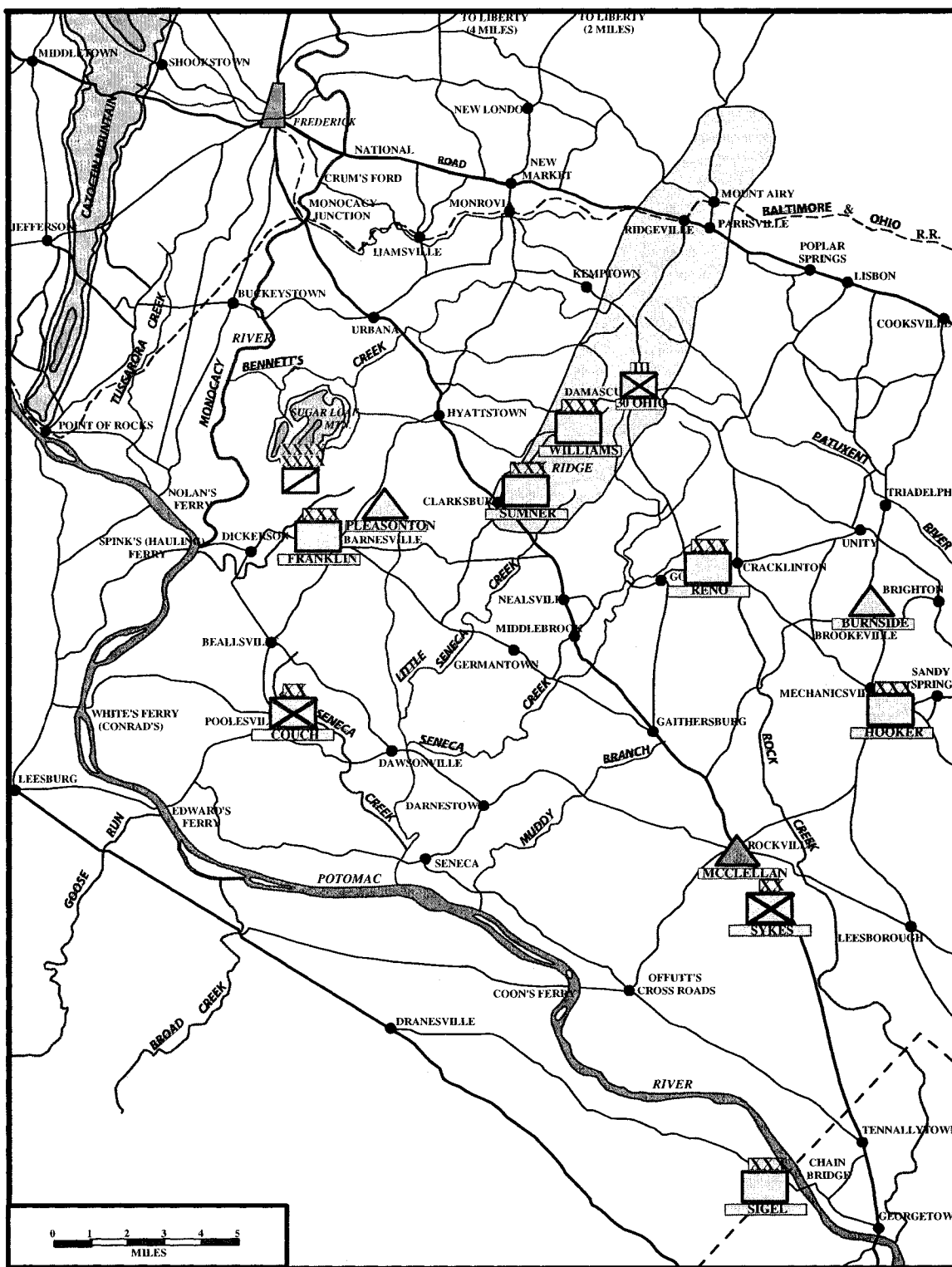


Figure 11. Positions of the Army of the Potomac, Evening, 10 September 1862.

Ridgeville was, as believed, strong enough ground that it could be held by the four corps of his and Sumner's commands without permitting the enemy to dislodge them or pass between them. In addition to Burnside's reconnaissance in force, Pleasonton was told to move his cavalry forward on the left and to occupy Sugar Loaf Mountain if it did not involve too great a risk. Possession of this very prominent height would enable the re-establishment of a signal station on the mountain that would provide a commanding view of almost the entire campaign area.¹⁶

Because Sumner got his two corps off to an early start on the morning of the tenth, by the time that McClellan's order to suspend the march was received at noon, Sumner's troops already were nearing their march objectives. During the afternoon, Sumner reported to Marcy at army headquarters that Williams's corps was within one mile of Damascus, and his own corps was three miles to the east of Clarksburg just behind Williams. Both corps were now halted, he said, and would remain where they were until further orders were received. He had placed his own corps still in its order of march—a column of divisions this time—in position, and, though he did not think the ground to be good, he believed that the position was secure.¹⁷

¹⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 124; pt. 2, 233; 51, pt. 1, 806, 807, 809, 811. The Federals had had a signal station on Sugar Loaf Mountain on 3 and 4 September until it had to be abandoned during the Confederate advance toward Frederick

¹⁷ OR 19, pt. 2, 241. What Sumner meant by three miles east of Clarksburg is a matter for some interpretation. The Frederick road on which Sumner's column approached Clarksburg enters the town from the southeast. The road to Damascus which was taken by Williams exits Clarksburg to the northeast. East out of Clarksburg evenly bisects the angle formed by these two roads. Regimental histories, however, do offer some additional information. Those of Sedgwick's division generally indicate that they marched farther than did the regiments of Richardson's division. Several of the regimental histories from

Although McClellan and his commanders believed that they were urgently maneuvering the army toward what they hoped would be a climatic battle, the soldiers in the ranks of the Second Corps did not necessarily share their excitement or anticipate that battle was eminent. These days on the march in Maryland were for them a pleasant change from the campaigning they had so recently experienced in Virginia. The weather was still good, and, though it was gradually growing warm and humid again, the soldiers saw the movement of the army as almost leisurely. Reichardt in Tompkins's battery confided to his diary on the tenth, "Our advance is getting very slow." William Osborne of the 29th Massachusetts recalled that, "The marches were not at this time very long nor forced; the country through which the army moved was very picturesque and fruitful; the fields were filled with corn, and from these the soldiers had many delicious meals, . . . not seldom supping upon fresh pork (purchased of course of the country people)."¹⁸

Richardson's division state that they were not at Clarksburg until the eleventh. Two histories of Frank's battery of the corps artillery say that the battery did not reach Clarksburg until the eleventh. Most likely, then, Sedgwick's division followed Williams corps and was already through Clarksburg moving along Parr's Ridge on the road to Damascus when the order to halt reached it. Richardson's division was probably second in the order of march and was just reaching Clarksburg when it halted. French's division and the corps artillery which were toward the rear of the column were still well short of Clarksburg when they halted. It should also be kept in mind that the general direction of Sumner's movement was north toward Frederick. For Sumner to say that his corps was east of Clarksburg indicates a change of direction which can only mean that the corps was now on the road to Damascus.

¹⁸ Theodore Reichardt, *Diary of Battery A, First Regiment, Rhode Island Light Artillery* (Providence: N. Bangs Williams, Publisher, 1865), 62; William A. Osborne, *The History of the Twenty-Ninth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Late War of the Rebellion* (Boston: Albert J. Wright, Printer, 1877), 181.

Not all of the pork, though, was purchased. While the 5th New Hampshire was on picket duty one night, two soldiers happened upon a pig and created a disturbance that brought out the regimental commander, Colonel Edward E. Cross. Cross at once ordered that the noise be stopped, exacting compliance by running the pig through with his sword. When the owner of the pig came looking for it the next morning, Cross told the farmer with a clear conscience that “none of my boys have taken anything.” Such breeches of discipline, however, were not tolerated in the Second Corps if they were discovered. While encamped near Clarksburg some of the soldiers of the novice 108th New York in French’s division took straw from stacks they found in a field to improve their bedding. This lapse of discipline caused Colonel Oliver H. Palmer, the regiment’s commander, to be relieved of his sword. It was returned to him in the morning, though, “with the injunction to be more observant in compliance with orders as to the men’s foraging.”¹⁹

Like Sumner, Franklin must also have been well on his way to Barnesville by the time he received McClellan’s order to suspend the movement. During the afternoon, however, Franklin was ordered to provide assistance to Pleasonton’s effort to retake Sugar Loaf Mountain, and so he continued on and by 3:00 p.m. was at Barnesville. The only movement that was not suspended by McClellan was that of Couch’s division which was at Poolesville by the end of the day.²⁰

¹⁹ William Child, *A History of the Fifth Regiment, New Hampshire Volunteers in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (Bristol, NH: R.W. Musgrove, Printer, 1893; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1988), 109; George H. Washburn, *A Complete Military History and Record of the 108th Regiment N.Y. Vols., From 1862 to 1894* (Rochester, NY: Press of E.R. Andrews, 1894), 19.

²⁰ OR 51, pt. 1, 806, 807.

The one movement that McClellan wanted to take place on the tenth was Burnside's reconnaissance in force to Ridgeville, but it did not happen. The division that would have made this move was that of Brigadier General Jacob D. Cox, the Kanawha Division, of Reno's corps. Apparently, Cox started the division off from its encampment at Goshen in response to McClellan's early morning order for a general advance, but had gone only a mile on the road toward Damascus when the 10:30 a.m. order to suspend that movement was received. Cox returned to his encampment at Goshen, and thereafter no new orders were sent to the division to continue on to Ridgeville as a reconnaissance. Cox did, however, send the 30th Ohio and a section of artillery to Damascus, and communicated with Sumner learning that Williams was near Damascus and Sumner's corps near Clarksburg. The rest of Burnside's command remained in place on the tenth. Accordingly, at 8:00 p.m. McClellan, from Burnside's headquarters at Brookeville where he had gone during the afternoon, wired Halleck that it would be another day before he could determine if the enemy had any strong forces south of the Monocacy. There was little indication, he told Halleck, that the enemy intended to advance on either Baltimore or York. Earlier in the day, McClellan had written Halleck that he was convinced that the entire rebel army, numbering not less than one hundred and twenty thousand men, was in Maryland, and that there were little, if any, enemy forces threatening Washington on the Virginia side of the Potomac. McClellan speculated that the climatic battle of the war would soon be fought in Maryland, and asked Halleck to order out one or two of the three army corps that remained in the Washington defenses.²¹

²¹ OR 19, pt.2, 234, 240, 254-5; 51, pt. 1, 809; George B. McClellan, *The Civil War*

IV

As during the previous two nights, it was late in the evening before McClellan determined on his moves for the eleventh. Because McClellan was still in Brookeville at Burnside's headquarters and would remain there most of the night, he telegraphed his instructions to Marcy at army headquarters in Rockville who in turn began releasing a series of telegrams and dispatches at about 1 a.m. relaying instructions to McClellan's subordinates. Couch's division was to remain at Poolesville and continue to watch the fords of the Potomac. Franklin's corps was to remain in the vicinity of Barnesville and recapture the Sugar Loaf, which had not been accomplished on the tenth. Sumner was to move Williams's corps into position at Damascus, while keeping his own at Clarksburg. Sumner was also to send a strong advance guard to Hyattstown, which could cooperate with Franklin in taking the mountain by cutting off the enemy garrison from the north. Burnside with both of his corps was to complete the move that McClellan originally intended for him on the tenth, but with the objective being New Market instead of Ridgeville. Sykes's division was to move up from Rockville to Clarksburg, or as far in that direction as he could go without fatiguing his troops. Last, army headquarters would follow Sykes. McClellan himself planned to go to Clarksburg (figure 12).²²

Papers of George B. McClellan, Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865, ed. Stephen W. Sears (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 444-6. In the OR, McClellan's earlier message to Halleck is dated 11 September. However, Sears establishes that this message was really written and dispatched on the tenth.

²² OR 19, pt. 2, 234, 238, 239; 51, pt. 1, 814, 815, 816; McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 569.

Sumner carried out McClellan's instructions by sending an order to Williams "to select the strongest position in the vicinity of Damascus (within a mile of the town), and post your command on three lines, throwing out a strong advanced guard and picketing to the front and flanks." Sumner also cautioned Williams, "We are near the enemy, and it is absolutely necessary to be extremely vigilant." Williams did as Sumner ordered, which included moving his headquarters into Damascus and establishing it at the crossroads. There he spent the afternoon socializing with the officers of Burnside's command as they passed through the town on their march toward Ridgeville and the National Road. Burnside himself, according to Williams, "passed almost all the afternoon in my tent with Gen. Parke, Cox, and others."²³

To carry out the mission to Hyattstown, Sumner sent all of Sedgwick's division, which reached that point by 3:30 p.m. Sedgwick was not called upon by Franklin to

²³ OR 19, pt. 2, 263; Alpheus S. Williams, *From the Cannon's Mouth, The Civil War Letters of General Alpheus S. Williams*, ed. Milo M. Quaife (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 119-21. Williams's letter is dated 12 September, but the events that he describes are the events of the eleventh including the statement that "it is raining tonight." In a subsequent letter (page 122) Williams recalls writing from Damascus on the night of 11 September. The General Parke whom he mentions is Brigadier General John G. Parke, Burnside's chief of staff.

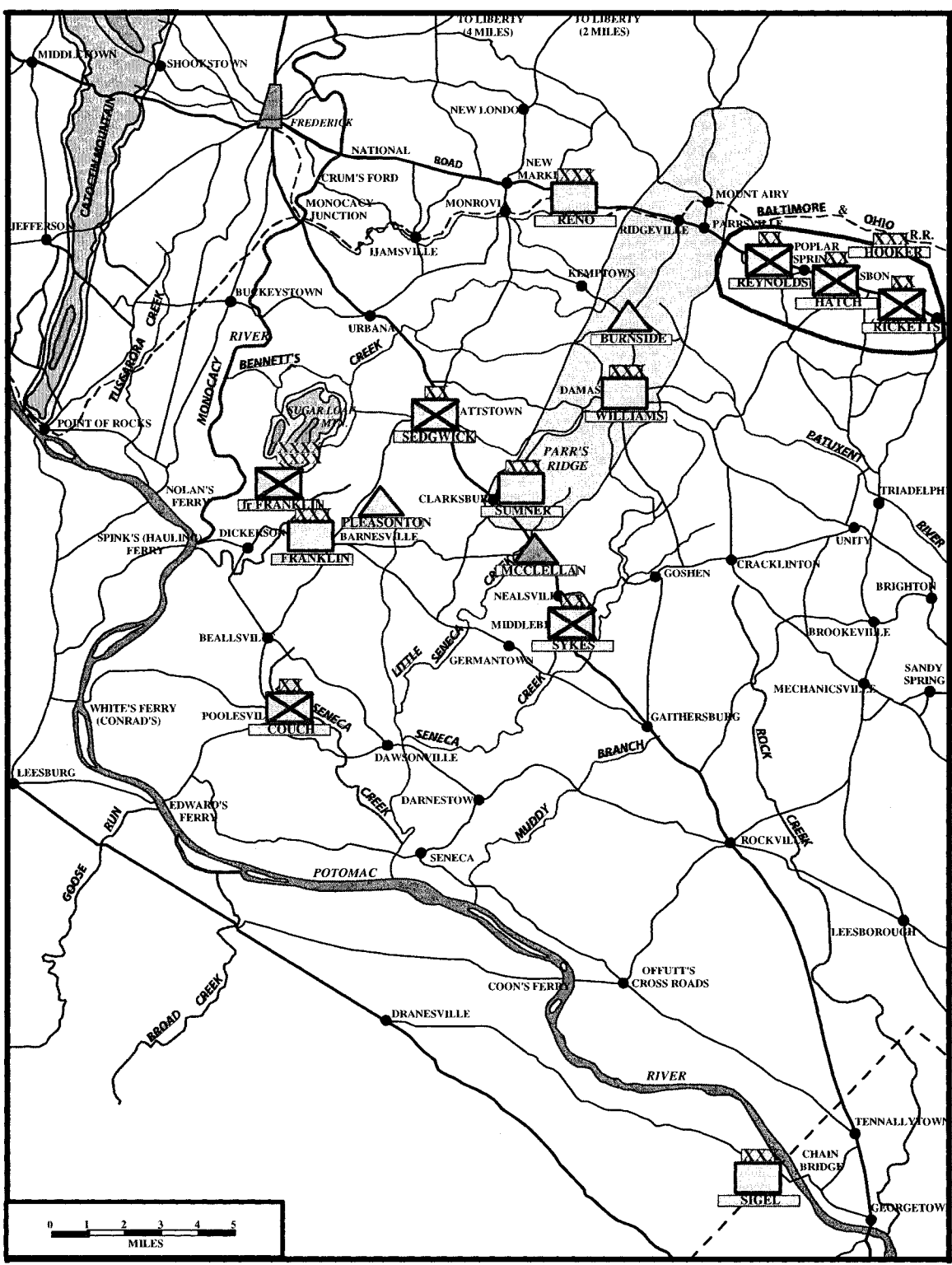


Figure 12. Positions of the Army of the Potomac, Evening, 11 September 1862.

support the retaking of Sugar Loaf, which was accomplished at about the same time that Sedgwick reached Hyattstown. The move, however, did precipitate the first contact of the Maryland Campaign between the enemy and the Second Army Corps. At 3:00 p.m., as Sedgwick was approaching Hyattstown, he sent back to corps headquarters near Clarksburg a hand-written note acknowledging the receipt of orders, and reporting all quiet despite the fact that a squadron of rebel cavalry was in his front. The orders that Sedgwick acknowledged were orders for him to push a reconnaissance along the road toward Urbana on the contingency that once Burnside reached New Market, McClellan planned to order the entire corps to that place. But apparently, Sedgwick did not advance a force much beyond Hyattstown, if at all, because the movement precipitated a small clash with the enemy's cavalry. In this action, Sedgwick used both of his batteries to fire across the town, dispersing the enemy's cavalry on a high hill beyond it, and then pushing forward a line of skirmishers who found no enemy remaining.²⁴

The order to check the road between Hyattstown and Urbana had been sent to Sumner's headquarters by Marcy at 1:15 p.m. It reemphasized that Sumner was to support Franklin in capturing Sugar Loaf if Franklin asked for assistance, and alerted

²⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 127; pt. 2, 258; 51, pt. 1, 814; War Department, John Sedgwick to Joseph H. Taylor, 11 September 1862, Second Corps Letters Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 41, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives; Roland E. Bowen, *From Ball's Bluff to Gettysburg . . . And Beyond: The Civil War Letters of Private Roland E. Bowen, 15th Massachusetts Infantry, 1861-1864*, ed. Gregory A. Coco (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 1994), 133; Andrew E. Ford, *The Story of the Fifteenth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, 1861-1864* (Clinton, MA: Press of W.J. Coulter, 1898), 59, 189; Louis N. Chapin, *A Brief History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment, N.Y.S.V.* (New York, 1903), 60; Reichardt, 62; Thomas M. Aldrich, *The History of Battery A, First Regiment Rhode Island Light*

Sumner that he was to be prepared to move his whole command to Urbana should Burnside reach New Market. Sumner was not to move, however, until ordered to do so.²⁵

This order to Sumner reflected McClellan's understanding of his situation on the eleventh, and his developing plan for the movements of the army on the twelfth. After returning to army headquarters at Rockville at 3:00 a.m. and getting some rest, he had a report sent to Burnside at 12:05 p.m. that the main rebel army was still thought to be east of Frederick between the National Road and Liberty, five miles north of New London. He told Burnside, "It will be necessary, therefore, in your movement of to-day to look out well for your right and rear, to move with great care, feeling your way cautiously, and being always ready to concentrate with Sumner if it should become necessary." Should Burnside reach New Market, without encountering a major enemy force, he was to communicate at once with Franklin and Sumner who would immediately move their commands to Urbana, while Couch would move up to Barnesville. Fifty-five minutes later another message was sent to Burnside further cautioning him that occupying New Market must not precipitate a general engagement.²⁶

Although McClellan was emphatic that Burnside exercise extreme caution in moving on New Market, and await the successful completion of that maneuver before ordering any other moves, he must already have been giving some credence to reports of Confederate forces moving west from Frederick. As early as the previous evening,

Artillery in the War to Preserve the Union (Providence: Snow & Farnham, Printers, 1904), 132.

²⁵ OR 51, pt. 1, 814.

²⁶ OR 19, pt. 2, 255; 51 pt. 1, 817, McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 569.

McClellan had wired Governor Andrew G. Curtin of Pennsylvania that he thought the enemy was checked with regard to any movement toward Baltimore or Gettysburg. Curtin was one of those individuals who throughout the day had been reporting large enemy forces moving toward Hagerstown. Almost as a postscript in his 12:05 p.m. orders to Burnside, McClellan had added that Wool reported fifteen thousand of the enemy had passed through Boonsboro headed for Hagerstown the previous night. Still, he told Curtin at 1:15 p.m. that as a result of Burnside's movement, he hoped "to know definitely whether the enemy are still massed near Frederick; whether they have any force east of the Monocacy; whether they have moved on Hagerstown in large force."²⁷

Sometime during the late afternoon McClellan must have learned that the head of Burnside's column—Reno's Corps—had arrived within two miles of New Market on the National Road without encountering the enemy, for at 7:00 p.m. he issued orders for the movement of the army the following day. Sumner was to move his own corps at daylight to Urbana, posting Williams's corps east of that town on the road to Monrovia. Franklin would move up to a position about two miles west of Urbana on the road between Urbana and Buckeystown, Couch was to move to Barnesville, and Pleasonton with all of his cavalry was to report to McClellan at Clarksburg where army headquarters would be relocated. Burnside with his command would further consolidate at New Market. At 10:00 p.m., however, McClellan sent a message to that officer saying that the best information now available was that the enemy had abandoned Frederick and was moving

²⁷ OR 19, pt. 2, 248-9, 269; 51, pt. 1, 817; Strother, *A Virginia Yankee*, 104-5, and "Personal Recollections," 275.

toward Hagerstown. If Burnside's view of the situation confirmed this, then he was to move his command forward and occupy Frederick. But McClellan still clung to the possibility that the enemy might be concentrated northeast of Frederick, and so he cautioned Burnside to "keep your flankers and cavalry well out to the right toward Liberty, Westminster, etc. Be extremely cautious in your advance."²⁸

V

It rained the night of the eleventh, the first rain to fall since the memorable storm of the night of 1 to 2 September, and the twelfth brought in a warm, damp, and occasionally rainy day. For the soldiers of the Second Corps it would be another day of relatively easy marching, though the rain made "the roads of red clay . . . soft and slippery as grease." Sedgwick's division had only about four miles to go to reach the march objective of Urbana, and the rest of the corps only about eight miles, not long distances for veteran campaigners even if the roads were muddy. As the soldiers marched north along the main turnpike between Washington and Frederick, they occasionally had to step aside to allow bodies of Pleasonton's cavalry and horse artillery to pass to the front. As the corps went into bivouac that evening at Urbana, some of the regiments of French's division discovered that they would have the displeasure of camping on ground that for several previous nights had been occupied by the enemy. As Lieutenant Hitchcock, the adjutant of the 132nd Pennsylvania, recalled, "There was abundant evidence of their presence in

²⁸ OR 19, pt. 2, 255; 51, pt. 1, 814-5, 816, 817, 818, 819. At 7:00 p.m. Pleasonton was told to report to headquarters at Urbana. At 10:00 p.m. the location was changed to Clarksburg.

the filth they left uncovered, for they had slaughtered beef for their troops and the putrid offal therefrom (sic) was polluting the air. Still there we had to sleep.” As evening came on and the soldiers attempted to make what beds they could in the fields or stand their picket posts, they could watch the lights of the reestablished Federal signal station on Sugar Loaf Mountain to the southwest as the signalmen attempted to maintain communication among the various corps and divisions of the army.²⁹

By 5:30 p.m. on the twelfth, the army was completing the strategic moves assigned to it by McClellan the previous evening (figure 13). Burnside’s headquarters, Reno’s corps and Pleasonton were in Frederick after having driven out the enemy’s cavalry rear guard, which withdrew to the west along the National Road and took up new positions just a few miles west of the town in the pass across Catoctin Mountain. The divisions of Hooker’s corps were on the National Road east of Frederick at the crossing of the Monocacy, New Market, and Ridgeville. Sumner, of course, had his corps concentrated

²⁹ George A. Bruce, *The Twentieth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), 151; Washburn, 19; Frederick L. Hitchcock, *War from the Inside: The Story of the 132nd Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry in the War for the Suppression of the Rebellion, 1862-1863* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1904; reprint, Alexandria, VA, Time-Life Books, 1985), 40; Charles D. Page, *History of the Fourteenth Regiment, Connecticut Volunteer Infantry* (Meriden, CT: Horton Printing Co., 1906; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1987), 16, 27; Reichardt, 62-3; Aldrich, *History of Battery A*, 132.

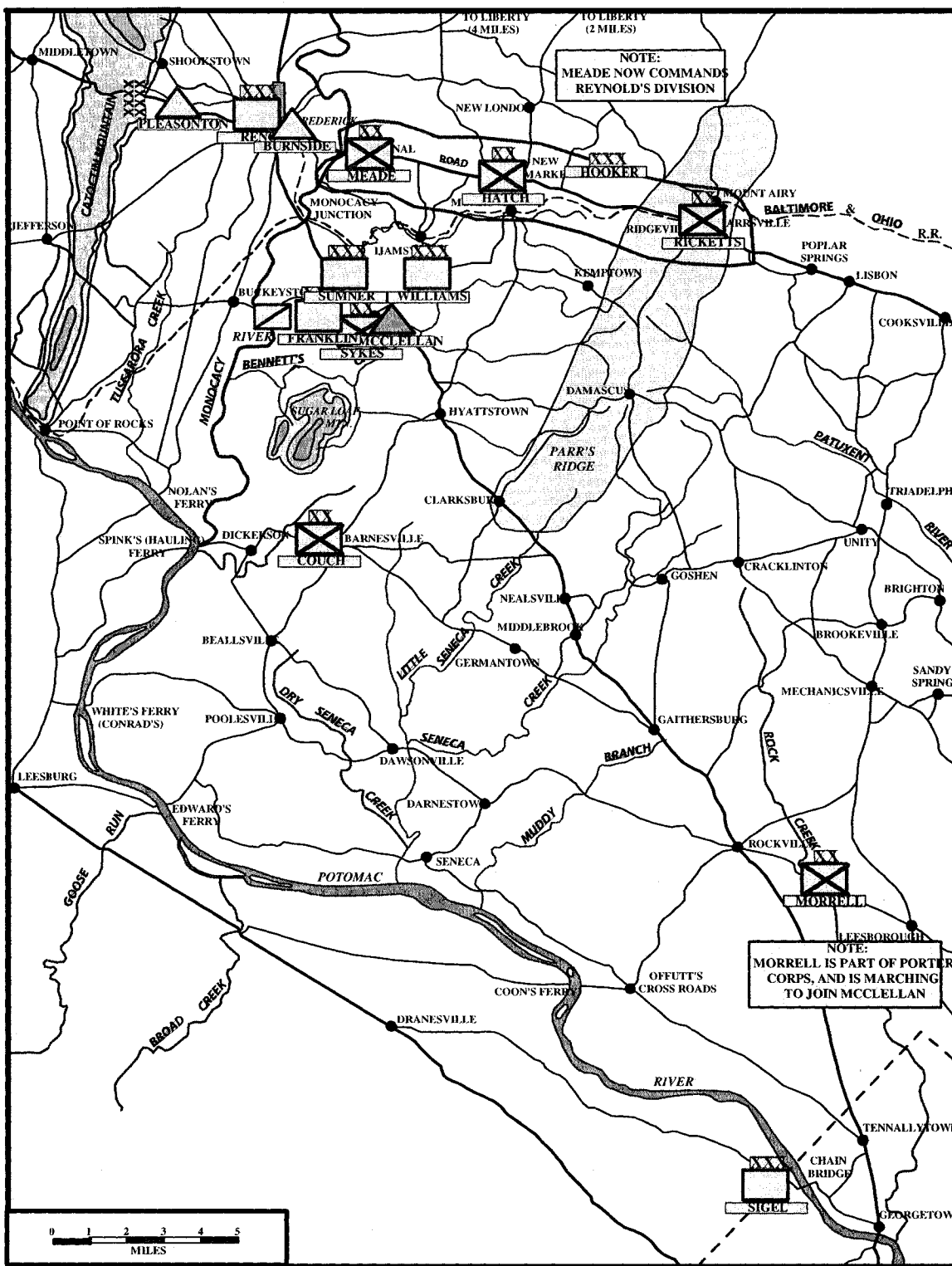


Figure 13. Positions of the Army of the Potomac, Evening, 12 September 1862.

around Urbana with Williams's corps to the east on the Urbana-Monrovia road after making what Williams described as "a circuitous and tedious march." Franklin's corps also was close by, just a few miles west of Urbana along the road leading to Buckeystown. Both McClellan's headquarters and Sykes's division were near Urbana in the rear of Sumner, and Couch had moved up to Barnesville. In addition, Major General Fitz-John Porter, commander of the Fifth Army Corps, was now near Rockville en route to join McClellan bringing with him the division of Major General George W. Morell that was part of that corps.³⁰

Although probably no one with the army in Maryland knew it, a general order was published that day by the War Department that would, eventually, have a profound effect on the make up and history of that army. War Department General Order Number 129, dated 12 September 1862, read in part, "The President directs that the First, Second, and Third Corps of the Army of Virginia, . . . be here after designated the First, Eleventh, and Twelfth." While a seemingly unimportant administrative detail, it should not be forgotten that up to this point in the campaign, the field army that McClellan assembled and carried into Maryland in early September 1862 was not a single entity, but a composite of two different field armies of entirely different backgrounds. Henceforth, the army of the Maryland Campaign would be the new Army of the Potomac, and the corps that made up that army were now numbered as their veterans and history forever would remember them.³¹

³⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 338; pt. 2, 271; Williams, 122.

³¹ OR 19, pt. 2, 279.

By the evening of the twelfth, McClellan was almost convinced that the Confederate army had gone west from Frederick. His remaining doubts were fostered by an early morning report from Burnside concerning an enemy column moving north from Frederick on the Gettysburg road, and by reports that enemy cavalry under Brigadier General Fitzhugh Lee was moving in the direction of Westminster. McClellan's response was to order Burnside to send some of his cavalry in pursuit of Lee. Of even larger concern was the fate of the Federal garrison at Harper's Ferry, some nine thousand men under the command of Colonel Dixon S. Miles. Before leaving Washington, McClellan had recommended the withdrawal of this garrison to prevent it from being cut off and captured. On the tenth, McClellan twice more recommended to Halleck that Miles be ordered to withdraw and join the army in Maryland. Halleck demurred in both cases and the garrison remained at Harper's Ferry. Now, amid reports of enemy columns moving in that direction, there had been no communication with Harper's Ferry for over twenty-four hours, and Halleck was asking McClellan if he could restore that communication. The implication was that when he did the garrison would come under his control. Accordingly, McClellan wired Halleck at 6:00 p.m. that he was sending cavalry in the direction of Harper's Ferry, and that his movement orders for the thirteenth would include arrangements for the relief of the garrison.³²

VI

³² OR 19, pt. 1, 43-4; pt. 2, 254, 271-3; McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 558-9.

McClellan's strategy for the thirteenth was a further concentration of his army in and around Frederick with an eye to either pursuing the enemy into western Maryland, marching north to meet him in Pennsylvania, or going to the relief of Harper's Ferry (figure 14). Franklin was told to move his corps at daylight west to Buckeystown. There he would await orders while being prepared to move to either Harper's Ferry or Frederick. Couch's division would move up to the position on the Urbana-Buckeystown road that Franklin was vacating, but leave forces to cover Edward's and Conrad's ferries. Burnside was told to leave one brigade at Monocacy Junction and mass the rest of his command in Frederick, prepared to move in any direction. If he could ascertain that the main body of the enemy had indeed gone west on the National Road, he was to occupy the pass over Catoctin Mountain, as always, provided there was no great risk in doing so. If heavy firing was heard in the direction of Harper's Ferry, Burnside was to move immediately in that direction. His cavalry was to continue the pursuit of Fitzhugh Lee, and protect the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad. Pleasonton with his cavalry was to enter Catoctin Valley, once Burnside had occupied the pass, and ascertain the situation at Harper's Ferry. He also was to send some cavalry north of Frederick toward Lewistown

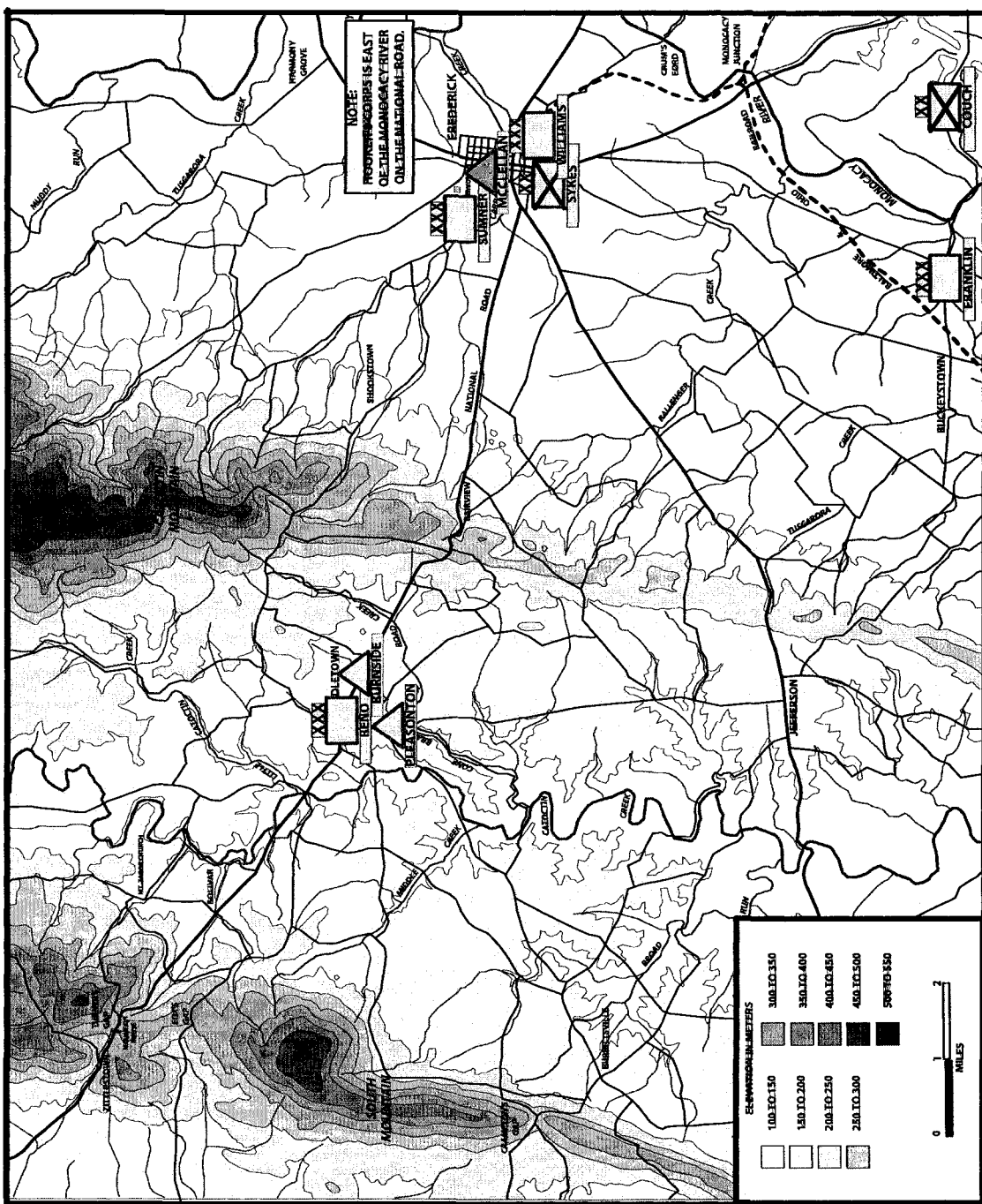


FIGURE 14. POSITIONS OF THE ARMY OF THE REPUBLIC OF TEXAS, 15 SEPTEMBER 1862.

and Mechanicstown to insure that there was no enemy remaining east of Catoctin Mountain attempting to get in the rear of the army. Sumner was to have Williams's corps move through Ijamsville, cross the Monocacy at Crum's Ford, and take position one mile east of Frederick. With his own corps, Sumner would take the direct route to Frederick and there await further orders.³³

For the men of the Second Army Corps, 13 September 1862 would be, perhaps, the most glorious day of their service. Although they did not have far to go to reach Frederick, Sumner had the corps up by 3:15 a.m. and on the road by 5:30, a little after first light. The dawn, when it came at 5:48, unveiled a day that would be fair and pleasant. It was about mid-morning when the corps "crossed a commanding range of hills southeast of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad bridge spanning the Monocacy river [and] beheld the church-spired city of Frederick and the broad, fertile and opulent valley of the Monocacy, shut in by low mountains of surpassing grace and outline, with all nature abloom,—a scene in the fierce sunlight of enchanting beauty." As the column splashed across the ford of the Monocacy, the artillery batteries took the time to water and feed their animals, and the infantry the opportunity to fill their canteens. When the march resumed it was along "a broad, smooth road, . . . macadamized and wide enough for three columns to move without interference."³⁴

³³ OR 51, pt. 1, 821, 822-3, 824-5.

³⁴ Joseph L. Harsh, *Sounding the Shallows: A Confederate Companion for the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2000), 15; Bruce, 151-2; Edward W. Spangler, *My Little War Experience, with Historical Sketches and Memorabilia* (York, PA: York Daily Publishing Company, 1904), 22-3; John H. Rhodes,

As the column swung along the last four miles to Frederick, the soldiers were able to discern in the distance the battle for the pass over Catoctin Mountain, which a soldier of the 15th Massachusetts recalled years later as being visible in “the smoke of the cannonading on the mountains across the valley as we came down into Frederick.” It was not long thereafter that an orderly passed through the column announcing to the regimental colonels that General McClellan soon would be passing them by on his way into Frederick. Lieutenant Hitchcock in the 132nd Pennsylvania knew that “this meant that we were to be ready to cheer ‘Little Mac’ when he came along, which, of course, we all did. He came, preceded by a squadron of cavalry and accompanied by a very large and brilliantly caparisoned staff, followed by more cavalry. He was dressed in the full uniform of a major general and rode a superb horse, upon which he sat faultlessly.” General Burnside also passed along the marching column of the Second Corps as they approached Frederick “on his bob-tailed horse, with a single orderly, and when fairly recognized, was greeted with a cheer as *uproarious* and as hearty as that given to McClellan.” In comparison to McClellan, Hitchcock remembered, “He was dressed so as to be almost unrecognizable as a general officer; wore a rough blouse, on the collar of which a close look revealed two much-battered and faded stars, indicating his rank of major general.”³⁵

The History of Battery B, First Regiment Rhode Island Light Artillery in the War to Preserve the Union, 1861-1865 (Providence: Snow & Farnham, Printers, 1894), 120.

³⁵ Ford, 189; Hitchcock, 39-40; Franklin Sawyer, *A Military History of the 8th Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry: Its Battles, Marches, and Army Movements* (Cleveland, OH: Fairbanks & Co., Printers, 1881), 71.

But the best was yet to come as the corps finally reached Frederick in the early afternoon. Lieutenant Favill of the 57th New York never forgot that “as we entered the main street the drums sounded attention, and the troops marched in regular order, with bands playing and colors flying.” Thomas M. Aldrich in Tompkins’s battery was incredulous. “My eyes could hardly believe what they beheld there. The ‘Stars and Stripes’ were flying from every house and the people could not do enough for us, they were so overjoyed to be delivered from the rebel hordes that had occupied the place.” Sergeant John H. Rhodes in Frank’s battery recalled that “as the full ranks of Sumner’s brigades, in perfect order and with all the pomp of war, passed through the quaint and beautiful town, their proud commanders and glittering staffs, and General Sumner at the head, the inhabitants responded with applause, and, from balcony and windows fair faces smiled, and handkerchiefs and scarfs waved to greet the army of the Union, as they passed along the streets from which, only the day before, the Confederates had been driven.” Women and girls ran through the ranks passing out cold water, pies, and bouquets to the passing soldiers. The twenty year old Lieutenant Favill was delighted. “This is the first real opportunity we have had of showing off to our grateful countrywomen, and we made the most of it, displaying our horsemanship to the best advantage.”³⁶

At some point, marching as if on parade, the corps passed before McClellan and his staff. Then, reaching Seventh Street near the north end of town, the corps turned left and

³⁶ Josiah Marshall Favill, *The Diary of a Younger Officer Serving with the Armies of the United States During the War of the Rebellion* (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1909), 183; Aldrich, 132; Rhodes, 120-1.

continued on until it was a mile outside of town in the vicinity of the reservoir. Here the corps was halted and the brigades and regiments were dismissed from their marching formations in preparation for going into bivouac. Before making camp, however, many of the regiments were drawn up in close formation so that an order from McClellan could be read strictly admonishing the soldiers against foraging of any kind.³⁷

Aside from the exhilaration that the officers and men of the Second Army Corps experienced in their march through Frederick, there was a situation developing during the day that had the potential to affect the operational readiness of the corps. General McClellan was not comfortable with having Williams as the commander of the newly designated Twelfth Army Corps. Williams was the only corps commander then with the Army of the Potomac who had no professional military training. He was a lawyer from Detroit who was made a brigadier general of volunteers in August 1861 because of his work in recruiting and training Michigan state troops that summer. Since then, he had commanded a brigade and then a division under Banks. Williams was now commanding the corps only because of the absence of Banks who remained in Washington as the commander of the city's defenses. On the afternoon of the thirteenth, McClellan reviewed a list of candidates to take temporary command of Williams's corps, selected John Sedgwick, and directed his assistant adjutant general, Colonel Albert V. Colburn, to publish the order. Colburn demurred, saying to McClellan, "I don't think Gen. Sedgwick

³⁷ Spangler, 23, 25; William Child, *A History of the Fifth Regiment, New Hampshire Volunteers in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (Bristol, NH: R.W. Musgrove, Printer, 1893; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1988), 109; Waite, 127.

wants it, General, I think he would rather command his present division.” McClellan, however, would not be dissuaded and told Colburn that Sedgwick must take the position. When Sedgwick received the order at his headquarters that afternoon, he declined the temporary advancement, as Colburn had predicted he would, saying, “He felt that he could do better service with the troops which he knew and which knew him.” No more was said concerning the matter, and Sedgwick continued during the campaign to command his division of the Second Army Corps.³⁸

³⁸ John Gibbon, *Personal Recollections of the Civil War* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1928; reprint, Dayton, OH: Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1978), 72-3; Charles Albert Whittier, “Reminiscences of the War, 1861-1865, or Egotistic Memoirs,” TMs (photocopy), Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, Boston Public Library, Boston, 5; Richard Elliott Winslow III, *General John Sedgwick, The Story of a Union Corps Commander* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 42-3.

VII

As momentous as this day had been for the Second Army Corps, it was a day of even more important events for McClellan and the strategy of the campaign. As Williams's corps was completing its march and preparing to go into camp in the fields southeast of Frederick, two soldiers of the 27th Indiana found a packet of papers wrapped around three cigars. The soldiers readily recognized the papers as official and they were quickly forwarded to Williams at corps headquarters, who, together with his aide, Colonel Samuel E. Pittman, determined that the papers were genuine and forwarded them at once to McClellan at army headquarters. What these soldiers had found was a lost copy of Special Orders 191 of the Army of Northern Virginia. The orders, which were dated 9 September, outlined Lee's strategy for the next phase of his campaign. This included splitting up his army into five different segments for the purpose of capturing or driving off the garrison at Harper's Ferry before reassembling in the vicinity of Boonsboro or Hagerstown. The largest of these segments, three divisions under Jackson, was to recross the Potomac near Sharpsburg, make a sweep through Martinsburg, Virginia to capture or drive off the Federal garrison there, and then move on Harper's Ferry from the west. Two other divisions under Major General Lafayette McLaws were to cooperate with Jackson by capturing Maryland Heights directly across the Potomac from the town, while another division under Brigadier General John G. Walker was to capture Loudoun Heights to the south separated from Harper's Ferry by the confluence of the Shenandoah and Potomac rivers. A fourth segment of the army, three divisions under Major General James Longstreet, was to move to Boonsboro, while the last, a division under Major General

Daniel Harvey Hill would form the rear guard. According to these orders, the Confederates had left Frederick on the tenth.³⁹

McClellan, of course, was delighted with this miraculous discovery, and excitedly wired Lincoln at noon, "I have all the plans of the rebels, and will catch them in their own trap if my men are equal to the emergency." He then sat down to analyze the orders and formulate a strategy of his own. At 3:00 p.m., McClellan sent a copy of the orders to Pleasonton and directed him to undertake a reconnaissance to determine if the rebel columns had indeed followed the order of march specified in the orders. By 6:00 p.m., McClellan finished formulating a plan by which he hoped to attack and defeat the rebel army in detail. At 6:20 p.m., he communicated the details of that plan to Franklin who was encamped at Buckeystown. He told Franklin that the pass across Catoctin Mountain west of Frederick had been cleared of enemy cavalry, and that Pleasonton was at Middletown with at least one division of Reno's corps en route there to back him up. In the morning, the rest of Burnside's command, followed by Sumner's and Williams's corps and Sykes's division, would march west on the National Road with the objective of crossing South Mountain at Turner's Gap and occupying Boonsboro. Couch would be ordered to move forward and join Franklin. Without waiting for Couch, though, Franklin was to march west at first light through Jefferson and Burkittsville, crossing South Mountain at Crampton's Gap and occupy Rohrersville in order to cut off McLaws's command on Maryland Heights. The destruction or capture of McLaws was Franklin's primary objective, which, when accomplished, would also relieve the garrison at Harper's

³⁹ OR 19, pt. 2, 603-4.

Ferry. Once this was done, Franklin was to return to Rohrersville and take the road to Sharpsburg and Williamsport in order to cut the route of withdrawal of Longstreet and Hill to Virginia and prevent the recrossing of Jackson into Maryland. McClellan expected that the passes over South Mountain would be defended and gave Franklin instructions for making an attack at Crampton's Gap in conjunction with the attack to be made at Turner's Gap by the main body.⁴⁰

Just how much of this plan was communicated to Sumner on the afternoon of the thirteenth is not known. At 8:45 p.m. an order was sent to Sumner telling him that he was to march punctually at 7:00 a.m. the next morning, but the order did not say to where, or what position the Second Corps would have in the order of march, which would be critical if the five army corps at Frederick were to use the National Road to get across Catoctin Mountain without creating a monumental traffic jam. Obviously, at this point Sumner must have already known where he was to take his corps the next day, and what would be his place in the order of march. Perhaps McClellan's plan had been given to him in more detailed instructions earlier with the document having since been lost, or perhaps the instructions had been communicated to him earlier in person. It should be noted that the Second Corps encampment and army headquarters were in close proximity to one another just west of Frederick that afternoon.⁴¹

One important detail that was included in the 8:45 p.m. order to Sumner was the army commander's arrangements regarding logistics as the army turned west. Only

⁴⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 45; pt. 2, 281; 51, pt. 1, 826-7, 829.

⁴¹ OR 51, pt. 1, 826.

ammunition wagons would move with the troops. The ambulances of all the corps and divisions were to be consolidated, formed in the same order as the marching corps, and follow directly behind the troops. Instructions on the movement of all other wagons would be given to the corps quartermasters by Colonel Ingalls at army headquarters at 6:30 a.m. In the meantime, supply wagons could be sent back to the point where the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad crossed the Monocacy to draw subsistence for issue to the troops. During the stay of the Confederates at Frederick, they had destroyed the railroad bridge over the river, but a supply train sent out from Baltimore was on the east side of the river ready to issue rations.⁴²

According to the historian of the 108th New York, "The camp in Frederick that evening was a grand spectacle, thousands of men bivouacking and the numerous camp fires presented a grand scene, the like of which is not looked upon in ages; officers were warmly welcomed and entertained by the loyal citizens in their pleasant homes, and feelings akin to 'Home Again,' were revived. The men were in good spirits, and we cannot forget that." If the day had served to renew the spirits of the volunteer soldiers of the Second Army Corps and to remind them of the great cause to which they had originally dedicated themselves, it was a good thing. Although they could not have known as they spread their blankets and settled down to sleep that evening, the days of leisurely marching through the rolling hills and verdant landscape of Maryland were over.

⁴² OR 51, pt. 1, 826.

The morning would begin a new phase of the Maryland Campaign, a phase that would end with the severest test of combat that the Second Army Corps had yet experienced.⁴³

VIII

Historians who have evaluated McClellan's direction of the Army of the Potomac in its move from Rockville to Frederick between 9 and 13 September, have uniformly described it as being slow and cautious. Francis Palfrey in 1882 somewhat excused McClellan saying that Halleck's warning "him against exposing his left and rear and uncovering Washington, may be accepted as valid excuses for the slowness of his movements, and his unwillingness to advance his left more rapidly than his other columns." A. Wilson Greene described McClellan's pace in the move to Frederick as "glacial" and "snaillike," and also cited Halleck's "hand-wringing" and "continual whining" as contributory, but ultimately concluded that this well suited McClellan's "natural inclinations." Stephen Sears in *Landscape Turned Red* concluded that "the Young Napoleon advanced his army slowly and with elaborate caution, making no attempt to seize control of events."⁴⁴

⁴³ Washburn, 19.

⁴⁴ Francis Winthrop Palfrey, *The Antietam and Fredericksburg*, vol. 5, *Campaigns of the Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1882), 20; A. Wilson Greene, "'I Fought the Battle Splendidly; George B. McClellan and the Maryland Campaign,'" in *Antietam: Essays on the 1862 Maryland Campaign* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1989), 59; Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1983), 107.

These historians and others also criticized McClellan for over estimating the enemy's strength and capabilities during this period. Sears's says that, "From September 9 on, George McClellan's vision of an opposing army triple its actual strength was fixed immutably in his thinking." Greene describes this as "vintage McClellan," and James V. Murfin writing in *Gleam of Bayonets* concluded that given the information McClellan received on 11 and 12 September, "a clear picture of Lee's intentions was presented."⁴⁵

While it cannot be denied that McClellan's movement of his army from Washington to Frederick was cautious, a day by day consideration of that movement, as presented in this chapter, allays the most severe criticisms of that movement. It should not be forgotten that the army that McClellan assembled in Maryland was a thrown together army made up of corps from the Army of the Potomac, the Army of Virginia, and the remains of Burnside's independent expeditionary force. The corps that McClellan selected for his "moveable army" were not all assembled in Maryland until early on the seventh, and the delay in moving that force farther into Maryland on the seventh and eighth is easily justified by the need to reorganize and refit the corps, as well as by the need to develop some assessment of the enemy's intentions. Once McClellan began to move on the ninth, it took only four days before the lead elements of the army reached Frederick on the evening of 12 September.

In his final report on the campaign, McClellan stated that, "uncertainty as to the intentions of the enemy obliged me, up to the 13th of September, to march cautiously, and

⁴⁵ Sears, *Landscape Turned Red*, 106-7; Greene, 60; James V. Murfin, *The Gleam of Bayonets: The Battle of Antietam and the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1965), 128.

to advance the army in such order as continually to keep Washington and Baltimore covered, and at the same time to hold the troops well in hand” This statement is a fair evaluation of the campaign in Maryland between 9 and 13 September. McClellan moved the corps of his army as the theorists envisioned, dispersed over a wide front without sacrificing the security of the army—or Washington—while keeping the corps within a day’s march of each other, ready to concentrate or maneuver once contact was made with the enemy.⁴⁶

The question of what McClellan could have known or should have known concerning the strength and intentions of the enemy force will always remain problematic. However, once it was determined that the Confederate move into Maryland was not merely a feint to draw Federal corps away from the southern defenses of Washington, McClellan necessarily had to posit that that force, whatever its actual strength, was formidable and could not be easily defeated or driven out of Maryland. During the move to Frederick, McClellan had to consider the security of his own army, and he was correct when he wrote in his final report that the possibility of an enemy move against Washington down the Potomac, or “on Baltimore, or to invade Pennsylvania, were questions which at the time we had no means of determining.” Given this situation, his strategic handling of the army during this period of the campaign is creditable, even if it is cautious. Viewed on a day by day basis, McClellan’s direction of the movement of his corps accomplished

⁴⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 39.

everything that should have been expected of an army commander in the earliest stages of the campaign.⁴⁷

Once McClellan reached Frederick and had “all of the plans of the rebels,” however, his caution and lack of celerity became more culpable. The discovery of Lee’s lost order on the thirteenth was like the discovery of an open door into the enemy’s house, but a door that would not remain open long under any circumstances, a door that could be easily slammed shut once the enemy saw the danger. Therefore, time became a critical factor in McClellan’s next move.⁴⁸

All of the corps of McClellan’s army completed their march objectives for the thirteenth by noon, or at the latest by mid-afternoon, and could easily have been ordered to continue their march to the west without unduly fatiguing the soldiers. It is understandable that McClellan would take several hours, as he did on the afternoon of the thirteenth, to consider the authenticity and validity of Special Orders 191, and carefully plan his strategy in response to this unexpected intelligence, but while he was doing that his corps could have moved across Catoctin Mountain and down into the Middletown Valley bringing them just that much closer to the fragmented enemy army and the early relief of the Harper’s Ferry garrison. As it was, McClellan did not seize the opportunity as he told Lincoln he would in his noon telegram, and by evening only Pleasonton’s cavalry and Reno’s corps were west of the mountain. In failing to order his corps to continue marching on the thirteenth, he failed to thrust his army into the open door.

⁴⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 39.

⁴⁸ OR 19, pt. 2, 281.

McClellan's failure to keep the army moving on the thirteenth proved less harmful than it might, however, because the enemy did not know of the lost order, and did not begin to close the door. The Confederates had left the door open as they did because they did not believe that he was in any position to go through it. When Lee developed the plan outlined in Special Order 191, he told one of his division commanders that McClellan "is an able general but a very cautious one. . . . His army is in a very demoralized and chaotic condition, and will not be prepared for offensive operations—or he will not think it so—for three or four weeks." On the thirteenth, when McClellan got a copy of 191, Lee was in Hagerstown and did not learn of the serious threat posed by McClellan until that evening. Even so, according to Joseph Harsh in his masterful study of Lee in the Maryland Campaign, *Taken at the Flood*, Lee decided that the threat was not that serious, and did not order an immediate re-concentration of his army at once. As a result, the open door would remain open to McClellan on the fourteenth.⁴⁹

By not ordering his corps to continue their march on the thirteenth, McClellan may have unwittingly contributed to keeping the door open. Had all of the corps of the Army of the Potomac entered Catoctin Valley on the thirteenth, Lee would have become fully aware of the threat posed by the Federal army, and would have undoubtedly acted sooner and more assertively to close the door.

⁴⁹ John G. Walker, "Jackson's Capture of Harper's Ferry," *North to Antietam*, vol. 2, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (New York: Century, 1887-1888; reprint, New York: Castle Books, 1956), 606; Joseph L. Harsh, *Taken at the Flood: Robert E. Lee & Confederate Strategy in the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1999), 245.

For Sumner and the divisions, brigades, regiments, and batteries of the Second Corps, the movement from Rockville on the ninth to Frederick on the thirteenth was hardly more than routine for the veterans that they were. Sumner's response to orders had been quick and efficient, and the response of the corps to his orders had been the same. The whole corps moved from Rockville to Frederick as if it was an intricate part of an immense and well orchestrated ballet. Neither Sumner nor the corps were tested during the early stages of the campaign, but their performance, nonetheless, indicated that they were ready to be called on and counted on when the time came.

CHAPTER 6
IN PURSUIT OF THE ENEMY
14 TO 15 SEPTEMBER 1862

I

While the soldiers of the Second Army Corps attempted to get as much rest as they could during the night of 13-14 September, the corps' supply wagons slowly wound their way back through Frederick City and down to Monocacy Junction to pick up rations. As the first wagons returned during the early hours of the morning of the fourteenth, the process of issuing rations to the troops began. The soldiers of the 14th Connecticut in French's division were called at 2:00 a.m. to draw "three days rations of hardtack, pork, sugar and coffee." As soon as it was light enough the soldiers of the 8th Ohio, also in French's division, were called in from their night of picket duty, hastily issued their rations, and told to be ready to march at a moment's notice. The soldiers of the 61st New York in Richardson's division slept the night away hoping against hope that this Sunday would be a day of rest. Just as they were being called from their sleep at first light "a field of ripe potatoes was discovered close by, and notwithstanding McClellan's savage order against taking anything, in a short time that field had upon it almost a man to a hill

of potatoes.” The hope of a leisurely day eating fresh vegetables soon was dissolved by the long roll and orders to get ready to march.¹

Although the orders of the night before did not require the corps to be in position and ready to march until 7:00 a.m., Sumner, as usual, had it ready early. Well before the appointed hour, the leading units of the corps were started off through the outskirts of Frederick to get into position at the National Road, ready to fall into the army’s line of march. The rest of the corps began slowly to close up behind them. A little after 6:15 a.m., Sumner received a note from Chief of Staff Marcy saying that Sykes’s division had been ordered to march at 6:00 a.m. and would be closely followed by the army’s reserve artillery. The note closed by saying, “Should this artillery fail to be en route in advance of the head of your column by 7 a.m., please delay your departure long enough to let it take its position.” Up and under arms, and ready to march, the corps was left standing in position waiting for the road to clear, not an uncommon occurrence in the daily operational life of every Civil War soldier. Just after 7:45 a.m., another note from Marcy was received at corps headquarters, but this one would do nothing to get the corps moving. It directed Sumner to leave two regiments and a section of artillery from Williams’s corps behind in Frederick. One of the regiments and the artillery were to take position at the junction of Liberty Road and the Emmittsburg Turnpike north of

¹ Charles D. Page, *History of the Fourteenth Regiment, Connecticut Volunteer Infantry* (Meriden, CT: Horton Printing Co., 1906; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1987), 27; Franklin Sawyer, *A Military History of the 8th Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry: Its Battles, Marches, and Army Movements* (Cleveland, OH: Fairbanks & Co., Printers, 1881), 72; Charles A. Fuller, *Personal Recollections of the War of 1861* (Sherburne, NY: News Job Printing House, 1906), 55.

Frederick, while the other was to report at the Commissary depot at Monocacy Junction as a guard.²

When 9:00 a.m. passed and access to the National Road was still blocked by columns of marching troops, Sumner received the third note of the morning from Marcy. Carried by Lieutenant Cyrus B. Comstock of McClellan's engineering staff, the note told Sumner not to wait for the National Road to clear, but to march immediately taking the more circuitous route—and the only other route across Catoctin Mountain—through Shookstown to Middletown, where his corps could then get back on the National Road (figure 15). Lt. Comstock would go along with the corps headquarters to communicate further instructions. Execution of this order meant that those units of the corps in position to start the march on the National Road had to be turned around and countermarched to the Shookstown road, about two-thirds of the way back to the reservoir where the corps had bivouacked the previous night. This would cause complaints in later years in some regimental histories, and no doubt more than a few at the time, concerning taking the wrong road, having to retrace steps, and a considerable loss

² War Department, Randolph B. Marcy to Edwin V. Sumner, 14 September 1862, 6:15 and 7:45 a.m., Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives; George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story* (New York: Charles & Company, 1887), 575. In his letter to Francis A. Walker, 21 May 1884, McClellan explained that the delay on the morning of the fourteenth was the fault of Hooker, who did not get his corps moving "as promptly as ordered."

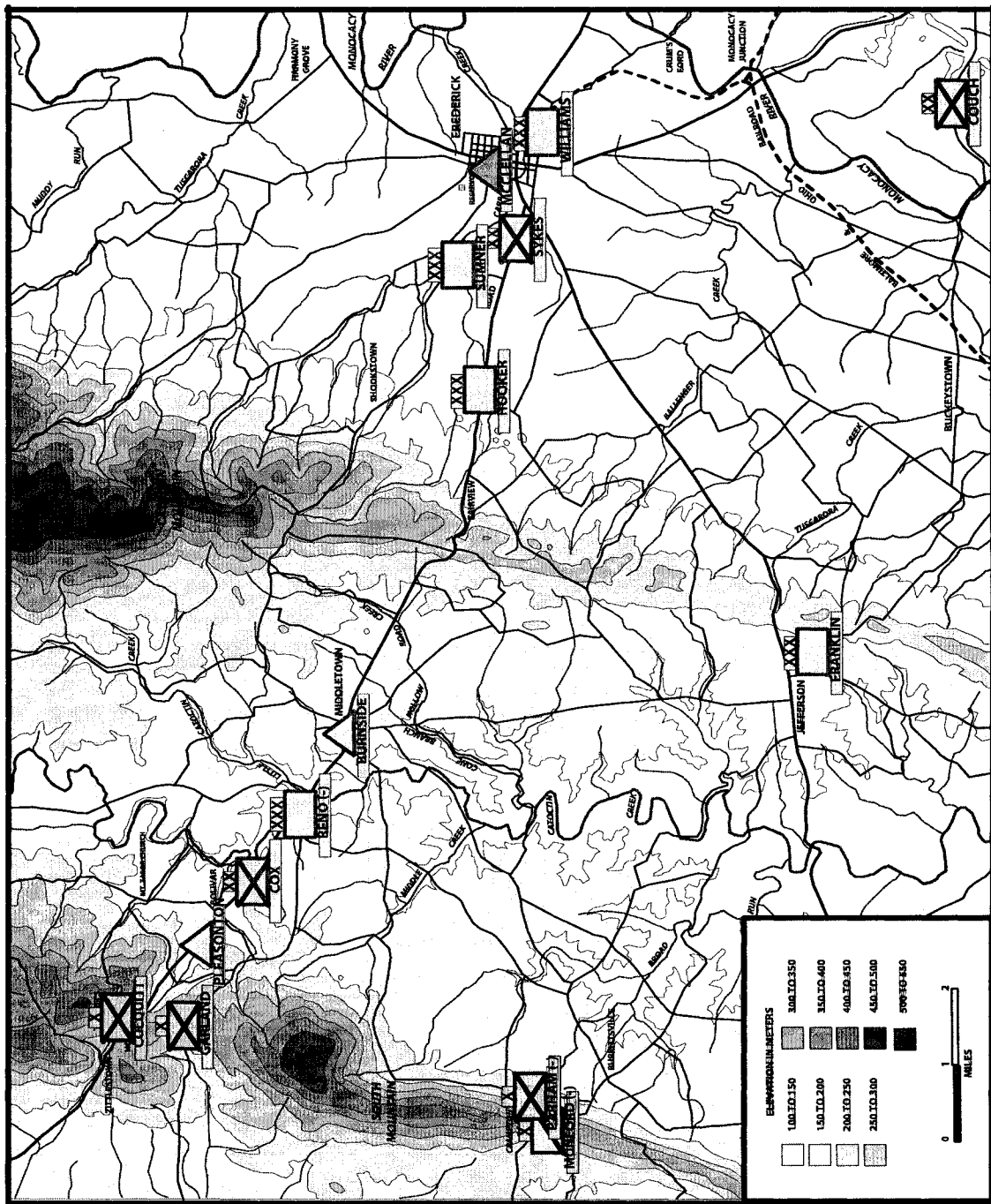


FIGURE 15. POSITIONS OF THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC, MORNING, 1 SEPTEMBER 1862.

of time. To keep the corps on the right route the staff procured the services of a civilian guide, who dressed in light gray and wore a broad rimmed straw hat as a member of the 8th Ohio remembered it.³

The order of march for the day was Richardson's division, then Sedgwick's, followed by the corps artillery reserve and French's division. At first the march was easy enough, "The road lay along the level 'Pleasant Valley' and was very smooth and delightful in the fresh autumn air." Soon, however, the men began to ascend Catoctin Mountain and the marching gradually became much more difficult.⁴ "For a good part of the way up the road was well shaded by large trees, making it cool and refreshing when the sun became high. There were frequent openings between the trees which presented charming pictures of the beautiful valley below."⁵

On reaching the top, the soldiers were presented with an even more spectacular vista. "To the right and to the left of us was a beautiful valley. A silver stream of medium size

³ War Department, *War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 71 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), series I, vol. 51, pt. 1, 831. Hereinafter cited as OR. All references are to Series I unless otherwise noted. Ernest Waitt, *History of the Nineteenth Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865* (Salem, MA: Salem Press Co., 1906), 127-8; Theodore Reichardt, *Diary of Battery A, First Regiment, Rhode Island Light Artillery* (Providence: N. Bangs Williams, Publisher, 1865), 63; Thomas Francis Galwey, *The Valiant Hours, Narrative of "Captain Brevet," An Irish-American in The Army of the Potomac*, ed. W.S. Nye (Harrisburg, PA; Stackpole Company, 1961), 35.

⁴ Waitt, 127. Waitt's reference to "Pleasant Valley" should be interrupted generically and not confused with Pleasant Valley that is the proper name for the valley west of South Mountain running between Boonsboro and the Potomac River.

⁵ Waitt, 128.

ran through each valley as far as the eye can reach, and it happened to be one of the clearest fourteenth of September days you can imagine. Two or three small towns lay in each valley with their white church towers, and about twelve o'clock the bells rang out joyfully."⁶

But the spectacular scenery was not all that there was to attract the soldiers' attention, nor was it the most dramatic sight to be seen from the top of Catoctin Mountain.

As we came out of the woods on the brow of the hill the whole panorama of the valley of Middletown lay before us, calm and beautiful, but on the verge and on the mountain slopes beyond we caught suddenly a most distinct view of battle. . . . Batteries were sweeping across the plain under a full run and going into position. Columns of troops would burst forth from the woods on the mountain side and move gracefully across open spaces, and disappear in the woods again. Skirmish lines appeared and disappeared along the ridges and crests. Clouds of smoke would break forth among the woods, underneath which we would catch occasional glimpses of the combatants.⁷

The battle that the Second Corps soldiers were witnessing would later be called the Battle of South Mountain. It had been anticipated by McClellan in the orders to his army the afternoon before, and precipitated when the Ninth Corps began to move in response to those orders on the morning of the fourteenth. The fighting had begun not long before the first soldiers of the Second Corps reached the summit of Catoctin Mountain.

Contact with the enemy came as the division of Brigadier General Jacob D. Cox, which had camped the night of the thirteenth to fourteenth in the vicinity of Middletown,

⁶ Henry Gerrish, "Seventh New York Infantry Regiment Memoirs," TMs (photocopy), pp. 25-6, Civil War Times Illustrated Collection, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.

⁷ Sawyer, 72-3.

attempted to cross South Mountain through Fox's Gap. Cox had started his division west along the National Road in support of Pleasonton's cavalry to determine if Turner's Gap, the pass over South Mountain used by the National Road, was going to be defended by the enemy in any strength. Warned by a paroled Federal officer that rebel forces were waiting for him at the crest, Cox turned his division off to the south, taking the Old Sharpsburg road that crossed the mountain through Fox's Gap a mile south of Turner's. Cox, however, still met stiff resistance in Fox's Gap, and even though he was able to initially drive the enemy back and occupy a portion of the gap itself, he halted his advance to await reinforcement. Gradually the battle became a general engagement as the rest of the Ninth Corps and then Hooker's First Corps—all of Burnside's right wing—came up and were deployed to drive the rebels out of both passes. By early afternoon, the Ninth Corps was working its way up into Fox's Gap, while the First Corps deployed north of the National Road in an attempt to flank the enemy forces defending Turner's. By the end of the day, these two corps would drive to the top of South Mountain, securing Fox's Gap and all but occupying Turner's, making the rebels' position on the mountain untenable. The cost of this success, however, included the death of General Reno.

Five miles south, another phase of the Battle of South Mountain was taking place at Crampton's Gap. McClellan's order to Franklin on the afternoon of the 13th specified that that officer, with his own Sixth Corps and Couch's division, was to march via Jefferson and Burkittsville to Crampton's Gap. If he found that the gap was not occupied in force, he was to seize it and move into Pleasant Valley in order to cut off and destroy

McLaws's column and relieve Harper's Ferry. However, should Crampton's Gap prove to be defended, Franklin was to make all preparations to attack and to commence the attack thirty minutes after hearing firing farther north at Fox's and Turner's Gaps. In accordance with these orders, Franklin moved forward from his encampment at Buckeystown at 6:00 a.m.. At Jefferson, he halted for a time to wait for Couch, but when Couch did not show, Franklin moved on to Burkittsville, arriving at about noon to find enemy infantry and artillery posted to defend the gap. Unaware of Franklin's circumstances, McClellan at 11:45 a.m. sent him new orders. Franklin was advised that an engagement at Fox's and Turner's Gap already was well under way, and directed to lose no time in occupying Crampton's Gap. Again at 2:00 p.m., McClellan ordered Franklin to "mass your troops and carry Burkittsville at any cost." At that point, Franklin was already in the process of doing just that and by early evening he would be in complete possession of the gap.⁸

McClellan seems to have been well pleased with the advance of the army on the fourteenth. At 1:00 p.m., he felt confident enough to sent a message—to be carried by three different couriers on three different routes—to Miles in Harper's Ferry informing him of the situation and urging him to hold out. He told Miles, "You may count on our making every effort to relieve you. You may rely upon my speedily accomplishing that object."⁹ At 4:00 p.m., he wired Halleck, "We are firing the passes of the Blue Ridge.

⁸ OR 19, pt. 1, 45, 46; 51, pt. 1, 833.

⁹ McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 560-1; OR 19, pt. 1, 45; George B. McClellan, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865*, ed.

Have possession of the heights on the left of Hagerstown pike; are now attacking the right. Franklin is attacking the Rockville [Crampton's] Pass, through the same ranges. Thus far all goes well. Have taken about 100 prisoners. I have the troops in hand. They are confident, and hope at have full possession of the passes by dark."¹⁰

What McClellan did not know as he watched the progress of the battle from a hill top just south of Bolivar was that at the beginning of the day the Confederate army had been ill-prepared to defend any of the three crossings over the mountain. During all of the morning hours, only one under-strength brigade was in position to defend Turner's and Fox's gaps. Several additional brigades arrived from the vicinity of Boonsboro by early afternoon to resist the Federal effort that came with the full deployment of Reno's and Hooker's corps, and it was only the arrival of two divisions that had marched all the way from Hagerstown that kept the Federals from driving Confederate forces out of both gaps by early evening. Had Reno pushed forward earlier and more aggressively, had McClellan not caused Sumner to wait for the passage of Hooker and Sykes who started the march from well east of Frederick, Federal forces might have been able to occupy the South Mountain passes before Confederate forces defending those passes were reinforced. At Crampton's Gap on the morning of 14 September there were fewer than one thousand Confederates to contest the march of Franklin's entire corps through the

Stephen W. Sears (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 459. Sears establishes the time of this message as 1:00 p.m., and that despite three different couriers being sent the message was never received.

¹⁰ OR 19, pt. 2, 289; McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 460. Sears establishes the time of this dispatch as 4:00 p.m., and that it was sent from "In Front of Middletown."

gap. Had Franklin not stopped at Jefferson for several hours to wait for Couch, or had Franklin been more aggressive once he reached Burkittsville, again the results of the day might have been different.

All of this, of course, was completely unknown to the officers and men of the Second Army Corps as they tread their way down into and across the Middletown Valley toward the fighting at Turner's and Fox's Gaps. In a message to Hooker at 1:00 p.m., the same message that directed him to deploy his corps to flank Turner's Gap from the north, Colonel George D. Ruggles, one of McClellan's aides-de-camp, reported that both Sumner's and Banks' corps were beginning to arrive in the vicinity of the battlefield. However, it would have been more accurate to say that the leading elements of Richardson's division had begun arriving. In marching from Frederick to South Mountain, both Sumner and Williams had to use the Shookstown road over Catoctin Mountain (figure 16). One soldier in the Second Corps referred to this road as a "bridle path," and Williams wrote home a few days later describing it as "a very rough road." As a secondary road at best, making a steep mountain ascent and descent, it did not provide the corps the opportunity to march in multiple columns on either side of the road as they had on the wider more level turnpikes south and east of Frederick. Individual regiments and batteries took up the whole width of the road forcing the entire corps to march as a single column. The result was that by mid-day the corps formations were stretched out over not less than seven to eight miles, creating a march punctuated with the frequent halts and starts so hated by the soldiers in the ranks. Henry Gerrish, a soldier in the 7th

New York in Richardson's division, recalled in his memoirs that the regiment reached the top of Catoctin Mountain at about noon. Theodore Reichardt, a member of Tompkins's battery in Sedgwick's division, wrote in his diary that the battery did not get to the top of that mountain until 3:00 p.m.¹¹

¹¹ OR 19, pt. 1, 50; Galwey, *Valiant Hours*, 35; Alpheus S. Williams, *From the Cannon's Mouth, The Civil War Letters of General Alpheus S. Williams*, ed. Milo M. Quaife (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 122; Gerrish, 26; Reichardt, 63; John D. Hemmingen, "Diary of John D. Hemmingen, Company E, 130th Pennsylvania," TMs (typescript), 14 September 1862, Michael Winey Collection, Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA. In addition to Reichardt, Hemmingen also noted reaching the crest at about 3:00 p.m. so perhaps Tompkins's battery and the 130th Pennsylvania were close to each other in the march column that day.

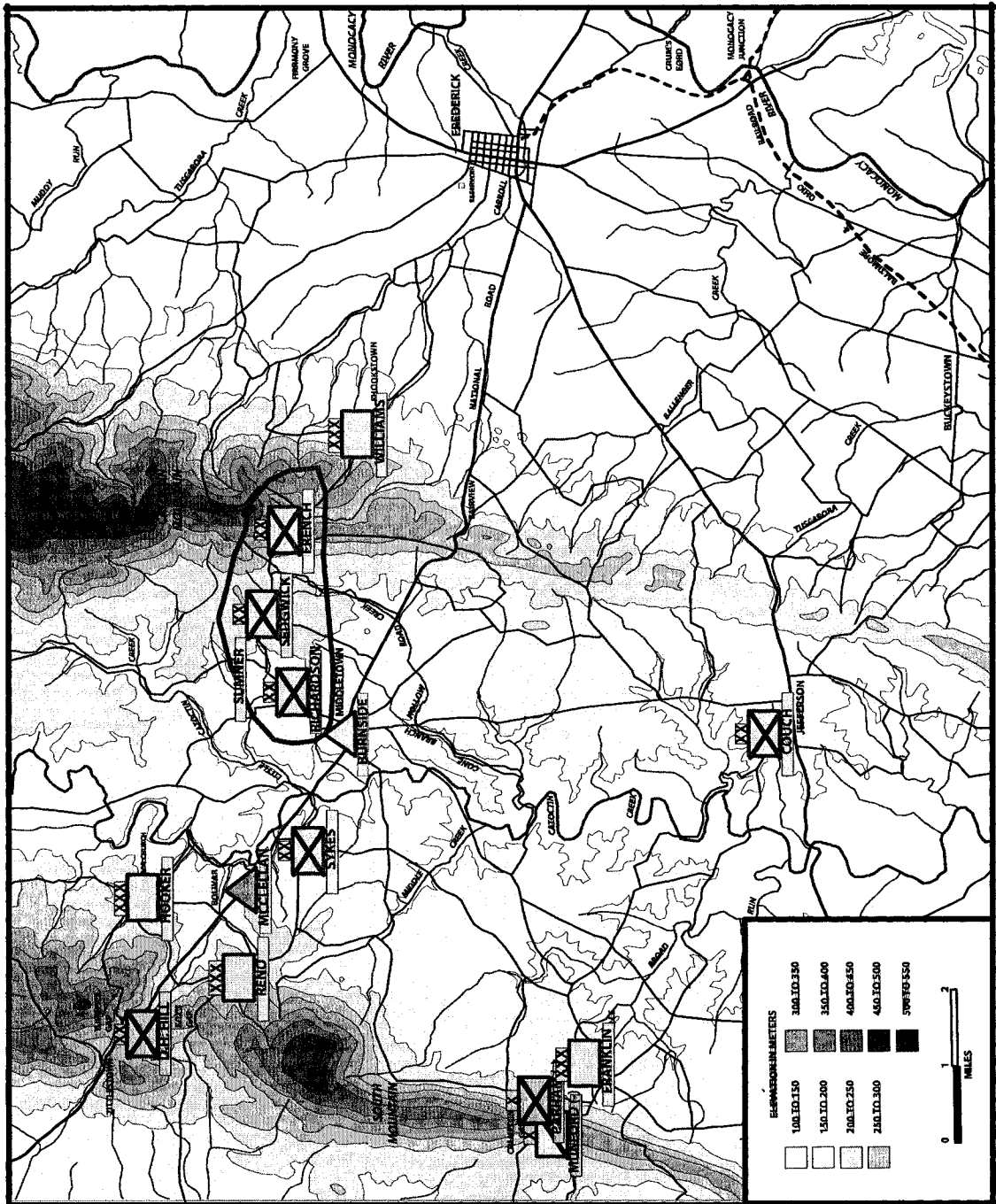


Figure 16. POSITIONS OF THE ARMY OF THE CUMBERLAND, 11 SEPTEMBER 1862.

On reaching Middletown, the corps column, division by division, turned right on the National Road to step off the last three miles to the base of South Mountain at Bolivar. Here the regiments moved into the fields beside the road and, going into line of battle,

reassembled themselves into their brigades and divisions. Richardson's division, by virtue of being the first in the line of march, was the first division ready for commitment to the battle, though this probably was not before late afternoon. The division had not been very long at Bolivar before it was called on to go to the right in support of Hooker's corps (figure 17). The division did not get into its final position near Mount Tabor Church about a mile north of Bolivar until 9:00 p.m. At this point McClellan placed it under the control of Hooker telling Sumner that this was "a temporary arrangement made absolutely necessary by circumstances." Sumner was to insure that Richardson understood that he was to obey Hooker's orders and that he must "look out well for the safety of our right flank during the night and early in the morning." Sumner was then was to return to Bolivar and direct the remaining two divisions of the Second Corps and Williams's corps in supporting the center and left of the army.¹²

Sedgwick's division did not reach Middletown until late afternoon, probably about the time that Richardson's division was getting into position at Bolivar. As Sedgwick approached Bolivar, he deployed his regiments and brigades into line of battle and placed them so that they were in support of Richardson. Since it was close to sunset by the

¹² McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 582; OR 51, pt. 1, 831.

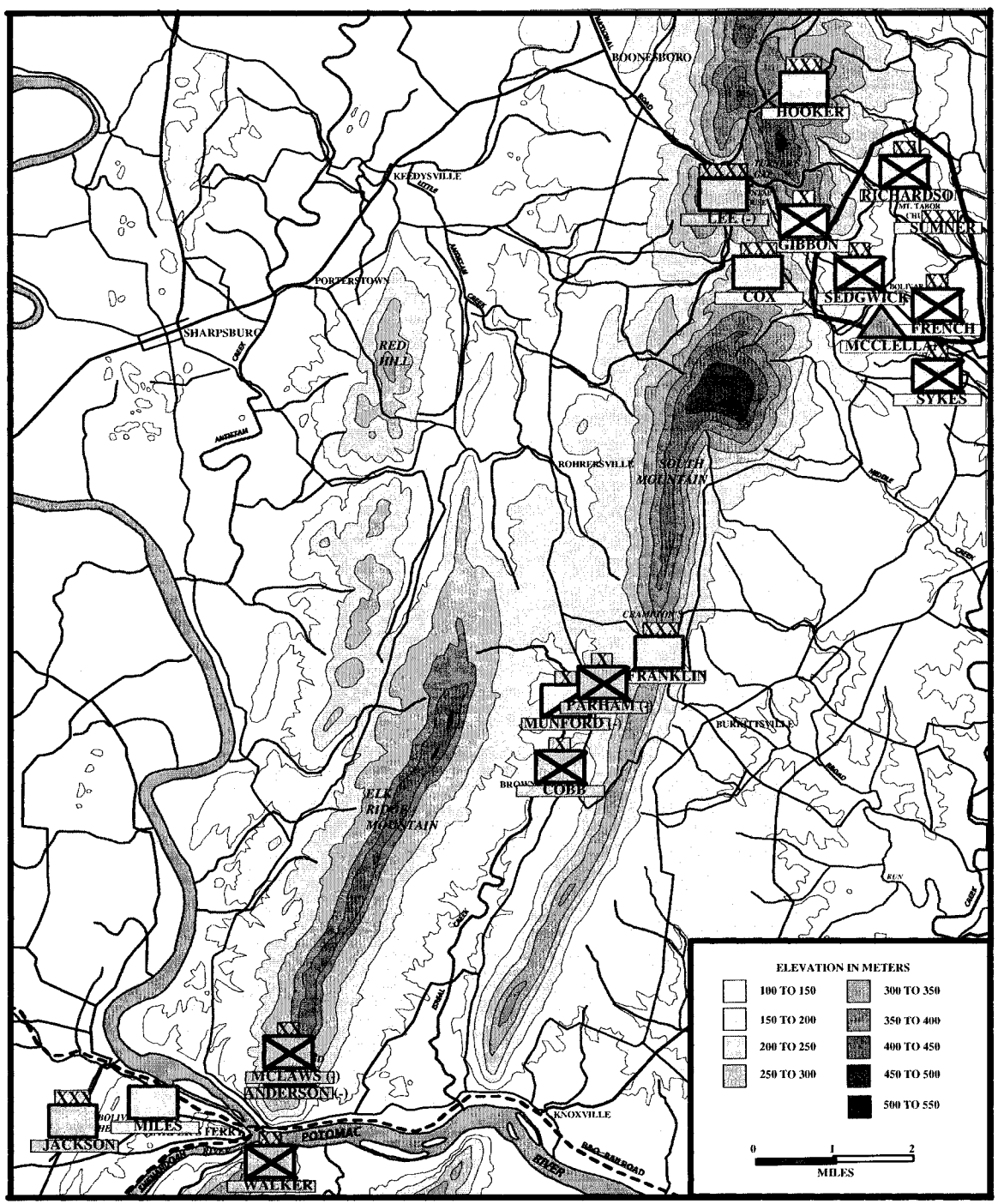


Figure 17. Positions of the Army of the Potomac, Evening, 14 September 1862.

time that the last of the regiments were in position, the soldiers of the division naturally thought that this meant an end to the day's marching and that they would be bivouacking for the night. The men of the 15th Massachusetts began preparing their supper. The men of the 34th New York found themselves on a beautiful farm, and no sooner had they stacked arms than fully nine-tenths of them made a dash to harvest the abundance of a nearby cornfield. But the men had "barely reached the field, and begun to pluck the ripened ears, when the bugle sounded fall in, and we had to make a lively return dash."¹³

At this point, Sedgwick had his division deployed along the National Road, directly behind the Federal center. Orders now came for him to move the division forward along the pike part way up the mountainside itself, to take position in direct support of the troops in the front line. At about 10:30 p.m., Sedgwick received another order to send one brigade even farther forward to relieve John Gibbon's brigade of Hooker's corps. In the late afternoon, that brigade had been ordered to move against the Confederate center along the National Road and had made a gallant charge up into the center of Turner's Gap that earned it the sobriquet, "Iron Brigade." But now Gibbon was nearly out of ammunition and in need of relief. Sedgwick sent up Gorman's brigade that took the place of the 2nd and 7th Wisconsin and 19th Indiana in the front line. The only regiment of Gibbon's brigade that was not relieved by Gorman was the 6th Wisconsin. According to Gibbon, this was because the 6th "had made its way so far forward up the mountainside

¹³ Andrew E. Ford, *The Story of the Fifteenth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, 1861-1864* (Clinton, MA: Press of W.J. Coulter, 1898), 190; Waitt, 129, Louis N. Chapin, *A Brief History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment, N.Y.S.V.* (New York, 1903), 60.

in the rocks and timber and was in such close contact with the enemy that its gallant commander Lt. Col. Bragg, thought it inadvisable to move and the regiment kept its position all night.” But Major Rufus Dawes recalled in his memoirs that Bragg was expecting to be relieved, and that when the relief did not show he sent the regimental adjutant to Gorman to inquire about the delay. The adjutant reported that Gorman refused to relieve the 6th because the regiment was in the woods. The adjutant quoted Gorman as saying “I can’t send men into the woods to-night. All men are cowards in the dark.” In his official report of the incident written six days later, Bragg remained angry and was sarcastic, noting that the 6th was not relieved until after daylight by “the Second [82nd] New York . . . who had been lying in the field, under cover of a stone wall, at a safe distance in the rear, refreshing themselves with a good night’s sleep, after a long and fatiguing march of some 10 miles.”¹⁴

At the rear of the Second Corps, French’s division was the last to get over Catocin Mountain, being subject to the interminable halts and delays created by the long column of regiments and batteries ahead of it. After the descent from the mountain, the 108th New York was halted long enough for the soldiers to get some fires going and make coffee. For the 8th Ohio, this long halt was taken in a potato patch and the men had enough time to dig and cook a few of the tubers for their lunch. All too soon, though, for

¹⁴ Ford, 190; John Gibbon, *Personal Recollections of the Civil War* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1928; reprint, Dayton, OH: Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1978), 77-8; Rufus R. Dawes, *Service with the Sixth Wisconsin Volunteers* (Marietta, OH: E.R. Alderman & Sons, 1890; reprint, Dayton, OH: Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1984), 84; OR 19, pt. 1, 254.

soldiers who would have liked to see the long afternoon halt turn into a night bivouac, the division was again up and on its way. When it again deployed into the fields along the National Road, it still was some two miles from the fighting at Turner's Gap. Based on reports of victory at South Mountain, the soldiers of the 130th Pennsylvania were sure that the day's marching was now over. "Rail fires were quickly supporting our cups filled with green corn." But the fighting flared anew and the division was called on to move closer to the action, this time in battle formation and cross country. The new regiments of Morris's brigade had a particularly difficult time with this movement. Private Hemmingen of the 130th recorded in his diary that the regiment crossed Catocin Creek just a little west of Middletown at about sundown. By the time the 108th New York got to the stream it was dark. As the regimental historian recalled it, "In darkness we were obliged to clamber feelingly down the slippery rocky bank of a stream, ford it, and get up the opposite bank; tallow candles were used to illuminate the clambering and crossing of Colonel Palmer's and Major Force's horses, the rocky feat being accomplished without much hors de combat." The 14th Connecticut was delayed by this stream until nearly midnight, perhaps held up by the 108th New York in front.¹⁵

When French's division did reach the front, it was pushed up close behind Sedgwick's on either side of the National Road. Much of the ground in this area was

¹⁵ George H. Washburn, *A Complete Military History and Record of the 108th Regiment N.Y. Vols., From 1862 to 1894* (Rochester, NY: Press of E.R. Andrews, 1894), 20; Galwey, *Valiant Hours*, 36; Sawyer, 73; Edward W. Spangler, *My Little War Experience, with Historical Sketches and Memorabilia* (York, PA: York Daily Publishing Company, 1904), 26; Hemmingen, 14 September; Page, 27.

marshy, which kept many of the soldiers from lying down. Private Edward W. Spangler of the 130th Pennsylvania recalled, “Fatigued, weary and almost famished, we were compelled to stand in this uninviting spot for hours. When finally about midnight we began to move, I was so exhausted that I could absolutely march but a few steps farther. As we emerged, I threw myself on a bank by the roadside, and covered with my blanket, fell into a profound sleep.”¹⁶

Not all of the soldiers of the Second Corps were so fortunate in finding a place to sleep. The problem was not so much the marshy ground, but ground covered with the dead, dying, and wounded of both sides. This was less of a problem for the soldiers of the veteran regiments who had seen the aftermath of battle before than it was for the volunteers of the new regiments. The historian of the 1st Minnesota—Sedgwick’s division—prosaically noted in the official regimental history that, “the Minnesotians [sic] lay down to rest among the dead bodies of those that had fallen in the conflict a few hours before.” With the same sense of matter-of-factness, Lieutenant Janvrin W. Graves of the 5th New Hampshire—Richardson’s division—noted that on arriving at South Mountain his men “got together a good many of the rebel dead and put blankets over them.” The 8th Ohio—French’s division—was also a veteran regiment, but because of their position found no opportunity for sleep that night as the regimental history later recorded. “The men were crowded together on the ground where the battle had raged, the ground was filthy and damp, the ambulances were rattling by all night, and the stretcher-carriers busily hunting for the dead and wounded.” Adjutant Hitchcock of the 132nd

¹⁶ Spangler, 26.

Pennsylvania in French's division, who at that point had been a soldier for less than a month, later recalled, "Here I saw the first dead soldier. Two of our artillerymen had been killed while serving their gun. Both were terribly mangled. They had been laid aside, while others stepped into their places. There they still lay, horrible evidence of the 'hell of war.' Subsequently I saw thousands of killed on both sides, which made scarcely more impression on me than so many logs, but this first vision of the awful work of war still remains. Even at this writing, forty years later, memory reproduces that horrible scene as clearly as on that beautiful Sabbath evening."¹⁷

All in all, this Sunday had been a good day for the Second Army Corps. The delay at the beginning of the day had been inauspicious, but the corps went on to complete the most difficult march of the campaign to date, and the most difficult march that it had had since the one from Alexandria to Manassas at the end of August. The new regiments, although tried by ordeal, performed well even if at times showing their lack of experience. And the corps was now for the first time in contact with the enemy, and in position to take up the fight or continue the pursuit on the morrow.

McClellan also continued to believe that the day had gone well for the Army of the Potomac. Burnside's command was at the top of Turner's and Fox's gaps, backed up now by the presence of Sumner's two corps, and ready to renew the battle on the morning

¹⁷ *History of the First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1864* (Stillwater, MN: Easton & Masterman, Printers, 1916), 187; William Child, *A History of the Fifth Regiment, New Hampshire Volunteers in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (Bristol, NH: R.W. Musgrove, Printer, 1893; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1988), 110; Sawyer, 73-4.

of the fifteenth, if necessary. Franklin had cleared Crampton's Gap and was well into Pleasant Valley, threatening the rear of McLaws's command on Maryland Heights. At 9:40 p.m., McClellan wired Halleck, "It has been a glorious victory." Still there was doubt in his mind as to what the enemy might do next. "I cannot tell yet whether the enemy will retreat during the night or appear in increased force in the morning. I am hurrying up everything from the rear, to be prepared for any eventuality." Given how the day had gone, McClellan expected nothing more from an army that began its day's march on average seventeen miles from the enemy.¹⁸

II

On the morning of 15 September 1862, the soldiers of the Second Army Corps awoke to find that their foe had used the cover of darkness to abandon their position on South Mountain. They also discovered for the first time the full extent of the horrors remaining from the battle of the day before. Private George Washburn in the 108th New York found that he had spent the night sleeping next to a headless artilleryman. Private Hemmingen in the 130th Pennsylvania "awoke and found where I had lain a human foot and fingers, that had been sacrificed for or against the Union cause." Sergeant Benjamin Hirst of the nascent 14th Connecticut remembered, "I awoke about five o'clock on the battle-field of yesterday and went out to see what war was without romance. I cannot describe my feelings, but I hope to God never to see the like again." The historian of the

¹⁸ OR 19, pt. 2, 289.

29th Massachusetts remembered that “the enemy had fled during the night leaving their dead unburied and their wounded uncared for. The ground in many places was thickly strewn with the dead and wounded of both armies. . . . Thirty-four of the enemy’s dead were counted in one spot only a few yards square.” At first light, the 61st New York formed line of battle, threw out skirmishers, and advanced to the top of the ridge without meeting any opposition. Lieutenant Charles A. Fuller recalled, “We passed several field hospital stations, where operations had been performed, and where had been left numerous legs and arms that had been amputated. These sights are not refreshing to advancing troops—they make them think too much of what is likely to happen to any one of them.” With what little time there would be before marching, several of the regiments sent out burial details, but “it was a difficult task to gather their [Confederate] dead, as

many of the killed had fallen into deep crevices between the huge boulders upon the mountain side.”¹⁹

Just as it was for the soldiers of the Second Corps, the morning of the fifteenth would be one of discovery for George B. McClellan. It would also be a morning during which he would need to make important strategic decisions. At 1:00 a.m., he had sent a message to Franklin indicating that he (McClellan) was still unsure of the situation that he would be facing at sunrise (figure 18). In the message, McClellan implied that he believed that the enemy’s most likely course of action would be to abandon South Mountain and attempt to make a stand in the vicinity of Boonsboro. Accordingly, he directed Franklin to look out for his rear by “placing a sufficient force at Rohrsersville to hold that position in case it should be attacked by the enemy from Boonsborough.” McClellan then directed Franklin to attack and destroy whatever enemy forces opposed him in Pleasant Valley, and to attempt to open communication with Miles in Harper’s Ferry. If he was successful in communicating with Miles, that officer was to be directed to bring his whole command out of Harper’s Ferry to join with Franklin in Pleasant Valley, destroying whatever public property that could not be carried along. Franklin was then to move his entire command to Boonsboro and join the main army in attacking the enemy there on the

¹⁹ Washburn, 20; Hemmingen, 15 September; Page, 27-8; William A. Osborne, *The History of the Twenty-Ninth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Late War of the Rebellion* (Boston: Albert J. Wright, Printer, 1877), 182-3; Fuller, 56.

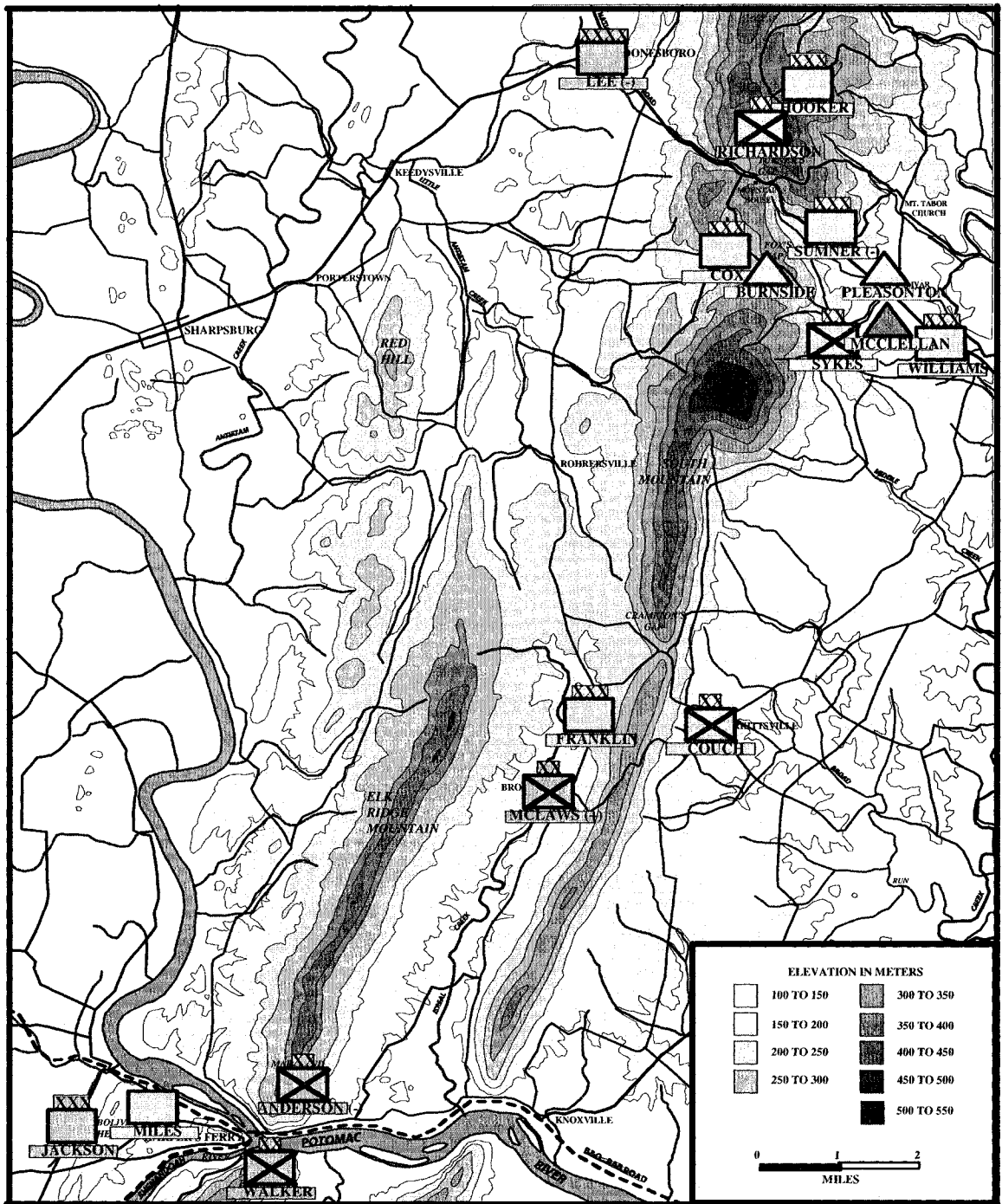


Figure 18. Positions of the Army of the Potomac, Morning, 15 September 1862.

following day. However, if he found that the enemy was attempting to retire from Boonsboro, Franklin was to march toward Sharpsburg and attempt to cut off his retreat.²⁰

During the night, McClellan had also sent orders to the corps commanders in contact with the enemy at Turner's and Fox's Gaps. As early as possible, they were to push forward their pickets to determine the disposition of the enemy. As a result of this advance, McClellan by 8:00 a.m. was receiving positive reports concerning the situation and was able to wire Halleck, "The enemy is making for Shepherdstown in a perfect panic." He assured Halleck that he was "hurling everything forward to endeavor to press their retreat to the utmost." In a separate message of the same hour, McClellan informed Halleck of Franklin's success at Crampton's Gap the day before, reiterating that he would be in rapid pursuit of the enemy, but cautioned Halleck that with regard to the enemy, "I do not know where he will be found."²¹

Based on this information, McClellan began to issue orders to the corps commanders for their movements on the fifteenth. At 8:00 a.m., Colonel Ruggles sent orders to Burnside that he was to advance immediately along the Old Sharpsburg road to its junction with the Rohrersville-Boonsboro road, about two and a half miles south of Boonsboro. Once there, Burnside was to communicate with the main body of the army that would be advancing to Boonsboro through Turner's Gap on the National Road, and with the detachment that Franklin was sending to Rohrersville. In addition, he was to be

²⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 47.

²¹ McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 584; OR 19, pt. 1, 53; pt. 2, 294.

“prepared to lend such assistance as may be necessary in either direction, or if required to advance upon Centerville [Keedysville] and Sharpsburg to cut off the retreat of the enemy.” The message informed Burnside that Hooker and his corps, moving on the right of the National Road, would necessarily be “separated from you for the present by force of circumstances” and consequently “during such separation, [Hooker would] report direct [sic] to these headquarters.” To this end, a special order was cut on the fifteenth rescinding temporarily the command arrangement in effect since the beginning of the campaign whereby Burnside was considered the commander of the right wing consisting of the First and the Ninth Corps. The message closed by telling Burnside that Hooker’s corps was expected to remain for a few hours in the vicinity of the Mountain House, a tavern on the National Road at the very top of Turner’s Gap, and that Richardson’s division would be leading the advance of the army to Boonsboro. As much as possible Burnside was to keep the head of his column parallel to that of Richardson’s.²²

²² OR 51, pt. 1, 836-7; 19, pt. 2, 290, 297. One of the continuing controversies of the Maryland Campaign is the command role of General Burnside from this point on. Ruggles’s message refers to the Ninth Corps as Burnside’s corps. But Burnside did not consider himself commander of that corps, and did not act as such for the remainder of the campaign, even though McClellan and the headquarters staff thought of him as such. In January 1862, Burnside had been assigned command of the Department of North Carolina (see OR 9, 353), and conducted an extensive expedition along the North Carolina coast during the spring and summer. In late June, during the crisis of the Seven Days, Burnside was asked by the War Department to send to Virginia all possible reinforcements. A letter from Lincoln suggested that Burnside himself should come to Virginia (see OR 9, 404-9). By the time that Burnside reached Fort Monroe, however, the crisis had passed and neither he nor his troops ever joined the Army of the Potomac. On 22 July, the War Department published General Order Number 84 which designated the troops “under Major-General Burnside, belonging to the Department of North Carolina, the Ninth Army Corps” (see OR 11, pt. 3, 333). Burnside and the Ninth Corps were sent to secure Aquia Creek in early August as the Army of the Potomac was being withdrawn

Forty-five minutes after forwarding the dispatch to Burnside, Ruggles addressed instructions to General Sumner. Sumner with Sedgwick's and French's divisions of his own corps and all of Williams's corps was to advance immediately using the National Road through Turner's Gap to Boonsboro. Pleasonton with some of his cavalry, Sumner was told, would be in front. If Sumner found that Boonsboro had been abandoned by the enemy, he was to "occupy the town or take up some strong position in its vicinity." Should he find the enemy at Boonsboro in any strength, Sumner was to "dispose [his] men for attack and report for further orders to the commanding general." The order went on to explain that if it proved necessary to attack the enemy in position at Boonsboro, McClellan wanted to be able "to insure the co-operation of the various corps of this

from the Peninsula. From Aquia Creek, Burnside dispatched Major General Jesse Reno with two divisions of the Ninth Corps to the support of Pope. In this configuration the Ninth Corps participated in the Second Manassas Campaign as an independent corps attached to Pope's Army of Virginia. Burnside himself remained in command at Aquia Creek, communicating directly with Halleck and the War Department. As the Maryland Campaign got under way, McClellan requested that Reno be retained to lead the Ninth Corps (see OR 19, pt. 2, 189-90), and Burnside eventually came up from Aquia Creek to enter the campaign as the commander of the right wing of the army. After the death of Reno at South Mountain on 14 September, Brigadier Jacob D. Cox acted as the commander of the Ninth Corps while Burnside continued to act as Commander of the right wing. At the close of the campaign, Burnside would submit a report as Commander of the right wing, while Cox submitted one as Commander, Ninth Corps. Historians of the Maryland Campaign usually refer to the Ninth Corps as Burnside's corps. But considering that Burnside did not consider himself the commander of the Ninth Corps, nor did he act as such, while Cox did, in this study the Ninth Corps will be referred to as Cox's corps after 14 September. See Congress, Senate, Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 3 pts., 37th Cong., 3rd sess., 1863, Rep. Com. 108, pt. 1, 640; Jacob D. Cox, "The Battle of Antietam," *North to Antietam*, vol. 2, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (New York: Century, 1887-1888; reprint, New York: Castle Books, 1956), 631-2.

command” before the attack was begun. The dispatch also informed Sumner that Burnside would be moving on his left, and that Richardson’s division would be moving in front of Hooker’s corps on his right.²³

This last bit of information about the movement of Richardson and Hooker indicates a misconception on the part of Ruggles, and perhaps McClellan and the rest of his staff, as to the roads across South Mountain in the vicinity of Turner’s and Fox’s Gaps. Ruggles made it clear in his instructions to both Burnside and Sumner that Burnside was to cross South Mountain via the Old Sharpsburg road through Fox’s Gap, while Sumner would cross using the National Road through Turner’s Gap. In both messages, Hooker with Richardson in the lead was to cross South Mountain and approach Boonsboro on the right [north] of the National Road. The problem was that there was no road to the right of the National Road that Richardson and Hooker could have used to cross the mountain without taking them miles out of the way to the north. On the previous afternoon, Hooker had advanced up the mountain along a road to the right of the National Road in order to flank the enemy position in Turner’s Gap, but this road did not continue across the mountain. Even before reaching the top of Turner’s Gap, the site of the Mountain House, it rejoined with the National Road to make the ascent to the crest and the descent into Boonsboro. A second road even farther to the right did crest the mountain, but it also

²³ OR 51, pt. 1, 834-5. There was an 8:30 a.m. message addressed to Sumner that told him to move his own and Williams’s corps to the crest of the mountain and either attack the enemy there or position himself to defend the crest against an enemy attack. This message, however, was rescinded and never sent. It appears to have been based on a false report that enemy forces were either holding or advancing on the crest of the mountain.

rejoined the National Road as it descended into Boonsboro. Thus there were only two and not three roads across South Mountain in the vicinity of Turner's and Fox's Gaps as Ruggles believed. As the corps got moving on the morning of the fifteenth, this would mean that Sumner's and Hooker's corps would come together as they both tried to move through Turner's Gap. How Sumner and Hooker would sort through this congestion of units would determine the marching order of these two corps for the remainder of the day. In addition, it would slow the pursuit of the enemy as three corps, Hooker's, Sumner's, and Williams's, would have only a single road to use instead of two.

In a postscript to the 8:45 a.m. message, Ruggles provided Sumner with the latest intelligence received at army headquarters. Hooker had just reported the enemy to be retiring in a perfect panic and heading for the crossing of the Potomac at Shepherdstown. If, on reaching Boonsboro, Sumner found this report to be true, he was to "push on after the enemy as rapidly and far as possible, keeping your corps well in hand and doing them all the injury possible."²⁴

Additional messages also were sent to Franklin and to Burnside informing them of these developments. Franklin was told that if this new information was confirmed, he was to march for Sharpsburg with his whole command "and endeavor to fall upon the enemy and to cut off his retreat." Burnside, for his part, was to "follow the enemy up by

²⁴ OR 51, pt. 1, 834-5.

Porterstown and Sharpsburg,” all the while keeping open his “communication with Sumner, on the right, and Franklin, on the left.”²⁵

As always, Sumner had the Second Corps ready to march early on the fifteenth, well before his orders for the day were communicated to him. When the orders did arrive, Sumner immediately got Sedgwick’s division moving toward the top of Turner’s Gap via the National Road, to be closely followed by French’s division. On reaching the Mountain House, however, the whole column was stopped abruptly as it encountered troops from Hooker’s command pouring out onto the National Road.

At this point, a little after 9:30 a.m., Sumner received a message from Marcy directing him to send a staff officer “to give instructions to Genl. Richardson to push forward as rapidly as possible after Genl. Pleasonton,” who was to lead the pursuit of the enemy in the direction of Boonsboro. Sumner did not need to take any action in following this order because Hooker at first light had called Richardson’s division up from its position in the vicinity of Mount Tabor Church and directed it “to pursue the enemy in their hurried retreat.” This, Hooker reported, “was promptly executed by that distinguished officer.” Therefore, Richardson’s division, if not already well beyond the Mountain House on the National Road, was certainly at the Mountain House at the head of Hooker’s column. If this order did nothing else, it restored the command relationship

²⁵ OR 51, pt. 1, 835-6.

between Sumner and Richardson that had been temporarily suspended the evening before.²⁶

At the same time that Marcy was sending directions to Sumner concerning the movement of Richardson, he also was sending additional directions to Hooker concerning his movements. As with Sumner, Hooker was told that Richardson's division should be allowed to take the lead. Marcy then explained that McClellan wanted Hooker to have time to bring up his supply trains and to issue rations before moving from his present position. Consequently, if Sumner's command was closed up and in a position to take the lead, Hooker should allow him to do so. Apparently, Marcy was not under the same misapprehension as Ruggles concerning the number of roads leading over the mountain to Boonsboro.²⁷

The historian of the 19th Massachusetts recalled that while his regiment was halted near the summit of the mountain "several of the generals held a consultation in what had been an old hotel." Other than this recollection, no authentic record has been discovered regarding any meeting between Sumner and Hooker at the Mountain House. But, given the arrangement of the march that followed the arrival of the Second Corps at that point, it is very likely that such a meeting did take place in which the two generals managed to sort out the collision of their commands on the mountain top. As already mentioned,

²⁶ War Department, Randolph B. Marcy to Edwin V. Sumner, 15 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives; OR 19. pt. 1, 215.

²⁷ OR 51, pt. 1, 834.

Hooker brought Richardson's division up the mountain at first light to take the lead in the First Corps' pursuit of the enemy. By the time that Richardson got up the mountain, some units of the First Corps already had pushed forward from the positions that they held during the night. In his report on the Battle of South Mountain, Hooker mentioned that at dawn on the morning of the fifteenth, the brigade of Brigadier General George L. Hartsuff moved forward as far as the Mountain House skirmishing all the way with a mounted enemy picket, which retired as Hartsuff advanced. In his subsequent report on Antietam, Hooker went on to say that he ordered Richardson "to take the place of Hartsuff, and to proceed in vigorous pursuit." If Richardson was to get his division in the lead of Hooker's corps and take over the pursuit as ordered, his division would have had to pass the Mountain House taking the National Road down the western side of the mountain toward Boonsboro. This would have occurred well before Sumner with Sedgwick's division got to the Mountain House via the National Road in obedience to his 8:45 a.m. orders. Richardson's division was followed down the mountainside by Pleasonton with three regiments of cavalry. Hooker allowed his men some time "to make a little coffee and eat their breakfasts, which they had not been able to do since the beginning of their march from the Monocacy, the morning previous." Once they completed this necessity "the First Corps resumed its march in pursuit of the enemy."²⁸

²⁸ Waitt, 130; OR 19, pt. 1, 210, 215, 216; Henry Brainard McClellan, *I Rode with Jeb Stuart, The Life and Campaigns of Major General J.E.B. Stuart*, ed. Burke Davis (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1958), 124. In his narrative of the engagement at Boonsboro on the morning of the fifteenth, McClellan says that it was soon after daylight that the enemy's infantry column "debouched [sic] from the gap." This could only have been the leading element of Richardson's division.

Accordingly, the First Corps was already on the road to Boonsboro when Sumner with Sedgwick's division reached the summit, and when the order for Hooker to let Sumner go ahead arrived. It would have been foolish for either general to insist on following the order, for that would certainly have slowed the pursuit considerably and needlessly. The National Road down the west side of South Mountain was extremely narrow and followed a winding course cut into a very steep slope. It is still that way today. Since the First Corps already was in front, it would have to remain that way, and the order of march in pursuit of the enemy would be Richardson's division, Hooker's corps, then Sedgwick's and French's divisions followed by Williams's corps. To accommodate the movement of Hooker's corps, Sumner even went so far as to have the Second Corps open the road on the east side of the mountain so that Gibbon's brigade, which had been detached from the First Corps during the battle the day before, could rejoin it at the Mountain House.²⁹

As the soldiers of the Second Army Corps crossed the battlefield of South Mountain, they continued to see and evaluate evidence of the fight that had taken place there the day before. In his initial report to McClellan that morning, Hooker, based on information that he got from some citizens of Boonsboro, told the commanding general that the enemy was retreating in a "perfect panic." Now the soldiers of the Second Corps could see for

²⁹ Gibbon, 79. Gibbon says that Sumner was even going to have the Second Corps cheer his brigade as it passed up the mountain in honor of the gallant work done by the unit the evening before. According to Gibbon this was an especially gratifying compliment because "it was well known in the army that he [Sumner] was very much opposed to such demonstrations as not being proper for disciplined troops."

themselves and draw the same conclusion. The historian of the 29th Massachusetts recalled, "The summit and westerly side of the mountain, down which the Confederates fled, gave proof of the extreme panic which seized them at the close of the battle; guns, blankets, and equipments were scattered about the ground in great profusion." Lieutenant Hitchcock of the 132nd Pennsylvania had the same recollection. "There was abundant evidence of the rebel skedaddle down the mountain ahead of our troops in the way of blankets, knapsacks, and other impedimenta, evidently dropped or thrown away in the flight."³⁰

Richardson advanced down the western side of the mountain with Meagher's Irish Brigade in the lead, followed by Brooke's brigade and then Caldwell's. On reaching the bottom of the hill, however, Richardson halted the column and called up the 5th New Hampshire which at that time was at the very end of the long column of regiments. Moving at the double quick, the 5th advanced to the front to shouts of "there goes Richardson's foot cavalry" coming from the other regiments of the division. Once at the front of the column, Richardson directed Colonel Cross to deploy his regiment as skirmishers on either side of the road. Cross put four companies on each side of the pike

³⁰ McClellan, *Civil War Papers*, 462; OR 19, pt. 2, 294, 295; 51, pt. 1, 834-6; Osborne, 183; Frederick L. Hitchcock, *War from the Inside: The Story of the 132nd Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry in the War for the Suppression of the Rebellion, 1862-1863* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1904; reprint, Alexandria, VA, Time-Life Books, 1985), 48.

and kept the remaining two in the center as a reserve. In this formation and backed by the 8th Illinois Cavalry, the regiment moved toward Boonsboro.³¹

Waiting on the outskirts of Boonsboro was the 3rd Virginia Cavalry and a section of artillery, supported by two more regiments of cavalry, the 4th and 9th Virginia, in the village itself. The rebel artillery temporarily slowed Richardson's advance, but the extended formation of the 5th soon overlapped the Confederate flanks and the rebels were forced to abandon their position. Just as they were beginning to withdraw, the 8th Illinois charged through the center of the 5th New Hampshire and into the main street of the village, catching much of the 4th and 9th Virginia off guard. These rebel troopers were exhausted after many days in the saddle and had been allowed to dismount. Many were just sitting on the curb stones holding the reins of their horses. A wild scene ensued as the 8th Illinois made several charges down the main street and the rebel troopers scrambled to mount and hurriedly find any exit from the village they could. The left flank companies of the 5th New Hampshire nearly succeeded in cutting off the main avenue of this retreat by gaining a cornfield on the west side of the village from whence they could fire into the flank of the rebel horsemen as they fled west down the Boonsboro-Sharpsburg pike—hereinafter the Boonsboro pike—in the direction of Sharpsburg. In addition, the 5th managed to capture many prisoners. At one point, Lieutenant Graves of Company H was approached by a young black servant of some Confederate officers. Inquiring of the youngster where his masters were, he pointed to

³¹ OR 19, pt. 1, 287.

some buildings and told Graves that there were four or five rebels there who wanted to surrender. Graves sent a detail under a sergeant and the penitent Confederates were brought in.³²

As Pleasonton pursued that portion of the rebel cavalry that fled north along the National Road toward Hagerstown, the 5th New Hampshire, followed by the rest of Richardson's division, kept after the larger body of rebels that had taken the pike west toward Sharpsburg. The enemy resisted this advance as well as the terrain permitted, but continued to give ground. Their first stand was at a small wooden bridge just outside of Boonsboro, which they set on fire and guarded with cavalry. On the approach of Richardson's division, the cavalry withdrew, and the Federals extinguished the fire before it could do any appreciable damage and pushed on. Four miles of forcing the enemy from position to position finally brought the division to a range of hills overlooking Antietam Creek. On the hills on the opposite side of the creek, Richardson could see the enemy forming a line of battle with infantry and artillery, and preparing to resist any further advances by the division (figure 19).³³

³² George William Beale, "Maryland Campaign; The Cavalry Fight at Boonesboro' Graphically Described; The Ninth Virginia and Eight Illinois Regiments Cross Sabers," *Southern Historical Society Papers* 25 (1897): 276-8; H.B. McClellan, *I Rode with Stuart*, 124-6; Ezra Ayers Carman, "The Maryland Campaign of 1862," chapter 9, pp. 23-6, Carman Papers, Library of Congress, Washington; Joseph L. Harsh, *Taken at the Flood: Robert E. Lee & Confederate Strategy in the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1999), 309-10; OR 19, pt. 1, 210, 287; Child, 101, 110, 118.

³³ OR 19, pt. 1, 210; pt. 2, 308; John C. Tidball, "Rpt. Of Capt. John C. Tidball, Bty. A, 2nd US Arty., of Operations, Sept. 14-20, 1862," in *Artillery Hell: The Employment of Artillery at Antietam*, Curt Johnson and Richard C. Anderson (College Station, TX:

The orders given to Richardson by Hooker earlier in the day specified that even though the pursuit was to be vigorous, Richardson was to await Hooker's arrival before undertaking any engagement, if the enemy were overtaken or attempted to make a determined stand. No doubt this instruction was restated to Richardson several times that day as he pushed the enemy rear guard toward Antietam Creek. Ruggles had included the same instruction to Sumner in his orders of 8:45 a.m. While Richardson did not attempt to precipitate an engagement on reaching the stream, he did begin deploying

Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 111; Child, 110, 118; James B. Turner, "Gallowglass' Reports on Antietam," in *My Sons Were Faithful and They Fought: The Irish Brigade at Antietam: An Anthology*, ed. Joseph G. Bilby and Stephan D. O'Neill (Hightstown, NJ: Longstreet House, 1997), 37. Pleasonton mentions that after the fight at Boonsboro he moved in the direction of Sharpsburg and caught up with Richardson. Comstock in his report from the scene says that Pleasonton and Tidball followed Fitzhugh Lee toward Hagerstown, and that Richardson was moving forward without cavalry support. Tidball adds that after pursuing the enemy out of Boonsboro with Pleasonton and the cavalry, they made a circuitous march of several miles before they were on the road leading from Boonsboro to Sharpsburg. As quoted by Child, Colonel Edward E. Cross, commander of the 5th New Hampshire, says that the cavalry followed the enemy out of Boonsboro on the Williamsport road, which intersects with the National Road about a mile north of Boonsboro. Taken together it is clear that these reports indicate that Pleasonton and his cavalry initially followed the Confederates north out of Boonsboro toward Hagerstown.

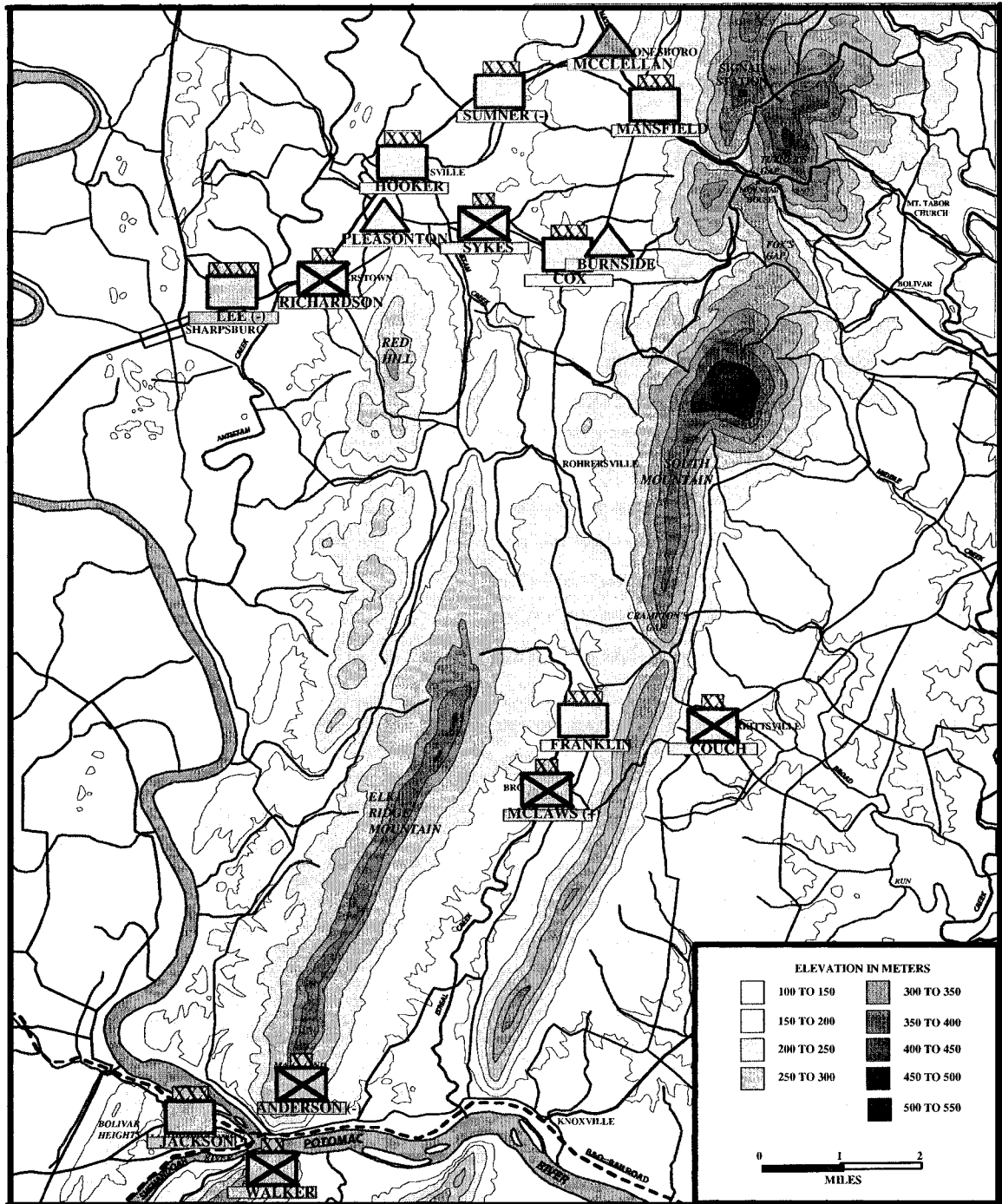


Figure 19. Positions of the Army of the Potomac, Afternoon, 15 September 1862.

the division behind the hills above the creek, generally on the right side of the pike. The 5th New Hampshire, having led the division in the pursuit, was deployed on both sides the pike close up to the bridge over Antietam Creek. Behind the 5th on the reverse slope of the hills, Meagher's brigade was deployed with two regiments on the left of the pike and two on the right. On the right of Meagher, Brooke deployed his brigade with Caldwell's brigade on his right. As the division went into position, its formations were taken under fire by Confederate long-range guns, and Richardson began looking for batteries to respond. The problem was that the division's batteries were not marching with the division that day. They had remained in the vicinity of Bolivar the night before when the division was sent off toward Mount Tabor Church. As a consequence, Richardson's batteries were marching with the Second Corps main body behind Hooker's corps, so it would be a while before they could come up. Richardson, therefore, asked Pleasonton, who by now had caught up with the advance, for some artillery and he responded by sending Captain John C. Tidball's battery, Battery A, 2nd US Artillery consisting of 3-inch ordnance rifles. Tidball immediately went into position on the crest of the hill above the creek on the right side of the pike and opened fire on the enemy batteries.³⁴

In addition to drawing the fire of the enemy's long-range guns, the 5th New Hampshire also precipitated a lively engagement with enemy skirmishers who had taken up position among a group of buildings on the east side of the bridge. Moving towards

³⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 210-1, 216, 293, 301; 51, pt. 1, 834-5; Tidball, "Report," in Johnson and Anderson, *Artillery Hell*, 111-2.

the bridge with the skirmish line of Company I, Lieutenant Ira T. Bronson was singled out by a Confederate sniper concealed behind a bush. The sniper's first shot struck very near Bronson, and he directed the attention of his skirmishers toward the bush. Before anything could be done, however, the sniper got off two more shots, both of which tore holes in Bronson's clothing without touching him. The skirmishers then concentrated their fire on the bush and the sniper bolted for the bridge amidst a hail of lead. Reaching the bridge, the defiant rebel jumped up on one of the side walls, and waved his hat before making good an escape to the accompaniment of the cheers of the men of the 5th.

Lieutenant Graves in H Company recalled, "The rebels cracked away at us pretty sharply, and we covered ourselves behind a rail fence." After a few minutes, Graves asked the regimental commander to allow him take his company and drive the rebels out. Colonel Cross granted the request and Graves with his men worked their way down to the stream. Approaching a small building with a yard and a clump of trees, Graves ordered several of his men to fire into it. "They did so, and two or three fellows ran out pretty lively."

Graves and his men then moved down a little further to where they could see behind a barn and into a cornfield. "There we could see several men. They would come out to the end of the barn, fire, and then go back." Borrowing a rifle, Graves took careful aim and shot one of these men at a range he estimated to be three hundred yards. Graves next "had the first platoon fire into the corn back of the barn, and then the second platoon, when eight or ten men went out of that corn flying, and the skirmishers picked them off."

Having accomplished his mission, Graves led the company back to its position in the regiment's main skirmish line.³⁵

At about this time, Captain Rufus D. Pettit's battery of six ten-pounder Parrotts arrived, and was put into position on the crest of the hill above the division. Pettit reported that he immediately "engaged the enemy's batteries, there in number, which were in position on the hills on the opposite side of the Antietam, supported by a considerable body of infantry, this engagement lasting until near night, I having expended about 400 rounds without sustaining any loss to my command." In his matter of fact statement about the action, Pettit may have been a little modest. The historian of the 29th Massachusetts, which was positioned just behind the battery, credited it with "making some most excellent shots, in one instance driving the Confederate gunners from their pieces."³⁶

The fact that the enemy was taking position on the hills on the west side of Antietam Creek did not come as a surprise to Sumner or the other general officers directing the pursuit. As early as 10:00 a.m., Hooker, and quite possibly Sumner and Richardson, received word from army headquarters that the enemy appeared to be turning off the road west of the Antietam and going into battle formation. This information came from a newly established signal station on Monument Hill, a spur on the west side of South Mountain north of the National Road where a castle-like monument to George

³⁵ Child, 110-1, 132.

³⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 283; Osborne, 183.

Washington had been erected in 1827. At 11:00 a.m., Lieutenant Comstock reported to Marcy from just outside Boonsboro that local citizens were telling him that the enemy was taking “position just beyond Centreville [Keedysville], on a high ridge, above a small stream, where the valley is clear of wood.” At 1:00 p.m., as Richardson was deploying his division, Captain George Armstrong Custer, an aide-de-camp on McClellan’s staff riding with Pleasonton that day, sent back a dispatch to army headquarters confirming the stand of the enemy, describing the position, and asking for more troops, especially artillery, to be sent forward at once.³⁷ Then, at 2:45 p.m., when Hooker arrived at the front and could see the situation for himself, he sent back the following report to Sumner:

We have come up with the enemy about 5 miles from Shepardtoun [sic] drawn up in line of battle. They have a position formed there but with two or three more batteries it will be expedient to attack. Will it be inconsistent with your orders to move up within easy supporting distance[?] They are drawn up in an open field but only three brigades of infantry has yet arrived. If practicable it is expedient to attack tonight as they will certainly be off in the morning.³⁸

Despite the fact that Richardson’s division was at the head of the pursuit, Sumner remained with the main body of the Second Corps. At the time that he received Hooker’s 2:45 p.m. dispatch asking about making preparations to attack the enemy position, Sumner with the lead elements of Sedgwick’s division was at Keedysville. Mindful of

³⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 217; pt. 2, 308; Harsh, *Taken at the Flood*, 311; George A. Custer to [Army Headquarters], 15 September 1862, *Papers of George B. McClellan*, Series I, Volume 80, Item 16259, Library of Congress. Comstock’s dispatch is clearly from 15 September and not 16 September.

³⁸ War Department, Joseph Hooker to Edwin V. Sumner, 15 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

his instructions in the 8:45 a.m. order that the army commander did not wish any attack to be made until he could “insure the co-operation of the various other corps,” Sumner sent his own dispatch to army headquarters describing the situation as he understood it and asking if he should make preparations for an attack: “The enemy is drawn up in large force in front; their line it is said extending a mile. As we do not know the number of their lines, it is impossible to estimate their entire force. Shall I make the necessary dispositions to attack & shall I attack without further orders?”³⁹

Army headquarters and McClellan himself at that point were only two and a half miles away at Boonsboro. Based on Sumner’s message, McClellan decided to come forward to evaluate the situation. Reaching Keedysville, he met Sumner who showed him to a high hill above Antietam Creek “whence a view of the position could be obtained.” The whole party of general officers and their staffs were large enough that they drew the attention of some of the Confederate batteries across the Antietam, which opened fire on the group with their rifled guns. This caused McClellan to dismiss all except Fitz-John Porter who remained to discuss the situation. McClellan noted that the Confederates had taken up a strong position on the heights above the stream blocking the Boonsboro pike. His first inclination was to cross the stream well north of the pike in order to attack the enemy’s left. But at this point, probably about 5:30 p.m., he felt that the day was too far gone to begin to effect such a maneuver. Accordingly, he “at once

³⁹ OR 51. pt. 1, 834-5; Edwin V. Sumner to Randolph B. Marcy, 15 September 1862, *Papers of George B. McClellan*, Series I, Volume 79, Item 16222, Library of Congress.

gave orders for the positions of the bivouacs, massing the army so that it could be handled as required.”⁴⁰

For McClellan the day had again gone well enough, but some of the uncertainties that he faced counseled against making a hasty attack on the enemy’s position as much as did the lateness of the hour. Principally, much of the army was still strung out on the march. Richardson’s three brigades were deployed and facing the enemy, but Hooker’s entire corps was still stacked up along the pike, followed by Sedgwick’s and French’s divisions. Behind them, Williams’s corps, now under the command of the Mexican War hero Major General Joseph K.F. Mansfield who had just arrived from Washington, was bringing up the rear. Sykes’s division was just arriving at the front and being deployed behind the hills along the Antietam to the left of Richardson and the pike. But it was Cox’s corps that McClellan wanted in this position, not Sykes’s division, which McClellan had always thought of as his reserve. The problem here was that despite the orders sent to him that morning to pursue the enemy via the Old Sharpsburg road through Porterstown, Burnside by 12:30 p.m. had not yet gotten the Ninth Corps moving. McClellan at that point ordered Sykes ahead of Burnside, and asked Burnside for an explanation of his failure to start on time. So while Sykes might now be in position, Cox’s corps was still in marching order on the Old Sharpsburg road just as the other corps were on the Boonsboro pike.⁴¹

⁴⁰ McClellan, *McClellan’s Own Story*, 586-7.

⁴¹ OR 19, pt. 2, 295, 296; 51, pt. 1, 837.

Over in Pleasant Valley where Franklin's corps was located—now to the army's rear—the situation was also unsettled. In an 8:45 a.m. dispatch, McClellan had ordered Franklin to march his corps to Sharpsburg to cut off the enemy's retreat. At 11:00 a.m., however, Franklin responded that he was facing an enemy force in front drawn up in line of battle and outnumbering him two to one. Franklin pointed out to McClellan, "It will, of course, not answer to pursue the enemy under these circumstances." He went on to inquire about the prospect of reinforcements, because, as Franklin put it, "I have not the force to justify an attack on the force I see in front. I have had a very close view of it, and its position is very strong."⁴²

The key to the situation in Pleasant Valley was the status of Harper's Ferry. At 8:50 a.m., Franklin had reported that he feared Harper's Ferry had fallen because the firing in that direction had stopped. If that were true, then it was possible that McLaws and all the rest of the Confederate forces at Harper's Ferry, including Stonewall Jackson, might attack McClellan through Pleasant Valley by pushing Franklin aside. That might be the reason for the strong enemy force taking a stand in front of Franklin. The possibility could not be ignored. McClellan responded at 1:20 p.m., telling Franklin that reinforcements would be in position to support him if that became necessary. In particular, Sykes and Burnside would very soon be at the junction of the Rohrer'sville-Boonsboro and Old Sharpsburg roads and from there could continue toward Porterstown in pursuit of the enemy force withdrawing from Turner's Gap, or come to the aid of

⁴² OR 19, pt. 1, 47.

Franklin. McClellan urged Franklin to “attack whenever you see a fair chance of success.” At 3:45 p.m., a message was sent to Burnside which revealed the predicament as McClellan understood it. Burnside was told to march south to Rohrersville while communicating directly with Franklin. If Franklin needed assistance in defeating the enemy in front of him, Burnside should “join him at once.” If, however, Franklin could hold his own, Burnside was to march on Sharpsburg. But, if Burnside learned that Sharpsburg had been evacuated by the enemy, he should join Franklin.⁴³

At 3:00 p.m., however, Franklin had sent a dispatch to McClellan informing him that the enemy force to his front was withdrawing at a rapid pace, so fast that Franklin could not keep up with them. Franklin now thought that he could comply with McClellan’s 8:45 a.m. order. “I shall start for Sharpsburg at once.” Fifteen minutes later, Franklin sent another message telling McClellan that an aide of General Stuart’s had been captured carrying a message from Jackson at Harper’s Ferry to Lee at Keedysville announcing the surrender of the Harper’s Ferry garrison at 9:30 that morning. The message also said that Stuart’s command was between Keedysville and Harper’s Ferry. Before Franklin could move toward Sharpsburg, however, he received McClellan’s 1:20 p.m. dispatch and changed his mind about going. At 4:00 p.m. he told McClellan, “In consequence of the last orders received from you, I shall await further orders here.”⁴⁴

⁴³ OR 19, pt. 1, 51, pt. 1, 836, 837-8.

⁴⁴ OR 19, pt. 2, 296, 297.

By that time, reports were coming into army headquarters confirming the enemy's stand in front of Sharpsburg, and McClellan finally determined on one course of action. Another order was immediately sent to Burnside telling him not to consider moving toward Franklin. Rather, he should move his "command at once to Sharpsburg, via Porterstown, to assist in the attack upon the former place." At the same time, 4:30 p.m., Marcy sent a message to Franklin that validated Franklin's decision to remain in place, explaining that he should hold that "position without attacking unless you should see a very favorable opportunity. It is his [McClellan's] desire to concentrate everything this evening on the force at or near Sharpsburg, and he will be satisfied if you keep the enemy in your front without anything decisive until the Sharpsburg affair is settled."⁴⁵

McClellan was thinking in terms of crossing the Antietam to the north and enveloping the enemy's left flank (figure 20). Richardson's and Sykes's divisions were to remain in position facing the enemy. Hooker's corps was turned off the main road to the right, crossed Little Antietam Creek west of Keedysville and bivouacked in the fields northeast

⁴⁵ OR 51, pt. 1, 836, 838.

of the junction of the Little Antietam with the main stream. Sedgwick's and French's divisions continued along the pike from Keedysville and finally took position not far behind Richardson. Although this move seemingly reunited all of the divisions of the Second Corps, some of the regiments of Sedgwick's and French's divisions would not pass through Keedysville until the next morning. Mansfield's corps, which was bringing up the rear of the army, encamped in the vicinity of Nicodemus's Mill about half way between Boonsboro and Keedysville. Cox's corps continued forward on the Old Sharpsburg road reaching Porterstown and went into camp on the left side of the road behind Sykes. Army headquarters was brought forward to Keedysville and established "in a pretty grove adjoining a church."⁴⁶

At 9:00 p.m., Franklin was sent a final dispatch informing him that "the troops have not been able to come up sufficiently to-day to enable us to attack the enemy, but a reconnoissance will be made at daylight, and if he is found to be in position, he will be attacked." But other than telling Franklin to send a squadron of cavalry to picket the Frederick pike, he was given no additional instructions.⁴⁷

Sumner also was sent one additional instruction that evening written by Assistant Adjutant General Colburn: "Genl. McClellan desires that you send a staff officer to Headquarters at daylight in the morning to let him know everything that has happened

⁴⁶ David Hunter Strother, "Personal Recollections of the War," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine* 36 (February 1868): 280.

⁴⁷ Carman, chapter 9, p. 38; *History of the First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry*, 190; Washburn, 21; Williams, 124; OR 19, pt. 1, 423; pt. 2, 297.

during the night, and that you send reconnoitering parties out at daylight to ascertain if there is any enemy in your front, his strength, etc. Send him a report of what is seen as early as possible and have your command in readiness to attack the enemy early in the morning should he be found in our front at that time.”⁴⁸

At about sunset, the artillery duel that had been on going along Richardson’s front subsided, but Tidball’s and Pettit’s batteries remained in position. At the same time, Richardson pulled the 5th New Hampshire back from its advanced position near the bridge and placed it in reserve about a half a mile to the rear, except for Companies E and G, which remained to watch the bridge. During a day of pursuing and skirmishing with the enemy rear guard, the regiment suffered one officer and three enlisted men slightly wounded. They were the first casualties of the Second Corps in the Maryland Campaign. In reciprocity, the regiment claimed to have killed or wounded twelve of the enemy and to have taken sixty prisoners.⁴⁹

The remainder of the corps’ soldiers set about doing what they could to make a second night of sleeping on their arms as comfortable as possible. The expectation within the corps was that daylight would bring with it a general engagement. The most simple of pleasures that night would be remembered for a lifetime. The historian of the 34th New York recalled a most remarkable spring that the soldiers of the regiment found near

⁴⁸ War Department, Albert V. Colburn to Edwin V. Sumner, 15 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

⁴⁹ Child, 104, 111; OR 19, pt. 1, 287.

Keedysville. “It was near a small farmhouse and barn. It gushed out from under a shelving rock, formed a deep reservoir, and then flowed off the hillside in a beautiful river of sparkling water, enough for each, enough for all, enough for evermore.” In the 132nd Pennsylvania, Lieutenant Colonel Vincent M. Wilcox earned the eternal gratitude of his fellow officers when he brought into camp a fresh home made loaf of bread. The feat was worthy of being considered “two acts of extraordinary merit, namely, first in finding and capturing the bread, and, second, bringing it into camp intact, the latter act being considered supremely self-sacrificing.” Most soldiers, however, could do no better that night than to roll themselves up in their blankets and get what sleep they could.⁵⁰

III

On the fourteenth and fifteenth of September, McClellan continued to direct the strategic movements of the army with caution, but in this second stage of the campaign that caution was more costly to McClellan in terms of opportunity than it had been during the move from Rockville to Frederick. The open door of the thirteenth remained open to McClellan on the morning of the fourteenth, but he failed to move the army forward vigorously enough to take advantage of it. Sumner’s corps, which was west of Frederick that morning, was in the best position to move rapidly into Catoctin Valley using the National Road, and to cooperate with Reno’s corps in forcing Turner’s and Fox’s gaps

⁵⁰ Josiah Marshall Favill, *The Diary of a Younger Officer Serving with the Armies of the United States During the War of the Rebellion* (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1909), 185; Chapin, 60; Hitchcock, 50.

early in the day before the enemy could man them sufficiently to delay the Federal movement. But McClellan had both Sumner's and Williams's corps wait for the passage of Hooker's corps that had to march some seven miles to get into the leading position. As a result, Major General Daniel Harvey Hill, whose Confederate division was at Boonesboro, was able to get enough of his brigades to the top of the gaps in time to be able to hold them throughout the day.

Undoubtedly, McClellan's highly developed sense of organization had much to do with the delay of Sumner's corps that morning. Having organized the army into wings, McClellan wanted Hooker reunited with Reno under Burnside. But this, of course, could also have been accomplished by allowing Sumner's command—his and Williams's corps—to go to the front, reuniting Burnside's command behind them. Historians of the Maryland Campaign have long speculated that McClellan lacked trust and confidence in Sumner. Sears cites McClellan's disparaging description of Sumner as an old fool after the Battle of Williamsburg during the Peninsula Campaign, and argues that McClellan did not want Sumner in a position where he could exercise independent command. This may also have had much to do with sending Hooker ahead. Up to this point in the campaign, McClellan does seem to have reposed a greater confidence in Burnside. It was Burnside's command that McClellan kept in the lead on the way to Frederick while Sumner's and Franklin's commands moved correspondingly. Whatever his reason, holding back Sumner's corps allowed the enemy to partially close the open door.⁵¹

⁵¹ Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1983), 102, 220.

In addition to a lack of vigor on the morning of the fourteenth, McClellan continued to believe that he was facing a larger enemy force than he really was at Turner's and Fox's gaps. When he wired Halleck at 11:15 a.m., he told him that the whole of the enemy was in front, was not retiring to Virginia, and that the decisive battle was pending. When McClellan sent a dispatch to Franklin thirty minutes later, he told that commander that the enemy was in force at Boonesboro. Clearly, McClellan believed by midday of the fourteenth that the opportunity of the open door was gone, and there is no evidence that he urged any greater effort on the part of Burnside who was directing the battle for Turner's and Fox's gaps. McClellan's dispatches to Franklin on the fourteenth contained a mixed message. While he urged Franklin to secure Crampton's Gap as soon as possible, he also cautioned him against attacking if Franklin believed that the pass was held by the enemy in any strength, and Franklin did not ignore that advice.⁵²

On the fifteenth, McClellan was in no hurry to exploit the advantages that he himself believed he had gained on the fourteenth. Although first light came at approximately 5:00 a.m., positive orders for a forward movement of the army at Turner's and Fox's gaps were not forthcoming until three hours later. Even then, the orders to Sumner told that officer not to attack the enemy unless ordered to do so. Consequently, pace of the army's forward movement was regulated by the rate of the enemy's withdrawal, and when the

⁵² OR 19, pt. 2, 288.

enemy began to take position west of Antietam Creek late in the afternoon, McClellan was content allow him to do so.⁵³

For Sumner and the Second Army Corps, the fourteenth and fifteenth were days of more excitement than the early days of the campaign had been, but they were days of no additional challenge. Sumner and his subordinate commanders displayed their usual efficiency keeping the corps well in hand, ready for action, and moving in response to their orders from army headquarters.

Sumner had also shown himself to be competent in carrying out the spirit of his commander's orders on the morning of the fifteenth when he worked out the confusion at the top of Turner's Gap. If McClellan lacked confidence in Sumner, it was evident only in the order to Sumner not to precipitate an engagement without orders. If McClellan was afraid of Sumner's rashness, Sumner proved that such a fear was of no consequence. Conversely, McClellan's two other wing commanders demonstrated their lack of perception in executing the orders they received from army headquarters.

⁵³ Joseph L. Harsh, *Sounding the Shallows: A Confederate Companion for the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2000), 17.

CHAPTER 7
PREPARATION FOR BATTLE

16 SEPTEMBER 1862

I

In response to his final instructions from army headquarters on the night of the fifteenth, Sumner directed Richardson to send a reconnaissance party across the Antietam early on the morning of the sixteenth to determine whether the enemy had abandoned his position during the night. Richardson gave the task over to Caldwell who assigned it to Colonel Barlow commanding the combined 61st/64th New York regiments. Barlow selected his lieutenant colonel from the 61st, Nelson A. Miles, to lead the expedition. Just after midnight, Miles took two companies from each regiment, and crossing to the left side of the Boonesboro pike made his way slowly down to the bridge. Miles reached the bridge just as a party of Federal cavalrymen were recrossing from the west side. They informed Miles that the enemy had fallen back and were not in the immediate vicinity of the bridge. Now under the cover of a morning fog that limited visibility to less than twenty feet, Miles took his small command across the bridge, and proceeded up the road toward Sharpsburg. Reaching the crest of the first hill, a distance of about six hundred yards from the bridge, Miles captured a Confederate soldier unfortunate enough to be crossing the road just at that point. From his prisoner, Miles learned that the Confederates had not abandoned their position during the night. Indeed the advance of

their main line was only a few yards away at the bottom of the hill on which he was standing. By now it was well after daylight, and Miles, having accomplished his mission, led his party back to the bridge, and crossed over to the safety of the Federal side before the sun could burn away the fog.¹

The fog that covered Miles's reconnaissance also caused McClellan to postpone any plans that he might have had for an attack that morning. Just what those plans may have been is a matter of conjecture. In his last message to Franklin on the previous evening, McClellan intimated that if the enemy force in front of Sharpsburg was still in position in the morning, he would be attacked. Sumner, likewise, received an order to have his

¹ Ezra Ayers Carman, "The Maryland Campaign of 1862," chapter 13, pp. 4-5, Carman Papers, Library of Congress, Washington; Charles A. Fuller, *Personal Recollections of the War of 1861* (Sherburne, NY: News Job Printing House, 1906), 57; Nelson A. Miles, "My Recollections of Antietam," *Cosmopolitan Magazine* 53 (October 1912): 587-8. The story of this expedition as told here is essentially as it was related by Carman in his manuscript on the Maryland Campaign. Carman, commander of the 13th New Jersey in the Twelfth Corps at Antietam and a member of the Antietam Battlefield Board when he wrote his manuscript, did not cite his source for the story. Fuller mentions the expedition briefly in the recollection of his service with the 61st New York. Both Carman and Fuller place the expedition on the morning of the sixteenth. Miles, however, in relating the story of the expedition in 1912 said that it took place "on the night of September 16th," and the story he told is slightly different from the story that Carman told. Carman's interpretation is adopted here because it seems more plausible that the expedition would have taken place on the night of the fifteenth, rather than the sixteenth. Miles said in his account that the bridge was unoccupied when he reached it, which could only be true for the night of the fifteenth. Early on the morning of the sixteenth, the bridge was occupied by the 4th US Infantry which deployed four companies as skirmishers on the west side of the bridge. The 4th held the bridge until the evening of the sixteenth, when it was replaced by the 1st Battalion, 12th US Infantry which held the bridge through to the evening of the seventeenth. See War Department, *War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 71 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), series I, vol. 19, pt. 1, 355, 356-7, 358; pt. 2, 315. Hereinafter cited as OR. All references are to Series I unless otherwise noted.

command ready to attack if the enemy was still in front in the morning. No doubt McClellan's other commanders were given similar instructions. But no plan was disseminated. Everything rested on the situation at sunrise, and the fog kept McClellan from knowing if the enemy was still in position in front of Sharpsburg, or if the enemy's forces had been repositioned during the night.

At 7:00 a.m., McClellan wired Halleck, "This morning a heavy fog has thus far prevented us doing more than to ascertain that some of the enemy are still there. Do not know in what force. Will attack as soon as situation of enemy is developed." McClellan also informed Halleck that the garrison at Harper's Ferry had definitely been surrendered by Colonel Miles early on the morning of the fifteenth. McClellan received this information from a dispatch rider sent to Harper's Ferry, who returned during the night with the news. Concerning Miles's conduct McClellan said, "I fear his resistance was not as stubborn as it might have been." McClellan closed the message by telling Halleck, "The time lost on account of the fog is being occupied in getting up supplies, for the want of which many of our men are suffering."²

At 7:45 a.m., McClellan sent a message to Franklin informing him of the surrender of the Harper's Ferry garrison. McClellan added that the dispatch rider reported rebel forces using the pontoon bridge at Harper's Ferry to cross from Maryland back into Virginia. This led McClellan to speculate, "I think the enemy has abandoned the position in front

² OR 19, pt. 2, 307-8; 51, pt. 1, 839.

of us, but the fog is so dense that I have not yet been enabled to determine. If the enemy is in force here, I shall attack him this morning.”³

But as the fog slowly began to lift, McClellan quickly abandoned any thoughts that the enemy might be leaving his position at Sharpsburg and returning to Virginia. In his official report he wrote, “On the morning of the 16th it was discovered that the enemy had changed the position of his batteries.” For McClellan, the repositioning of those batteries was proof that the enemy intended to stay and fight. In addition, the long lines of infantry that had been plainly visible the afternoon before no longer could be seen. McClellan imagined them “concealed behind the opposite heights,” further indicating a redistribution of the enemy’s forces for battle, and not for withdrawal. An immediate morning attack, though, as intimated to Franklin, was out of the question. McClellan, the engineer, could not attack without a definite plan of maneuver, and no plan of maneuver could be developed until a thorough reconnaissance was completed. McClellan, therefore, left his Keedysville headquarters “to spend the morning in reconnoitering the new position taken up by the enemy, examining the ground, finding fords, clearing the approaches, and hurrying up the ammunition and supply trains.”⁴

II

³ OR 51, pt. 1, 839.

⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 54, 55; David Hunter Strother, “Personal Recollections of the War,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 36 (February 1868): 280.

While McClellan spent the morning hours conducting his reconnaissance, the officers and men of the Second Army Corps spent them waiting. The day would not prove boring, however. As soon as enough of the fog lifted, the artillery duel that had ceased at sunset the evening before began again in earnest. On the Federal side, new and heavier batteries were brought into position. Throughout the campaign, the army's Artillery Reserve had marched at the rear of Sykes's division and so had arrived near to the front the night before. These batteries now went into position on the hills above Antietam Creek to take on the work of countering the enemy's batteries on the opposite range of hills. All four of the Artillery Reserve's twenty-pounder Parrott batteries went into position in front of Richardson's division, replacing Tidball's and Pettit's batteries.⁵

Even though the regiments of the Second Corps protected themselves by remaining on the reverse slope behind these batteries, the entertainment provided by the renewed artillery duel was still dangerous, sometimes even fatal, as the shells frequently flew over the ridge landing within the corps' massed ranks. Lieutenant Favill in the 57th New York in Richardson's division, close behind one of the twenty-pounder batteries, recalled that his veteran regiment took the shelling pretty much in stride, "we simply lay on our backs and speculated as to where certain shells would burst as they went rushing over our heads." The same was not true in the new regiments in French's division. Private Spangler in the 130th Pennsylvania remembered, "These fear-producing missiles gave us our first real taste of war, and the sensations of the green soldiers were anything but

⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 206, 342.

pleasant. The idea harbored before, that we would ‘rather fight than eat’ became suddenly susceptible of considerable moderation, and a square meal, even without dessert, out of range would have been more palatable.”⁶

Despite the horrors produced by artillery fire for new troops, one of the problems that Confederate artillerymen experienced throughout the war was the poor quality of their ammunition which often failed to explode, as much of it did this day near the Antietam. The historian of the 29th Massachusetts wrote, “The enemy had almost [the] exact range of our position, but his shell not exploding, did little execution.” Further back in French’s division, Lieutenant Hitchcock of the 132nd Pennsylvania was sitting on his horse talking with his colonel and lieutenant colonel who were also mounted, when a shell dropped among them. “It did not explode. It created considerable consternation and no little stir with horses and men, but did no damage further than the scare and a good showering of gravel and dust.” Not every individual and every regiment was so lucky, though. In the 8th Ohio, a shell exploded over the regimental color guard killing Corporal W.W. Farmer instantly.⁷

⁶ Josiah Marshall Favill, *The Diary of a Younger Officer Serving with the Armies of the United States During the War of the Rebellion* (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1909), 185; Edward W. Spangler, *My Little War Experience, with Historical Sketches and Memorabilia* (York, PA: York Daily Publishing Company, 1904), 30.

⁷ William A. Osborne, *The History of the Twenty-Ninth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Late War of the Rebellion* (Boston: Albert J. Wright, Printer, 1877), 184; Frederick L. Hitchcock, *War from the Inside: The Story of the 132nd Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry in the War for the Suppression of the Rebellion, 1862-1863* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1904; reprint, Alexandria, VA, Time-Life Books, 1985), 51-2; Franklin Sawyer, *A Military History of the 8th Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry: Its Battles, Marches, and Army Movements* (Cleveland, OH: Fairbanks & Co., Printers, 1881), 75; Thomas Francis Galwey, *The Valiant Hours*,

In spite of the shelling endured by the men of the Second Corps, the officers still had the business of getting the corps ready for a major engagement. Early in the morning, those regiments of Sedgwick's and French's divisions that had not gotten into position the night before were brought forward to rejoin their divisions. In addition, the corps' supply wagons were brought forward to give the soldiers their first issue of rations since the one they received at Frederick on the morning of the fourteenth. Because the corps had not been engaged in battle at South Mountain no ammunition needed to be issued.

Since leaving Frederick on the fourteenth, the corps' supply trains had marched at the rear of the column, and so they were readily available on the morning of the sixteenth. But the work of keeping the supply trains up with the corps had been exhausting. Lieutenant Charles H. Eager of the 15th Massachusetts was one of the officers assigned to Sedgwick's trains during the campaign. In a letter to his wife on the morning of the sixteenth, he described the ordeal of getting the wagons over the mountains from Frederick:

I arrived here [Keedysville] last night about 1 o'clock much used up with the headache & tired from head to foot. Was on the road all the night before, stopping only long enough to feed our teams. We harness up & are ready to start in the morning with the troops & it is seldom we get under weigh [sic] before from 1 to 3 & sometimes when our division is in the rear it is night before we get finally on the road then we have to travel nights. When we left Frederick last Sunday we had not made over two miles at half past five, then we had to go over the mountain in darkness & such a road you never saw, rocks & steep pitches going up & down.

Narrative of "Captain Brevet," An Irish-American in The Army of the Potomac, ed. W.S. Nye (Harrisburg, PA; Stackpole Company, 1961), 37.

Once the shelling started the supply officers had to complete their work quickly and then move the train some three miles to the rear where it would be out of range of the enemy's guns.⁸

At some point that morning an order was received at Second Corps headquarters to send a party to a small wooden bridge that was supposed to be about fifteen hundred yards upstream from the Boonsboro pike bridge. The mission of the party would be to drive away sharpshooters and prevent the enemy from burning the bridge. The mission was passed to Richardson's division in the front and given to Major Edward E. Sturtevant of the 5th New Hampshire. Sturtevant took out four companies of his regiment, but found no bridge and returned. At about the same time, another two companies of the 5th under Captains Richard E. Cross and Charles H. Long were sent off toward the Boonsboro pike bridge. Their mission was the destruction of a mill dam just a hundred yards down stream, opposite Newcomer's Mill on the west side. This mill dam kept the depth of Antietam Creek artificially high at the bridge. If it could be breached, then the water level would drop dramatically making it possible for infantry and cavalry to ford the stream at that point. The captains, however, were unable to accomplish their mission because they lacked the tools for the job.⁹

⁸ Charles H. Eager to his Wife, 16 and 17 September 1862, Book 15, Lewis Leigh Collection, Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA; War Department, George D. Ruggles to Edwin V. Sumner, 16 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 287; William Child, *A History of the Fifth Regiment, New Hampshire Volunteers in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (Bristol, NH: R.W. Musgrove, Printer, 1893; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1988), 119. The

At about noon, the division of Brigadier General George W. Morell, the First Division of Porter's Fifth Corps, arrived in the vicinity of Keedysville. This division had not left Washington until 12 September, and had been marching ever since trying to catch up with the army. Ordinarily, this event would have occasioned almost no notice within the Second Corps, but marching with Morell was the unassigned brigade of Brigadier General Max Weber. That afternoon Weber's brigade was assigned by army headquarters to the Second Corps to become the Third Brigade of French's new Third Division (figure 21).¹⁰

existence of a small wooden bridge upstream from the Boonsboro pike bridge [Middle Bridge] is problematic. Such a bridge is frequently shown on very early maps of the Antietam battlefield in a bend of Antietam Creek about fifteen hundreds yards north of the Middle Bridge and slightly southwest of the Neikirk farm. The two maps on Plate 29, *Atlas to Accompany the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* are examples. On more authoritative maps drawn of the battlefield well after the war, no bridge appears. On those maps a ford is occasionally shown at that point connecting farm lanes on either side of the stream, but many times no crossing is indicated at all as is the case with the Antietam Battlefield Board Maps.

¹⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 338, 342.

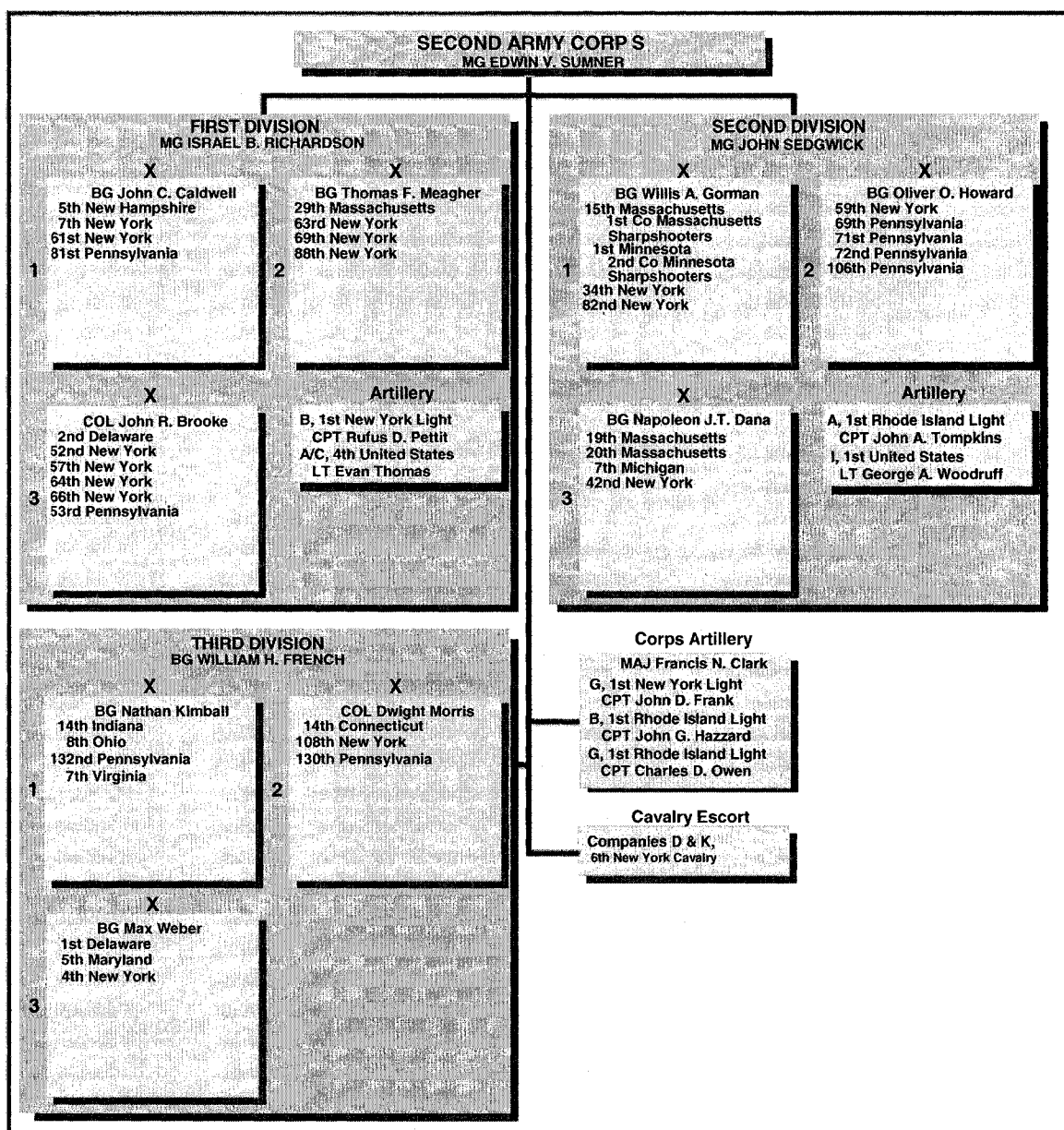


Figure 21: Organization of the Second Army Corps, 16 September 1862.

Weber's brigade consisted of the 1st Delaware, 4th New York and 5th Maryland.

Because these regiments had been in the service since the autumn of 1861, they might be counted as experienced, but during all of that time they had never participated in an active campaign nor fired so much as a single shot at the enemy. Rather, they had been assigned

to Major General John A. Dix's Department of Virginia and had been performing garrison duty in the vicinity of Fortress Monroe and Norfolk. On 7 September 1862, in the midst of the search for troops to send to McClellan, Halleck ordered Dix to send the 1st Delaware, and 3rd and 4th New York regiments to Washington "as promptly as possible." Dix, however, objected, telling Halleck that these three regiments were his "main reliance if Suffolk is to be defended." Dix then asked to be allowed to retain the 3rd New York and send the 5th Maryland in its place. The 5th Maryland was then at Camp Hamilton near Fortress Monroe doing guard duty, which the regimental surgeon thought severe enough work to exacerbate sickness among the troops. Halleck acquiesced in Dix's request and the three regiments were sent by transport to Washington. Arriving there on 9 September, they were brigaded together under the command of Weber and set out to catch up with the Army of the Potomac in Maryland.¹¹

The commander of this new brigade, Max Weber, had been born in the Grand Duchy of Baden in 1824. He attended the military school at Karlsruhe from which he graduated in 1843, taking a commission as a lieutenant in the Grand Duke's army. In the failed revolutions of 1848 he sided with the rebels, which led to his emigration to the United States. From then until 1861, he operated a hotel in New York City that became a haven for refugees from southern Germany. In the spring of 1861, he organized the "Turner

¹¹ OR 11, pt. 3, 374-5; 18, 386-7; William P. Seville, *History of the First Regiment Delaware Volunteers* (Wilmington: Historical Society of Delaware, 1884; reprint, Baltimore, Longstreet House, 1986), 45-6; War Department, George R. Graham, "The Fifth Maryland at Antietam," *Antietam Studies*, Antietam National Battlefield Board, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's to 1917*, RG 94, National Archives.

Rifles,” which was mustered into Federal service as the 20th New York, an exclusively German regiment. Weber and the 20th were made part of Dix’s Department of Virginia and sent off to Fort Monroe. As a regimental commander, Weber participated in an operation to capture Confederate batteries at Hatteras Inlet on the coast of North Carolina in August 1861, and then as senior colonel commanded Camp Hamilton during the winter of 1861 to 1862. He was appointed a brigadier general of volunteers on 28 April 1862, assigned as Commandant, Fortress Monroe and then to the command of a brigade in the capture of Norfolk in May 1862. He continued commanding a brigade at Suffolk throughout the summer that consisted of five regiments, two of which were the 1st Delaware and the 4th New York. When these two regiments and the 5th Maryland were transferred to the Army of the Potomac, Weber was sent along as their brigade commander.¹²

III

McClellan’s morning reconnaissance took him from Keedysville to the hill from which he had viewed the enemy’s lines the evening before. From there, he rode south along the ridge on which the twenty-pounder batteries were positioned. Crossing the Boonsboro pike, he continued on along the hills in front of the position held by Sykes’s division, until he was well beyond the left flank of the army. Based on this

¹² Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Blue: Lives of Union Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 545-6; OR 4, 589; 599; 11, pt. 1, 634; pt. 3, 176; 18, 377.

reconnaissance and the reports of reconnaissances made by the topographical engineers on his staff, McClellan was able to put together a comprehensive picture of the field on which the enemy had chosen to make his stand (figure 22).

The boundaries of what was to become the battle area were defined by the meandering courses of Antietam Creek on the east and the Potomac River on the west, both flowing north to south. The average distance between these two streams in this area was about three miles. The northern limit of the area was determined by a great bend in the Potomac that changed the course of the river from east to south, bringing it parallel to the course of Antietam Creek. The confluence of these two streams five miles below the great bend marked the southern limit. The dominant tactical feature of the terrain within the battle area was the height of land between the two streams. This ridge, which evenly divided the area along its north-south axis, gave a tremendous double advantage to the enemy that McClellan instantly recognized. The enemy's main line of battle could be formed, as it had been the day before, along the forward slope of this ridge, forcing any attack against it to be made uphill. In addition, using the reverse slope of the ridge, the enemy "could maneuver unobserved by our army, and, from the shortness of their line, could rapidly re-enforce at any point threatened by our attack." McClellan summed up his assessment of the enemy's position in his final report by saying, "Their position, stretching across the

angle formed by the Potomac and Antietam, their flanks and rear protected by these streams, was one of the strongest to be found in this region of country, which is well adapted to defensive warfare.” The single major drawback to the position, which McClellan did not mention was the fact that the enemy would have his back to a major river across which there was no bridge and only one accessible ford, Boteler’s or Blackford’s Ford at Shepherdstown.¹³

McClellan’s problem in formulating a battle plan was how to approach and attack the enemy in this position. Antietam Creek was not a significant obstacle. Within the battle area, it was crossed by three first-class stone arch bridges. The most northerly of these three—to be known to history as the Upper Bridge—was almost due east of the great bend of the Potomac, offering access to the northern part of the field. A little less than two miles below it was the bridge that carried the Boonsboro pike across the Antietam—to be referred to hereafter as the Middle Bridge. This was the bridge around which the 5th New Hampshire had skirmished with the enemy the previous afternoon and the one that Miles had crossed in his early morning reconnaissance. Only a mile below the Middle Bridge was the third crossing known locally—and hereafter in this study—as the Rohrbach Bridge after the family whose farm was on the land at the east side of the bridge. The stream itself was not deep, its banks generally not steep and therefore

¹³ OR 19, pt. 1, 54. There had been a bridge at Shepherdstown which carried the pike from Sharpsburg across the Potomac, but it was burned in 1861.

fordable at any number of locations, save at the Middle Bridge because of the mill dam just a hundred yards down stream.¹⁴

Once across the stream, the land itself was open rolling farm country consisting of a combination of pastures, cultivated fields and wood lots with little or no undergrowth. A net of turnpikes, country roads, and farm lanes that could support any number of schemes of maneuver crisscrossed the battle area. The Hagerstown Turnpike running almost due north and south, generally along the height of land, connected the town of Sharpsburg in the center of the battle area—population about nine hundred—with Hagerstown thirteen miles to the north. A second turnpike, the Boonsboro pike, crossed the battle area from east to west, becoming the main street through the center of Sharpsburg. From the Upper Bridge a good country road went to the northwest connecting with the Hagerstown pike about four miles north of Sharpsburg, while a second road branched off to the southwest eventually connecting to the pike just a mile north of the town. The road across the Rohrbach Bridge entered the east end of Sharpsburg only a mile beyond the bridge. Running south from Sharpsburg was a road through the southern reaches of the battle area that crossed the Antietam at a point just yards from where it flowed into the Potomac and eventually led to Harper's Ferry.¹⁵

¹⁴ Most studies of the Battle of Antietam refer to the Rohrbach Bridge as Burnside's Bridge or occasionally as the Lower Bridge. The name Rohrbach Bridge was generally the name in use at the time of the battle, and so it is the name used throughout this study.

¹⁵ Joseph L. Harsh, *Sounding the Shallows: A Confederate Companion for the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2000), 127.

Naturally enough, McClellan's mind focused on the three bridges crossing the Antietam as the launch points of three major avenues of approach to the Confederate position. In his initial assessment of the situation the previous afternoon, he had been inclined to make the attack on the Confederate left, and nothing that he had seen or that had happened since then changed his mind. As he articulated it in his final campaign report: "My plan for the impending general engagement was to attack the enemy's left with the corps of Hooker and Mansfield, supported by Sumner's and, if necessary, by Franklin's, and as soon as matters looked favorable there, to move the corps of Burnside against the enemy's extreme right, upon the ridge running to the south and rear of Sharpsburg, and having carried their position, to press along the crest toward our right, and, whenever either of these flank movements should be successful, to advance our center with all the forces then disposable."¹⁶

As he envisioned it, the plan would use all three avenues of approach. Hooker's, Mansfield's and Sumner's corps would cross the Antietam in the vicinity of the Upper Bridge and advance against the enemy left. Although this avenue of approach was nearly twice as long as either of the other two, there was a possibility that the attacking force could gain the height of land between the Potomac and the Antietam well north of the enemy's left flank. The fact that there were as yet no enemy forces in the vicinity of the bridge promised such a result. If the enemy's left could be gained, then the three attacking corps could advance south along the ridge guided by the Hagerstown pike,

¹⁶ George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story* (New York: Charles & Company, 1887), 587, 590; OR 19, pt. 1, 55.

driving the Confederates back on Sharpsburg. At that point Burnside with Cox's corps would attack across the Antietam at the Rohrbach Bridge and drive toward Sharpsburg from the south, catching the enemy in a pincer movement. An assault crossing at the Rohrbach Bridge would be difficult, though, because, as McClellan observed during his reconnaissance, "it was strongly covered by riflemen, protected by rifle-pits, stone fences, &c., and enfiladed by artillery. The ground in front of this line consisted of undulating hills, their crests in turn commanded by others in their rear." With both of these flanking movements developed, McClellan would next commit Porter's corps and whatever forces might be available across the Middle Bridge directly toward Sharpsburg, driving the enemy to destruction against the Potomac. It was a plan that promised success, and , if executed aggressively, might even bring about the end of the war.¹⁷

Before he turned to ride back to army headquarters, which was being relocated to the farm of Philip Pry, McClellan began to put his plan in motion. If Burnside was going to assault the enemy's right, his command would have to be much closer to the Rohrbach Bridge. Accordingly, McClellan directed him "to advance to a strong position in the

¹⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 54; McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 590; Strother, "Personal Recollections," 281; Carman, chapter 13, p. 32. Carman says that there is nothing to indicate that McClellan at this point was planning to commit Sumner's and Mansfield's corps along with Hooker's to an attack on the enemy left. Carman argues that that decision came only after Hooker advanced against the left during the afternoon and asked McClellan for reinforcements (see below). Strother, however, says that McClellan explained the plan to him on the sixteenth, and that it involved sending the "right wing under Sumner" across the Antietam to attack the enemy left. The plan as McClellan explained it in his final report and in his memoirs always involved sending all three corps against the enemy left.

immediate vicinity of the bridge and to reconnoiter the approaches to the bridge carefully.”¹⁸

Riding back to the north, McClellan stopped by the Pry house, probably to get updates on the situation from his staff and to discuss his plan of battle with them. One of the updates that he received at this time was that enemy troops from Harper’s Ferry, including the command of Stonewall Jackson, had been brought up to reinforce the position at Sharpsburg during the night. This news, however, did not cause McClellan to reconsider his plan, which already assumed that he would be facing the main strength of the enemy. Some consideration, though, was given to sending Pleasonton with his cavalry across the Upper Bridge and to the north to take position at Jones’ Cross Roads seven miles north of Sharpsburg at the point where the Hagerstown pike was crossed by the Boonsboro-Williamsport road. Had McClellan done this, Pleasonton would have been in position to conduct reconnaissance in that unobservable area west of the height of land where McClellan believed the masses of the enemy to be hidden. But McClellan rejected the idea, not wanting “to send them so far off,” and instead ordered sixteen hundred cavalry already in the vicinity of Hagerstown and Greencastle, Pennsylvania to take position at the crossroads. No mention was made of having them conduct a reconnaissance. Rather, McClellan ordered Pleasonton “to collect all your cavalry . . . so as to have your command ready at a moment’s notice, should it be required to make

¹⁸ OR 19, pt. 1, 55; Henry J. Hunt to George B. McClellan, 12 January 1876, *Papers of George Brinton McClellan*, Series I, Volume 96, Items 19333-19337, Library of Congress.

pursuit of the enemy.” In conjunction with this order, a circular was sent to the corps commanders directing them “to report what cavalry is now on duty with their respective commands” and “how much cavalry they require for orderlies of their commands.” Any cavalry required for other purposes, the circular went on to say, would be furnished from the cavalry division as a special detail. These tasks completed, McClellan rode off to find General Hooker whose corps was to lead the assault on the enemy’s left.¹⁹

There is no record of what transpired between McClellan and Hooker once McClellan arrived at Hooker’s headquarters near the Upper Bridge that morning. What is known is that at about 2:00 p.m. Hooker got his corps in motion, crossed the Antietam via the Upper Bridge and some nearby fords, and proceeded in a westerly direction “to attack and, if possible, turn the enemy’s left.” Before crossing the stream himself, Hooker rode over to the Pry house to ask McClellan if there were any further orders for him. According to his final report, Hooker says that he was told he would be “at liberty to call for re-enforcements if I should need them, and that on their arrival they would be placed under my command.” After going less than a mile, the lead elements of Hooker’s column became engaged with enemy skirmishers. This firefight continued for the remainder of

¹⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 54; pt. 2, 311; 51, pt. 1, 840; War Department, Headquarters Army of the Potomac Circular, 16 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives. The thirteen hundred “Harper’s Ferry” cavalry that Palmer refers to was a force under Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin F. Davis that escaped from Harper’s Ferry during the night of 14-15 September, riding all the way to Greencastle, Pennsylvania that night and in the process capturing a Confederate ordinance train of some forty wagons.

the afternoon, as Hooker pressed to the west in order to gain the height of land between the Antietam and the Potomac.²⁰

At some point that afternoon, McClellan again left his headquarters, crossed the Antietam, and caught up with Hooker to see for himself how the advance was going. At that time Hooker says that he told McClellan “that he [McClellan] had ordered my small corps, now numbering between 12,000 and 13,000 . . . across the river to attack the whole rebel army, and that if re-enforcements were not forwarded promptly, or if another attack not made on the enemy’s right, the rebels would eat me up.” After this conversation, McClellan left to go back to headquarters, and Hooker continued on to the west. By night fall, he would have his corps on the height of land, occupying the farm of Joseph Poffenberger on the Hagerstown pike some two miles north of Sharpsburg, and two miles west of the Upper Bridge and the nearest friendly forces (figure 23).²¹

²⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 55, 217.

²¹ OR 19, pt. 1, 217-8; Strother, “Personal Recollections,” 280-1. Hooker and Strother disagree as to exactly when McClellan reached Hooker’s column. Hooker says that it was before he had gotten a half mile from the bridge and before he engaged the enemy’s skirmishers, Strother says that it was not until Hooker reached his final position for the day.

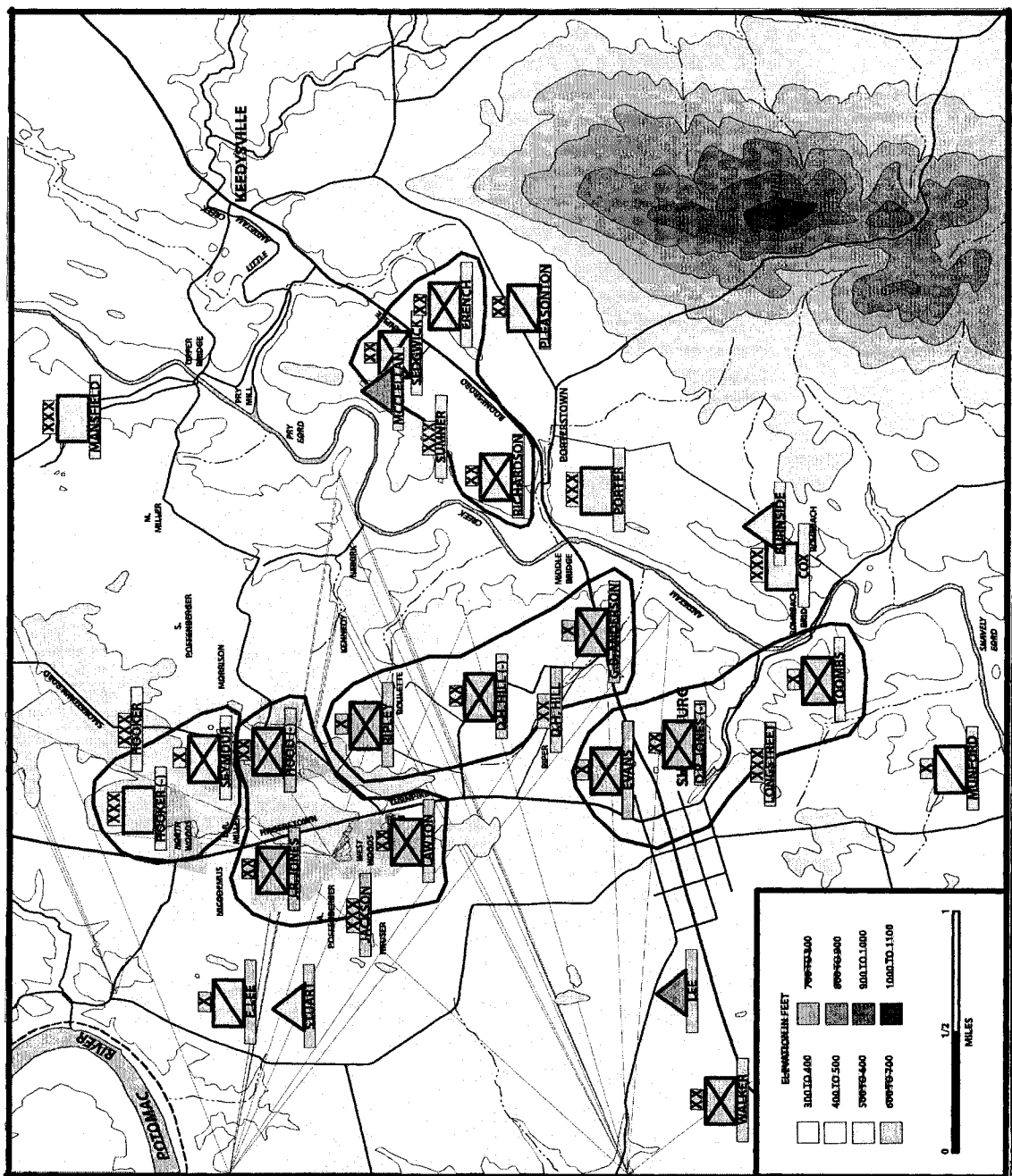


Figure 22. 1st Division and Cavalry Positions, 10 September 1862.

IV

No record exists of any conversation, or for that matter even of a meeting between McClellan and Sumner on 16 September 1862. Sumner's first indication that the commander was formulating a plan of battle came at 8:45 a.m. in a message written by Ruggles. In this McClellan told Sumner to "hurry up Banks' [Mansfield's] Corps." Just forty-five minutes later a second message was sent by Ruggles which read, "Gen. McClellan desires you to inform him the moment the head of Mansfield's corps comes up. The general will be for the present at Gen. Hooker's headquarters." It is strange that McClellan, having planned to commit Hooker's, Sumner's, and Mansfield's corps to attack the enemy's left, would order Hooker on the afternoon of 16 September to advance against that flank alone. McClellan's messages to Sumner indicate that he wanted Mansfield's corps west of the Antietam to support the First Corps before ordering Hooker to move against the enemy's left. Although McClellan and Hooker in their final reports both specified that the latter was to attack the enemy's left on the afternoon of the sixteenth, the actual conduct of Hooker's movement makes it seem more like a reconnaissance in force.²²

In his testimony before the Congressional Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, Sumner said that he was informed of Hooker's advance across Antietam Creek once it began, but he did not say how or when he learned of it. At 5:50 p.m., after McClellan's

²² War Department, George D. Ruggles to Edwin V. Sumner, 17 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives; OR 19, pt. 1, 55, 217; 51, pt. 1, 838.

return to headquarters from his last visit with Hooker, Ruggles sent a third message to Sumner which clearly indicated to him the role that he and the Second Corps would be expected to play in the pending battle. Sumner was directed to move Mansfield's corps across the creek via the Upper Bridge and the fords in the vicinity of the bridge. Mansfield's corps was to follow Hooker's route "and to take such position as may be designated for it by Gen. Hooker." Sumner was to ensure "that all of the artillery, ammunition, and everything else appertaining to the corps, be gotten over without fail to-night, ready for action early in the morning." Last, he was "to have the other corps of your command ready to march one hour before daylight to-morrow morning."²³

Although not definitive, McClellan's 5:50 p.m. instructions to Sumner clearly indicated that at sunrise the next morning the First, Second, and Twelfth Army Corps would conduct a combined assault against the enemy's left. In his later testimony before the Joint Committee, he indicated his understanding of the plan as McClellan conceived of it, that these three corps would attack the enemy left in order to throw them "right back in front of the other divisions of our army on our left, Burnside's, Franklin's, and Porter's corps."²⁴

²³ Congress, Senate, Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 3 pts., 37th Cong., 3rd sess., 1863, Rep. Com. 108, pt. 1, 368; OR 51, pt. 1, 839.

²⁴ Congress, Senate, Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 3 pts., 37th Cong., 3rd sess., 1863, Rep. Com. 108, pt. 1, 368.

Even though readily at hand, by the time that Mansfield's corps got started across the Antietam, it already was growing dark. Apparently, no guides were provided to help Mansfield find his way, nor did Hooker in any way indicate what position the corps should take once it arrived at the front as McClellan indicated that he would. Alpheus Williams, relegated once again to the command of his own division, wrote home a few days later saying, "We passed a stone bridge over the Antietam and then branched off into the fields. Gen. Mansfield and his escort led the way, but it was so dark and the forests and woods so deep that I could not follow and was obliged to send ahead to stop our leaders repeatedly." Williams's division was second in the order of march behind the division of Brigadier General George Greene, but his problem in keeping up resulted more from the fact that five of his eleven regiments new. Finally, at sometime between midnight and 2:00 a.m., the corps went into bivouac on the farm of George Line. Instead of following Hooker's route due west from the Upper Bridge, the Twelfth Corps had drifted to the northwest and was now a full mile and a half in Hooker's rear.²⁵

As could be expected, the seven batteries of the Twelfth Corps moved across the Antietam that night with the rest of the corps. But Sumner also took the unusual step of having the Chief of Artillery of the Second Corps, Major Francis N. Clarke, collect six of the seven batteries of the Second Corps and order them to follow the Twelfth Corps across the stream as well. McClellan's 5:50 p.m. instructions to Sumner stipulated "that

²⁵ Alpheus S. Williams, *From the Cannon's Mouth, The Civil War Letters of General Alpheus S. Williams*, ed. Milo M. Quaife (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 124-5; OR 19, pt. 1, 484.

all the artillery, ammunition, and everything else appertaining to the corps, be gotten over without fail to-night, ready for action early in the morning.” It is quite possible that Sumner read this instruction as meaning the artillery of both of his corps, not just Mansfield’s. The instruction itself clearly went to Sumner as the officer commanding both corps. It is also possible that given the instruction which followed, for Sumner to have his own corps ready to march an hour before daylight, and the fact that McClellan’s plan called for an early morning combined assault of the First, Second, and Twelfth Corps against the Confederate left, that Sumner simply saw it as prudent to get his artillery across the creek that night so that it would be in position to support the attack as it started. Whatever the rationale, Clarke sent the six batteries of the Second Corps across the Upper Bridge behind Mansfield, and just as Mansfield had done, the batteries took the road to the northwest. Accordingly, they bivouacked in the early morning hours of the seventeenth at a distance of anywhere from a half to two miles beyond the bridge.²⁶

²⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 283, 308; 51, pt. 1, 839; Theodore Reichardt, *Diary of Battery A, First Regiment, Rhode Island Light Artillery* (Providence: N. Bangs Williams, Publisher, 1865), 64; Thomas M. Aldrich, *The History of Battery A, First Regiment Rhode Island Light Artillery in the War to Preserve the Union 1861-1865* (Providence: Snow & Farnham, Printers, 1904), 135; Nelson Ames, *History of Battery G, First Regiment, New York Light Artillery* (Marshalltown, IA: Marshall Printing, Co., 1900), 40; John H. Rhodes, *The History of Battery B, First Regiment Rhode Island Light Artillery in the War to Preserve the Union, 1861-1865* (Providence: Snow & Farnham, Printers, 1894), 121-2; War Department, Antietam Battlefield Board, *Atlas of the Battlefield of Antietam* (Washington: Chief of Engineers, 1908), Map 1. The official reports of Pettit and Tompkins establish that their batteries crossed to the west side of the Antietam on the evening of 16 September. The two histories of Tompkins battery also say that the battery crossed on the evening of the sixteenth. The history of Frank’s battery indicates that it crossed on the evening of the sixteenth. In addition, the Daybreak Map (Map 1) of the Antietam Battlefield Board maps shows Woodruff’s, Owen’s, and Tompkins’s batteries

At 7:30 p.m., Ruggles sent one last directive to Sumner. This message told him that by daybreak he was to have two batteries of artillery in position to cover the crossings of the Antietam in the vicinity of the Upper Bridge and army headquarters. Rather than bring back any of the batteries of the Second Corps, Sumner passed this requirement on to Mansfield. Mansfield's Chief of Artillery, Captain Clermont L. Best, selected the Maine batteries of Captains O'Neil W. Robinson and Freeman McGilvery and at 2:00 a.m. led them back across the Upper Bridge, placing them in position on the hills on the east side of the stream overlooking the bridge.²⁷

At the same time that Ruggles sent this final instruction to Sumner, he prepared another for Franklin in Pleasant Valley. In it, Franklin was told that McClellan wanted him to occupy Maryland Heights. But the message also stated that if "this should prove impracticable, he [McClellan] thinks that you had better leave a small force at your present position, and join him with the remainder of your command." Two hours later, Ruggles reported to Franklin that the enemy was still present in force at Sharpsburg, and asked Franklin to report the condition of affairs on his front. Burnside too received one last message from army headquarters that evening, but it offered no additional instructions, only a further admonishment regarding his slowness. "The commanding general has learned that, although your corps was ordered to be in a designated position at 12 m. [noon] to-day, at or near sunset only one division and four batteries had reached the

as already positioned west of the steam. The one battery of the corps that did not cross that evening was Hazard's.

²⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 482; 51, pt. 1, 839; *Atlas of the Battlefield of Antietam*, Map 1.

ground intended for your troops.” Burnside was reminded that he also had failed to get the Ninth Corps moving in a timely manner at Fox’s Gap the day before. The message closed by telling Burnside that “in view of the important operations now at hand, the commanding general cannot lightly regard such marked departure from the tenor of his instructions.” This growing rift between McClellan and Burnside, who had always been the best of friends, did not bode well for the expedient and aggressive execution of McClellan’s plan of battle.²⁸

V

Throughout the day, the divisions of the Second Army Corps remained for the most part in the same positions that they had taken up the afternoon before or during the morning of the sixteenth as they arrived along the Antietam. The regiments of Richardson’s division were still in line of battle formation on the reverse slope of the ridge running above the creek on the north side of the Boonsboro pike. The brigades and regiments of Sedgwick’s division were in massed formation about four hundred yards to the right of Richardson in the fields just northeast of the Pry house where army headquarters was established during the day. French’s division, also in massed formation, was to the left of Sedgwick straddling the Boonsboro pike. As evening came

²⁸ OR 19, pt. 2, 308; 51, pt. 1, 840.

on, Sumner established corps headquarters at a house in Keedysville next to the German Reformed Church.²⁹

In these positions, the soldiers of the corps prepared to spend their third night in a row sleeping on their arms in the immediate presence of the enemy. They “were not allowed to sing or make any noise, nor have any fires—except just enough to make coffee—for the fear of attracting the fire of the enemies’ batteries.” To add to their discomfort, toward evening the sky turned dark and eventually a light rain began to fall. While the soldiers themselves were not privileged to know the details of McClellan’s plans, the historian of the 29th Massachusetts recalled that “when the day closed, there was probably not a private soldier along the line who did not realize that the army was on the eve of one of the greatest battles of the war.” Everyone took the time to make what preparations they thought necessary. For the soldiers, this meant a last opportunity to write letters home “many of them ‘last words’—and quiet talks were had, and promises made between comrades. Promises providing against the dreaded possibilities of the morrow.”³⁰

For the officers, there were additional matters to be attended to. Captain George W. Bachelder of Company C, 19th Massachusetts talked in a way he never had before to his lieutenant, Edgar M. Newcomb, of the affairs of the company, especially about the money in the company fund which Bachelder had sent home to his father in Lynn, Massachusetts

²⁹ Edwin V. Sumner to Albert V. Colburn, 16 September 1862, *Papers of George B. McClellan*, Series I, Volume 80, Item 16244, Library of Congress.

³⁰ Osborne, 184; Louis N. Chapin, *A Brief History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment, N.Y.S.V.* (New York, 1903), 61; Hitchcock, 55-6.

for safe keeping. Colonel Oakford of the 132nd Pennsylvania inquired of his adjutant, Lieutenant Hitchcock, “very particularly if my roster of the officers and men of the regiment was complete, for, said he, with a smile, ‘We shall not all be here to-morrow night.’” Thomas Galwey in the 8th Ohio recalled that eventually everything became quiet. But it was at best an ominous quiet, “for the quiet that precedes a great battle has something of the terrible in it. Everybody knows that there must be fought a bloody battle tomorrow and all are therefore anxious to save their strength for the contest.”³¹

But in spite of the silence and the air of foreboding that pervaded the scene, perhaps it was Lieutenant Colonel Revere, the corps inspector general, who best expressed the real temper of the men of the Second Army Corps as he wrote home to his wife for the first time in a week. “It has been a pretty hard time for the past week, but I feel none the worse for it. Everyone seems anxious to come up with the enemy, and I can’t but believe that if we do they must be defeated. Should that be the result it will be the beginning of the end for they never can reconstruct an army in the face of the immense increase to our army. I feel more hopeful as to the final result than for a long time.”³²

VI

³¹ John G.B. Adams, *Reminiscences of the Nineteenth Massachusetts Regiment* (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Company, 1899), 132; Hitchcock, 56; Galwey, *Valiant Hours*, 38.

³² Paul J. Revere to Lucretia Revere, 16 September 1862, Reel 4, Revere Family Papers, 1764-1964, Massachusetts Historical Society, Boston.

In the last dispatch sent from army headquarters to Franklin on the evening of the fifteenth, that officer was told that if the enemy was still in position on the morning of the sixteenth, “he will be attacked.” Some historians have been highly critical of McClellan for failing to carry out that promise. Sears in *Landscape Turned Red* wrote that this was perhaps McClellan’s best chance for destroying Lee’s army before it could be reunited, and Greene in his essay on McClellan in the Maryland Campaign notes that McClellan took no steps to prepare an assault. It is certainly true that McClellan made no plans for an attack for the morning of the sixteenth, which is a clear indication that he had no intention of attacking until he had a chance to consider the situation. But it is also true that the fog on the morning of the sixteenth was a real physical obstacle preventing an attack, even if a plan had been made and disseminated to the corps commanders. Civil War armies had no capability whatsoever for conducting operations under conditions of low visibility. If McClellan had attacked first thing on the morning of the sixteenth, he would have been entirely unable to provide artillery support, and his infantry would have had to grope forward blindly, unable to tell after only the first few yards the original direction of their attack.³³

As McClellan well knew, the situation had also changed overnight. He might have expected on the evening of the fifteenth to find the enemy next morning continuing his withdrawal to Virginia, which would justify a hasty attack. But, as the fog lifted it

³³ OR 19, pt. 2, 297; Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1983), 163; A. Wilson Greene, “‘I Fought the Battle Splendidly;’ George B. McClellan and the Maryland Campaign,” in *Antietam: Essays on the 1862 Maryland Campaign* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1989), 64.

became clear that the enemy was going to stay and fight. Accordingly, a hasty advance and attack, especially for the methodical McClellan, was entirely out of the question. McClellan was correct in his assessment of the ground west of Antietam Creek as being well suited to the defense. Thus, McClellan cannot be too strongly criticized for failing to attack early or for taking the time to develop a strong plan of battle.

Palfry, the Civil War officer, veteran of the Maryland Campaign, and the first historian of the campaign, says of the plan of battle that McClellan developed on the sixteenth, "It was extremely simple, and ought to have been successful." The problem would prove to be not the plan itself, but the incompetent way in which McClellan executed it, and the beginnings of that incompetent execution came on the sixteenth. First, having formulated the plan, McClellan failed to adequately communicate his intent or the plan itself to his subordinate corps commanders. McClellan visited Burnside's headquarters during his morning reconnaissance and no doubt communicated to Burnside the essence of the plan, but it is questionable how much Burnside knew and understood concerning the role he, and more importantly the Ninth Corps, was to play. McClellan also visited Hooker's headquarters and certainly communicated the plan to that officer since he was to take the lead in executing it. But beyond this, there is no record that McClellan clearly communicated the plan to any other corps commander. Fitz-John Porter is known to have been the closest confidant of McClellan at this time, so he may have known of the plan, but Sumner learned of it only indirectly, and whatever Mansfield knew came from Sumner and not McClellan. Moreover, no known communication was

sent to Franklin telling him what his role was to be, and he was not instructed to bring his command to Sharpsburg until 7:30 that evening.³⁴

Second, in formulating the plan of battle as he did, McClellan substantially rearranged his command structure without communicating it to his corps commanders. It is true that on the fifteenth, McClellan had officially suspended Burnside's command of Hooker's and Cox's corps, but that suspension was understood by Burnside to be temporary. When urged by Cox on the sixteenth to assume direct command of the Ninth Corps, Burnside demurred saying "he was unwilling to waive his precedence or to assume that Hooker was detached for anything more than a temporary purpose." With Sumner's wing, the arrangement was even more ambiguous. Army headquarters communicated with Mansfield's corps only through Sumner, indicating that Sumner's command of his own and Mansfield's corps was still the arrangement in effect, but then on the afternoon of the sixteenth McClellan had Sumner send Mansfield's corps across Antietam Creek "to take such position as may be designated for it by Gen. Hooker." Hooker would later claim that he was told by McClellan that any reinforcements sent to his support "would be placed under my command," but this certainly could not have been Sumner's or Mansfield's understanding of the command arrangement. Hooker did call for reinforcements on the afternoon of the sixteenth, and they were sent in the form of Mansfield's corps, but Hooker made no effort guide them into position or in any way

³⁴ Francis Winthrop Palfrey, *The Antietam and Fredericksburg*, vol. 5, *Campaigns of the Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1882), 59; Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan, The Young Napoleon* (New York; Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 298-300.

exercise the command authority which he said McClellan had given him. Consequently, Mansfield's corps bivouacked that night more than a mile to Hooker's rear where they were not available to support him.³⁵

Last, having formulated, as Palfrey points out, an effective plan of battle, McClellan failed to supervise its execution. Only one division and four batteries of Cox's corps moved forward to their attack positions on the afternoon of the sixteenth, and the only corrective action taken was a terse note to Burnside from army headquarters that was not sent until well after sunset. Worse, instead of sending forward the three corps McClellan later claimed were "to make the main attack" on the right, only Hooker's corps was ordered forward on the afternoon of the sixteenth. When Hooker pointed out that he could not possibly hope to successfully attack "the whole rebel army," McClellan ordered forward only one additional corps, Mansfield's, and because it was not guided into position by either McClellan's or Hooker's staffs, it would not be in position to support the opening of the battle on the seventeenth.³⁶

For his part, Sumner's performance on the sixteenth continued to be creditable, especially given that the army commander made no effort to appraise him concerning the role he was to play in the coming battle. The one critical decision that Sumner made was to send the batteries of the Second Corps—except Hazard's—across Antietam Creek

³⁵ Jacob D. Cox, "The Battle of Antietam," *North to Antietam*, vol. 2, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (New York: Century, 1887-1888; reprint, New York: Castle Books, 1956), 631; OR 19, pt. 1, 217.

³⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 30, 217.

behind Mansfield's corps. Sumner's intent was to have those batteries in position to support the corps the following morning, but since they followed Mansfield's unguided column, they would not be immediately available as Sumner planned. His decision was based on his interpretation of Ruggles' 5:50 p.m. note. The note read that "all the artillery, ammunition, and everything else appertaining to the corps, be gotten over without fail to-night, ready for action early in the morning." Corps in this case could be read as singular and referring only to Mansfield's artillery, or be read as plural and referring to the artillery of both corps of Sumner's command. Given that the note went on to instruct him to have the Second Corps ready to march "one hour before daylight," Sumner saw it as prudent to get his own artillery across the creek and in position to support the attack he clearly expected both corps would be making at first light.³⁷

³⁷ OR 51, pt. 1, 839.

CHAPTER 8
THE WEST WOODS

I

In his 5:50 p.m. dispatch to Sumner on the afternoon of 16 September 1862, McClellan told the general that he should have his corps ready to march at an hour before daylight the next morning. Accordingly, reveille on the morning of 17 September for the Second Army Corps was at 2:00 a.m. As Lieutenant Hitchcock in the nascent 132nd Pennsylvania remembered it, it was a morning like no other. "All realized that there was ugly business and plenty of it just ahead. This was plainly visible in the faces as well as in the nervous, subdued demeanor of all. The absence of all joking and play and the almost painful sobriety of action, where jollity had been the rule, was particularly noticeable." This sobriety characterized the demeanor of the veteran regiments also, but with them there was more of an air of confidence. Lieutenant Colonel John W. Kimball who commanded the 15th Massachusetts that day later wrote, "It has been the subject of much remark that troops never went into battle more cheerfully than did ours that morning, so confident were all that the shattered enemy would be driven ere night across the river."¹

¹ William Lochren, "Narrative of the First Regiment" in *Minnesota in the Civil and Indian Wars, 1861-1865* (St. Paul: Pioneer Press Company, 1891), 26; Frederick L. Hitchcock, *War from the Inside: The Story of the 132nd Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry in the War for the Suppression of the Rebellion, 1862-1863*

The priorities that morning of impending battle were ones that would be honored by even the more modern armies of this day: coffee, ammunition, and weapons. Every soldier in the corps already had a full cartridge box of forty rounds, but on this morning an extra forty rounds were passed out to each man to be carried in his pockets. Weapons were cleaned and readied by the soldiers, and inspected by the regimental officers. Knapsacks were carefully packed with the soldiers' blankets, extra clothing and personal items, and then stacked by company for later pick up. This day each soldier would carry no more than his musket, bayonet, cartridge box, haversack, and canteen. When these preparations were completed, the regiments were called to attention, ranks dressed, and the intervals between companies closed to regulation distance. The same was done at the brigade level, and the divisions of the Second Army Corps were ready to march an hour before daylight as required.²

(Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1904; reprint, Alexandria, VA, Time-Life Books, 1985), 55; Andrew E. Ford, *The Story of the Fifteenth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, 1861-1864* (Clinton, MA: Press of W.J. Coulter, 1898), 192.

² George H. Washburn, *A Complete Military History and Record of the 108th Regiment N.Y. Vols., From 1862 to 1894* (Rochester, NY: Press of E.R. Andrews, 1894), 24; Edward W. Spangler, *My Little War Experience, with Historical Sketches and Memorabilia* (York, PA: York Daily Publishing Company, 1904), 32; John D. Hemmingen, "Diary of John D. Hemmingen, Company E, 130th Pennsylvania," TMs (typescript), 16 September 1862, Michael Winey Collection, Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA; Ford, 193; *History of the First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1864* (Stillwater, MN: Easton & Masterman, Printers, 1916), 197; War Department, *War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 71 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), series I, vol. 19, pt. 1, 275. Hereinafter cited as OR. All references are to Series I unless otherwise noted.

But Sumner received no orders to march, and everything remained quiet for the time being. The soldiers in their tightly packed ranks were left to their own thoughts. An hour or more passed until just after 4:00 a.m. the sky began to brighten. The soldiers already were much relieved that the rain was gone, and now they could discern that the sky remained cloudy and the temperature cool. They would not have “to fight beneath a blistering sun.” But with the brightening sky also came the first sounds of battle from across Antietam Creek. As the historian of the 8th Ohio remembered it, “With daylight came the roar of artillery and the din of battle in Hooker’s front. The Second Corps still remained in the old position, the ranks being kept carefully closed, and ready to move at the note of the bugle.” Some soldiers, though, managed to slip away if only momentarily to get a look at what was happening across the stream. “Some sought the hilltops, some climbed to the crests of straw stacks, and from these elevated positions saw the battle ‘from afar off,’ and saw it plainly, commenting upon it as it progressed.” Private Bowen in the 15th Massachusetts later wrote home about the experience. “I could hear the crack of the muskets and once in a while a volley. I went out on to the hill to watch the progress of the battle. Yonder Hookers [sic] men were hard at it. The air seemed to be alive with bursting shell and the tremendous roar of musketry showed that the Hellish work had commenced in earnest.” Still, no orders arrived to send the corps across the creek to the support of Hooker and Mansfield.³

³ Ford, 192; *History of the First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry*, 197; Franklin Sawyer, *A Military History of the 8th Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry: Its Battles, Marches, and Army Movements* (Cleveland, OH: Fairbanks & Co., Printers, 1881), 76; Roland E. Bowen, *From Ball’s Bluff to Gettysburg . . . And Beyond: The Civil*

The better part of another hour passed before General Sumner at about 6:00 a.m. finally mounted his horse and rode the short distance to army headquarters at the Pry house. Captain Sam Sumner, the general's son and aide, went with him, along with other members of his staff. Captain Sumner later described the general's concern. "The artillery could be heard plainly on the right, and General Sumner was so impressed with the necessity of reaching the field of battle that he, personally, rode over to the army headquarters hoping to facilitate the movement of his command." But such was not to be the case. Sumner did not even get to see McClellan that morning. Captain Sumner recalled, "I don't know if General McClellan was asleep or engaged inside. I know General Sumner was uneasy and impatient We remained outside Headquarters for some time, quite an hour or more as I remember it."⁴

If Sumner was given any news at all concerning the battle—and it is likely that as the army's second ranking officer he was—it was nothing but good news (figure 24). As soon as it was light enough, Hooker renewed the contest of the day before and at about 6:00 a.m. moved forward with his whole corps to the attack, engaging the enemy's main line of battle in a fierce exchange of fire. George W. Smalley, a reporter with the *New*

War Letters of Private Roland E. Bowen, 15th Massachusetts Infantry, 1861-1864, ed. Gregory A. Coco (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 1994), 133.

⁴ Samuel S. Sumner, "The Antietam Campaign," in *Civil War and Miscellaneous Papers*, vol. 14, *Papers of the Historical Society of Massachusetts* (Boston: Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1918; reprint, Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1990), 10; Samuel S. Sumner to George B. Davis, April 4, 1897, John C. Ropes Research Files, Military Historical Society Collection, Boston University, Boston.

York Tribune, was with Hooker that morning, and later that day reported for his readers, “For half an hour after the battle had grown to its full strength, the line of fire swayed neither way.” But then Smalley observed, “The half hour passed, the rebels began to give way, only a little, but at the first indication of a receding fire, Forward, was the word, and on went the line with a cheer and a rush.” It was just at that point that Colonel Strother, who had enjoyed a comfortable night and breakfast at a house in Keedysville, reported for duty at headquarters. He was just in time to join McClellan and others members of the headquarters staff on the hill behind the Pry house from which “they had a splendid view of Hooker’s advance driving the enemy before them in rapid and disordered flight.”⁵

⁵ George W. Smalley, “*New York Tribune Narrative*,” in *The Rebellion Record*, vol. 5 (New York: Putnam, 1863; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1977), 468; David Hunter Strother, “Personal Recollections of the War,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 36 (February 1868): 280. Smalley’s article, a masterpiece of journalistic reporting, was first printed in a *Tribune* extra on 19 September. It would be reprinted a number of times by a number of different newspapers including a second time by the *Tribune* on 20 September.

It was in this atmosphere of success and possibility that, finally, at 7:20 a.m. a staff officer emerged from the house and handed Sumner an order written up by General

Marcy:

The Comdg. General directs that you move Sedgwick and French across the creek by the fords which Capt. Custer will point out to you. You will cross in as solid a mass as possible and communicate with Genl. Hooker immediately. Genl. Richardson's Division will not cross till further orders. You will cross your artillery over the bridge and halt after you cross until you ascertain if Genl. Hooker wants assistance.⁶

In an instant, Sumner and his staff were back in the saddle, and riding toward Sedgwick's and French's divisions. If there was any objection made by Sumner at having to leave Richardson's division behind, there is no record of it, and such an objection was highly improbable from a professional soldier who strongly believed in obeying rather than questioning orders. The fords that the corps would use were just eight hundred yards across the ridge northwest of where the head of Sedgwick's column was waiting. As Sumner planned it, Sedgwick's division led the way to be followed closely by French's. When the fords of the Antietam were reached there was no stopping to remove clothing or shoes, the regimental columns plunged straight ahead into the nearly waist deep water. Several soldiers of the 108th New York who did stop to remove their shoes to avoid getting them wet were accosted by officers "shooting red hot anathemas over such exquisite progressiveness." Once across the stream, the divisions tightened their

⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 275; War Department, Randolph B. Marcy to Edwin V. Sumner, 17 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

formations and continued directly west up the slope of the successive rolling hills toward the height of land, hastening to the sound of Hooker's guns.⁷

The formation adopted by both divisions that morning would prove to be of particular importance to the course of the battle that the corps would fight. Each of the regiments marched with their companies in the "column by the flank" formation (figure 4, page 62). This formation was relatively new to the army, having been introduced with the publication of William J. Hardee's famous *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics* in 1855. The formation was called column by the flank because it was formed by a company directly from the line of battle formation with one command by the officers and one movement by the soldiers. Given the command, "Company Right Face," all of the soldiers of the company would face to the right with the added measure that every second soldier—those in the even numbered files—would take a step to the right, moving up on the right of the

⁷ *History of the First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1864* (Stillwater, MN: Easton & Masterman, Printers, 1916), 198; Louis N. Chapin, *A Brief History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment, N.Y.S.V.* (New York, 1903), 61; Sawyer, 76-7; Washburn, 24. The Pry house was located on the ridge overlooking Antietam Creek at the point of an easterly bend in the creek. There were several fords in the vicinity of the Pry house. Two were upstream at the point where the creek turns sharply east into the bend. Another ford was located downstream at the point where the creek turned again to the south on leaving the bend. The lower ford could properly be called the Neikirk Ford from the farm that was directly on the west side of the creek at that point. This ford was the one that the companies of the 5th New Hampshire had been sent to on the sixteenth to burn a small wooden bridge that was supposed to be there. On the morning of the seventeenth, however, Sedgwick and French used the two upper fords. Those regimental histories that describe the march in detail agree that both divisions marched in a northwesterly direction, or to the right, to get to the fords. The 1st Minnesota history does say that the Neikirk farm was on the west bank at the ford, but even though the Neikirk farm is closer to the lower ford, a lane from the lower of the two upper fords also led to the Neikirk farm at a distance of only five hundred yards.

soldier who had formerly been on their right—those in the odd numbered files. The result was a compact marching column with a front of four soldiers that could be used for movements over long distances without becoming spread out. The column by the flank had the additional advantage of instantly being able to reform the line of battle to the left with one command, “Front.” This movement simply reversed the procedure of forming the column with the odd numbered file soldiers facing to the left and the even numbered file soldiers facing left and at the same time stepping back into their proper place in line on the left of the shoulder of the soldier in the odd numbered file. Hardee’s manual also contained procedures so that the line of battle could be reformed to the front or left of the column. Column by the flank was by this point in the war the standard marching formation of all of the armies. This column formation, however, was strictly a marching formation and not a fighting formation like the column by company or column by division.⁸

With each of the companies in this formation, the regiments formed in a column of companies with each company following the one in front. The brigades then formed in a column of regiments, each regiment following one behind the other, so that the brigade formation was literally a long column of companies marching by the flank. Within each division, the brigade columns marched side by side with about sixty to seventy-five yards separating them (figure 25). In Sedgwick’s division, Gorman’s brigade was on the left,

⁸ William J. Hardee, *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics: For the Exercise and Manoeuvres of Troops When Acting as Light Infantry or Riflemen*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1855), 1: 118-9.

Dana's in the center, and Howard's on the right. French put Max Weber's newly arrived brigade on the left, the brigade of new regiments under Morris in the center, and his own veteran brigade under Kimball on the right. Hazard's battery, the one battery that had not crossed the Antietam the night before, brought up the rear.⁹

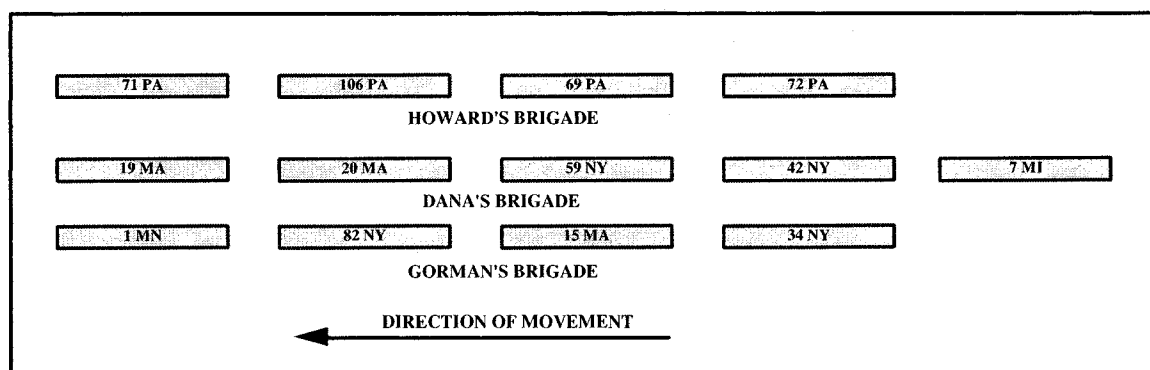


Figure 25: Formation of Sedgwick's Division

The formation adopted by Sumner for the movement of Sedgwick's and French's divisions was based on his understanding of the role that the Second Corps would play in McClellan's plan of battle, and the situation that he expected to find once he reached the battlefield. The Second Corps' mission was to combine with the First (Hooker's) and Twelfth (Mansfield's) Corps in an attack on the enemy's left to drive the enemy to the south, back on Sharpsburg in front of the advancing Fifth (Porter's) and Ninth (Cox's) Corps. The attack on the enemy's left had begun almost two hours earlier, and as Sumner started for the front with his two divisions the reports were that the enemy was indeed

⁹ Max Weber to Antietam Battlefield Board, 10 December 1892, Ezra Carman Papers, Copy at Antietam National Battlefield; S.S. Sumner, "Antietam Campaign," 10; John H. Rhodes, *The History of Battery B, First Regiment Rhode Island Light Artillery in the War to Preserve the Union, 1861-1865* (Providence: Snow & Farnham, Printers, 1894), 121-2; OR 19, pt. 1, p. 305.

being driven south as planned. Accordingly, once he reached the front, Sumner expected to find a situation in which he would be required to adopt one of two courses of action. In the first, the Second Corps would arrive at the front on the left flank of the First and Twelfth Corps' advance and would join them in the attack. In the second, the corps would reach the front coming in behind the First and Twelfth Corps and either provide support for the continuation of their attack, or possibly, if they were fairly used up at that point, pass through them and take over the attack. In either case, the two divisions of the Second Corps would be expected to advance to the south in a formation that facilitated maneuver and the development of their combat power. Given the formation that Sumner adopted in advancing to the front, this would be achieved with one simple command in each regiment, "Front!" On the execution of that command, each regiment and each brigade would instantly be back in the line of battle formation facing to the south and ready to move forward. The divisions would each have three brigade lines of battle, one behind the other at a distance of sixty to seventy yards, giving depth to the formation.¹⁰

In the 7:20 a.m. order to Sumner, McClellan directed that once across the creek Sumner should halt and determine if Hooker needed any assistance on the right. Establishing communication with Hooker was mentioned twice in the order. No halt was made, though. Once across the creek and reformed, Sedgwick's division was started off at once to the west. There was still a long way to go. No doubt one or more staff officers were sent to find Hooker at this point and bring back information concerning his

¹⁰ Samuel S. Sumner to George B. Davis, 4 April 1897, John C. Ropes Research Files, Military Historical Society Collection, Boston University, Boston.

situation. As Sedgwick's division started west from the creek and crested the first ridge beyond the stream, however, Sumner, who was riding with it in the van, began to suspect that all may not be going well (figure 26). Up ahead the sounds of battle were drifting gradually to the north. If Hooker and Mansfield were as successful as the headquarters staff seemed to believe they were, then the sounds of the battle should have been more to the south by now. Still, sounds, especially the reverberating sounds of a battle in rolling terrain, can play deceptive tricks on the ears, so Sumner kept Sedgwick's and French's divisions advancing due west for the time being.

Not long after passing the creek and starting toward the height of land, Sumner made contact with Hooker, perhaps facilitated by one of Sumner's staff officers sent to look for Hooker, or one of Hooker's sent to find Sumner. But at this meeting, Hooker was being carried from the battlefield in an ambulance, incapacitated by a painful wound in the foot. Since there is no authentic record of what passed between these two officers, if indeed there was any substantive conversation between them at all, we cannot know for

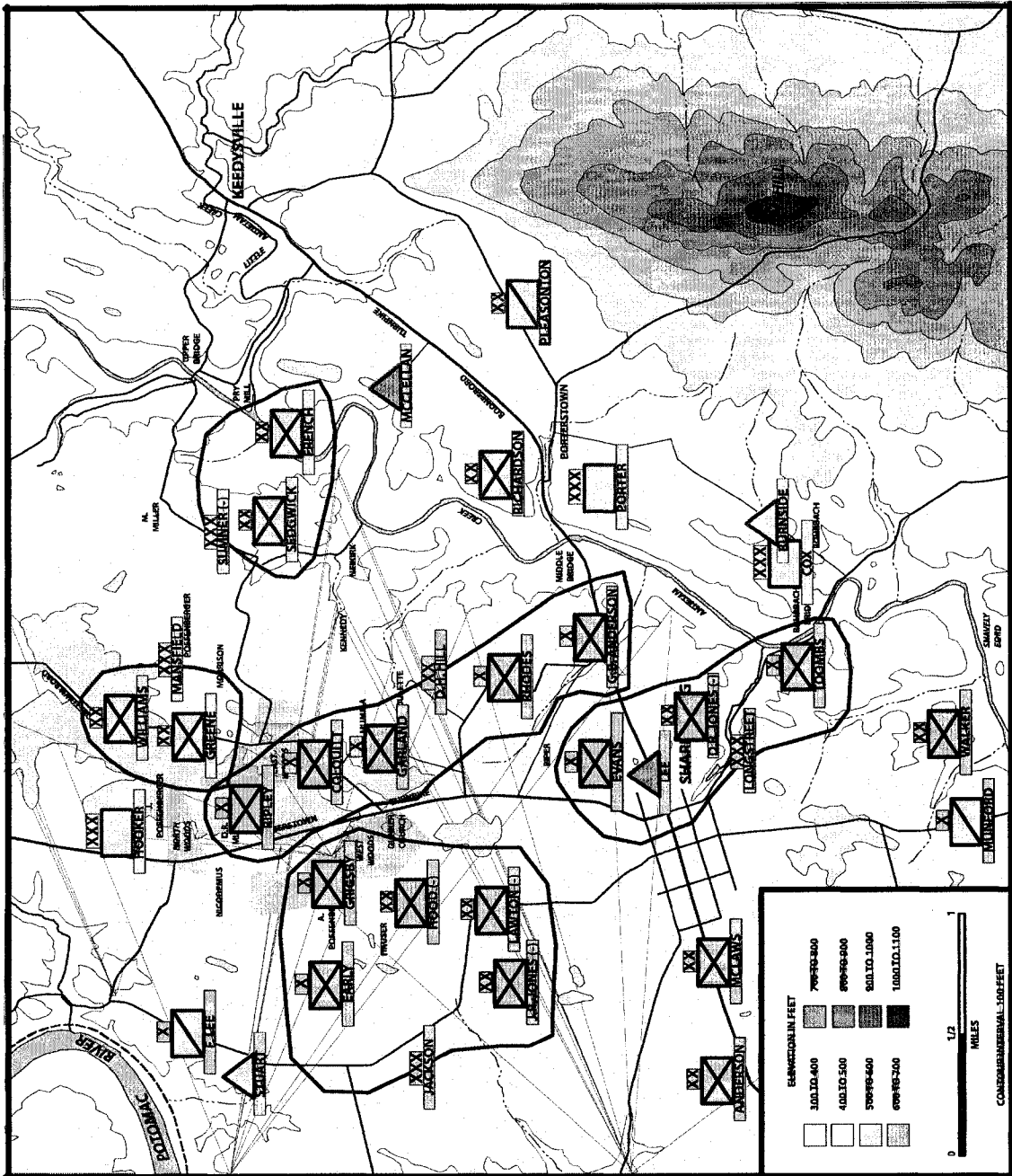


Figure 20: Oostego near Sandburg, N.Y., 17 September 1862.

certain what information or impression Sumner came away with concerning the progress of the battle. Hooker later testified to the Committee on the Conduct of the War that he remembered Sumner addressing him, but that he, Hooker, “was in a state of partial consciousness at the time this happened.” When questioned by the committee concerning the progress of the battle, Hooker went on to say that as he was carried from the field he believed “that we had won a great battle.” Smalley, the *Tribune* reporter who had observed the battle up to that point and was present when Hooker was wounded, can be considered a collaborating witness. He wrote that as Hooker was carried to the rear “he might well leave the field, thinking the battle was won—that his battle was won.” Even if Hooker did not pass this very optimistic impression on to Sumner, surely one or more of Hooker’s staff officers who accompanied him to the rear did. Accordingly, Sumner most likely came away from this meeting with the impression that all still was going well, even if his instincts might by now be telling him otherwise.¹¹

Sending Hooker on his way, Sumner then turned and spurred his horse to catch up with the head of Sedgwick’s column which had continued its march west. No sooner did he catch up than a courier arrived from army headquarters with two dispatches from Colonel Colburn, one for Sumner and one for Hooker. The dispatch to Sumner reinforced the positive impression concerning the decisive progress of the battle to that point, and gave Sumner more specific instructions on what he was to do.

¹¹ Congress, Senate, Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 3 pts., 37th Cong., 3rd sess., 1863, Rep. Com. 108, pt. 1, 581-2; Smalley, “*Tribune Narrative*,” 469.

Gen. Hooker appears to be driving the enemy rapidly. If he does not require your assistance on his right, please push up on his left through the ravine at the head of which the house was burned this morning, getting possession of the woods to the right as soon as possible & push on towards Sharpsburg and a little to its rear as rapidly as possible. Use your artillery freely.¹²

Although Sumner at that time would not have known the names or the circumstances, the burning house that Colburn was referring to was the entire farm of Samuel and Elizabeth Mumma who lived there with their eight children. It would be learned later that the Mummas had been ordered away on the 15th when the Confederates first arrived and occupied the farm, and that the fire that was destroying it had been deliberately set by order of Confederate Major General Daniel Harvey Hill, who feared that the Federals would use the buildings as cover for their sharpshooters. The woods to the right of the Mumma farm that Sumner was to get possession of “as soon as possible,” would later be named by historians of the battle the East Woods.¹³

The note to Hooker, marked 8:30 a.m., was in the same vein as the note to Sumner, and merely informed Hooker of what Sumner was directed to do once he reached the battlefield.

Genl. Sumner has been directed (if you do not require him to assist you on the right) to move up on your left and push forward toward Sharpsburg. P.S. Keep the Genl. fully posted by means of his aides.”¹⁴

¹² War Department, Albert V. Colburn to Edwin V. Sumner, 17 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

¹³ Kathleen A. Ernst, *Too Afraid to Cry: Maryland Civilians in the Antietam Campaign* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1999), 119, 131.

¹⁴ War Department, Albert V. Colburn to Edwin V. Sumner, 17 September 1862, and Albert V. Colburn to Joseph Hooker, 17 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National

Although the meeting with Hooker and the note from Colburn indicated that the enemy was being rapidly pushed to the south, Sumner was now beginning to wonder if that might not be the case. He had noted as he crested the first hill above the creek that the sounds of battle were more to his right in the north than they should have been. Now cresting the second and slightly higher fold of hills, he could see that the smoke from the fight also was more to the north than it should have been. Seven hundred yards directly ahead was the woods that Colburn had ordered him to seize, and it was in and beyond these woods that most of the fighting seemed to be taking place. Perhaps Hooker did need assistance on the right. It had to be obvious to Sumner at this point that he could not simply face front and attack to the south as planned. The initial assault of the Second Corps was going to have to be made to the west. Sumner, therefore, ordered Sedgwick to bring his brigade columns around to the right so that when they faced front forming their lines of battle they would be facing west. For the battle experienced and well drilled officers and soldiers of Sedgwick's division this was a simple maneuver, and it was instantly carried out with all the precision and efficiency of a parade ground practice drill. Just as the division was undertaking this maneuver, it came under the fire of Confederate batteries positioned somewhere well in advance of it to the west and the southwest.

Archives. That both of these messages were carried by the same courier and that both were received by Sumner is concluded from the fact that both were discovered together, along with the 7:20 a.m. order to Sumner, in the same file of telegrams and messages received by the Second Corps. The message to Hooker was obviously sent to him before it was known at headquarters that he was wounded, and obviously never delivered to him but to Sumner who had a staff officer keep and later file both documents together with the records of the Second Corps.

Nevertheless, now in three consecutive lines of battle with Gorman in front, Dana in the center, and Howard in the rear, Sedgwick ordered his division forward toward the East Woods. It advanced under fire as a division of veterans should “with very little wavering.”¹⁵

As the division moved ahead, Sumner, riding with Sedgwick between the first and second lines, began to notice a decrease in the sounds of battle up ahead, both in and beyond the woods. As the division drew closer, he could observe that the woods themselves were not occupied by the enemy, so there would be no need for Sedgwick’s division to have to take them by assault. It was also possible that the woods already were occupied by Federal units. A fairly large formation of Federal soldiers, several regiments at least, perhaps two brigades, seemed to be leaving the southern extent of the woods and continuing on to the south beyond the burning Mumma farm. Perhaps the reports that he had been given concerning the success of Hooker and Mansfield were correct after all. To find out, Sumner and his staff pushed their way through Gorman’s brigade and went on ahead to the East Woods. Like all of the bodies of woods that would be found on the battlefield, the East Woods was a grove of stately oaks, several acres in size, and open under the canopy of leaves with no underbrush, fallen wood, or obstructions other than

¹⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 305; 310-1, 318, 319. Howard is mistaken about facing to the south. Some of the artillery fire directed at Sedgwick’s division probably came from the batteries of Colonel Stephen D. Lee’s artillery battalion positioned on the high ground east of the Dunker Church, although Lee was already beginning to withdraw his batteries to the next ridge to the southwest. There were also batteries on Hauser’s Ridge west of the West Woods, and Carter’s battery on the high ground at the eastern end of the Sunken Road all of which could have contributed to the fire directed at Sedgwick. See Lee’s Report, OR 19, pt. 1, 845 and Antietam Battlefield Board Atlas, Map 7.

the stacked rail fences to be found along its outer perimeter. Sumner could see as he approached the wood that it would present little if any obstacle to the passage of Sedgwick's division.¹⁶

The scene that greeted Sumner as he and his staff reached the near edge of the woods was anything but pastoral. Artillery and even some small arms fire continued to create a rain of leaves and small branches. Hundreds of dead, dying, horribly wounded, and demoralized soldiers from both sides were everywhere giving evidence of a desperate contest. In some places, it was possible to tell where the lines of battle had stood by the dead and wounded who lay as if still in the ranks from which they had fallen. There also were dozens of unwounded Federal soldiers and even a few unarmed Confederate milling about. Many were helping wounded comrades to the rear, others simply had lost their units or themselves in the shock of combat. Off toward the western side of the woods, small groups of soldiers collected behind trees and fired irregularly to the west and southwest. These squads were what remained of whole regiments that only an hour before had gone forward in bold columns with their bright banners flying overhead fortifying their determination. Now they formed an expedient and disjointed line of battle that marked, if not the acme of their advance, at least its consequence. One Federal regiment, though, still very much intact and nearly unbloodied was passing rapidly through the woods to the south in battle formation.¹⁷

¹⁶ Smalley, "Tribune Narrative," 469; Ford, 194; *History of the First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry*, 198.

¹⁷ Oliver Otis Howard, *Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard, Major General United States Army*, 2 vols. (New York: Baker & Taylor Company, 1907; reprint, Harrisburg,

No general officers could be found to appraise him of the situation, so Sumner sent his staff off in search of any who could. In the meantime, he rode slowly forward through the wood, carefully picking his way around the dead and wounded (figure 27). As he did, he crossed two small country roads, one coming from the north, the other from the northeast. At the south edge of the woods they merged and then continued to the southwest. The scene that greeted him at the western edge of the woods yielded even more evidence of a desperate struggle. Beyond the woods lay a large open area of pasture and corn covered with dead and wounded, and more wounded and lost soldiers making their way slowly to the rear. To the west and southwest, he could see the last of some rebel formations, the targets of the soldiers firing from the edge of the tree line, retiring over a ridge toward a half-hidden woodlot that looked to be about eight hundred yards away. Standing directly in front of him at the southeast corner of a large cornfield, was a

PA: Archive Society, 1997), 1:295; Oliver O. Howard, "Personal Reminiscences of the War of the Rebellion," *National Tribune*, 27 March 1884, p. 1; OR 19, pt. 1, 502. The regiment Sumner saw passing through the woods was the 107th New York, Gordon's brigade, Williams's division, Twelfth Corps.

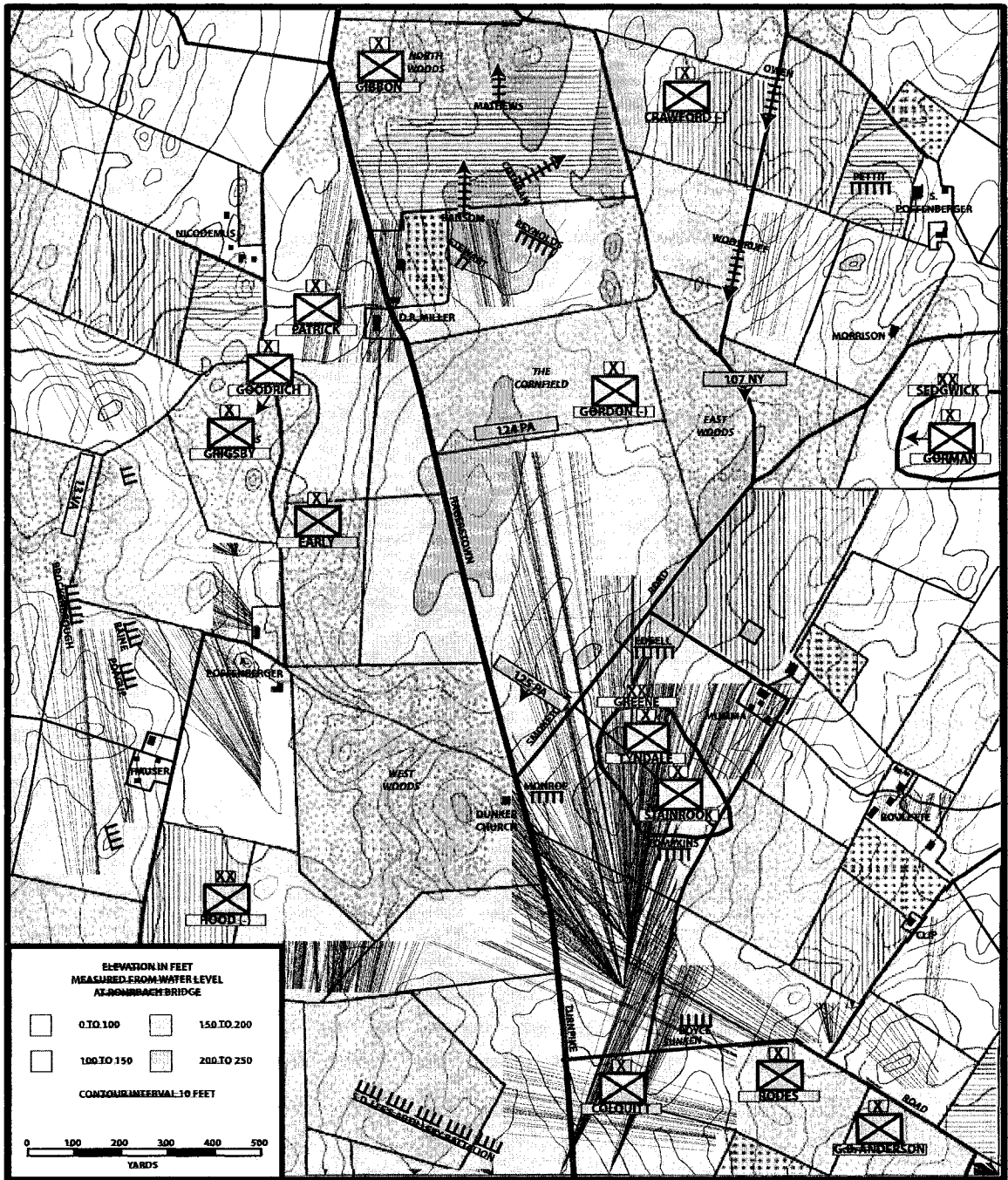


Figure 27. Situation on the Federal Right, 8:45 a.m., 17 September 1862.

brigade of infantry that apparently had just been engaged in driving a rebel force from the open area. This brigade was reforming in two lines of battle with two regiments in each line. The regiments of the front line were comparatively fresh, but the two regiments in the rear seemed to be pretty well shot up.¹⁸

Still awaiting the return of his staff officers, Sumner rode beyond the western edge of the woods a few yards out into the open area in order to get a better view. He first noticed that the front line of the brigade reforming at the edge of the cornfield was extended to the west by a very large regiment. Sumner could not see the full line of this regiment because it disappeared over a ridge. This ridge, which was about four hundred yards from the western edge of the woods, ran almost the entire length of the open area from northeast to southwest cutting off his view to the west. It was the height of land between the Antietam and the Potomac. The only thing that he could make out beyond the ridge was the tops of the trees of that second woodlot which seemed to cover the entire western horizon. Historians of the battle would later designate this body of trees the West Woods. While there was no longer any fighting going on in the open area, the companies of the large regiment that were on and just beyond the ridge still were firing to

¹⁸ OR 19, pt. 1, p. 495, 502, 503-4; John Gibbon, *Personal Recollections of the Civil War* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1928; reprint, Dayton, OH: Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1978), 87. The brigade in the edge of the cornfield was Gordon's, minus the 107th New York. Gordon's report say that when he reformed his brigade in front of the East Woods, the 2nd Massachusetts and 107th New York were in the first line, the 3rd Wisconsin and 27th Indiana in the second. A careful reading of the reports of the commanders of the 107th New York and the 3rd Wisconsin, however, make it clear that the 107th New York was at that point at the southern edge of the woods. The other regiment in Gordon's formation was the 13th New Jersey.

the west and southwest in the direction of the West Woods. Sumner also could tell from the sounds of musketry and the rising smoke that a considerable firefight was going on beyond the ridge and the large regiment, apparently in the vicinity of the northern extent of the West Woods. On the ridge in the northern part of the open area, about five hundred yards behind the reforming brigade, five artillery batteries were in position. At least one of these batteries and a section were firing toward the northern limit of the West Woods, while the others were in the process of limbering up and moving to the rear. Behind these batteries at the extreme northern extent of the open area, perhaps a thousand yards off, was yet another body of woods, that would later be named by historians the North Woods.¹⁹

Sumner next turned his attention to the southern portion of the open area. There a second ridge, only three hundred yards away, ran roughly parallel with the first, blocking his view to the south. Running southwest along the crown of the ridge was a country road that emerged from the southern most point of the East Woods. Looking down the

¹⁹OR 19, pt. 1, 227, 269-70, 491; Ezra Ayers Carman, "The Maryland Campaign of 1862," chapter 17, p. 26, Carman Papers, Library of Congress, Washington; Marsena R. Patrick, *Inside Lincoln's Army, The Diary of Marsena Rudolph Patrick, Provost Marshal General, Army of the Potomac*, ed. David S. Sparks (New York, Thomas Yoseloff, 1964), 149. The large regiment that Sumner saw was the 124th Pennsylvania, Crawford's brigade, Williams's division, Twelfth Corps. The troops fighting in the vicinity of the northern end of the woods were from Goodrich's brigade, Greene's division, Twelfth Corps and Patrick's brigade, Doubleday's division, First Corps. The guns firing were from Reynolds's battery and a section of Campbell's battery under Lieutenant Stewart, both of Doubleday's division. Ransom's battery of Meade's division and Matthew's battery of Ricketts's division, both First Corps, had been in this position for some time and were just withdrawing. Cothran's battery, Greene's division had also been in position here but was now moving toward the East Woods.

swale between the two ridges he could see a distance of eight hundred yards to the edge of the West Woods. Just in front of those woods was a road that came from behind the western ridge to disappear quickly to the south behind the more eastern ridge in the direction of Sharpsburg. Sumner could tell from the heavy post and rail fencing lining both sides of this road that it was the Hagerstown pike. The country road, called by the locals the Smoketown road, joined the turnpike at the end of the swale. Directly beyond the junction of the two roads, set a little back into the West Woods, was a small white building that looked to be either a church or a school house. Sumner later would come to know this building as the local meeting house of the German Baptist Brethren, or as it was more commonly called, the Dunker Church. Sumner noted that a large body of Federal infantry, perhaps even a small brigade, was just entering the woods in the vicinity of this building, apparently with little or no resistance, and that along the Smoketown road a number of rebel prisoners were being marched to the rear.²⁰

To see what was beyond the ridge to the south, Sumner next rode along the edge of the East Woods until he crested the ridge at the point where a farm lane ran off to the southeast from the Smoketown road. At the end of this four hundred yard lane was the burning Mumma farm. About a hundred yards below the crest of the ridge and just to the right of the farm lane, an artillery battery was going into position. From the point where Sumner was, the ridge ran on for another two hundred and fifty yards to the southwest,

²⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, pp. 506, 508, 509. The regiment that Sumner saw entering the woods around the church was 125th Pennsylvania, Crawford's brigade, Williams's division. As a new nine months regiment it was much larger than average. Many of the regimental reports of Greene's division mention capturing a large number of prisoners at this point.

then turned sharply south. In the bowl created by this hook of high ground, what appeared to be a division of Federal infantry was lying down in battle formation. These were the troops that Sumner had seen leaving the southern extremity of the East Woods only a few minutes before, and he took them now as belonging to Mansfield's corps. The orientation of their lines was that of a quarter-circle with their right flank facing to the west, their center to the southwest, and their left flank to the south. Situated below the ridge and its terminating knoll as they were, they were protected from the enemy's artillery fire being directed at the whole of the open area from somewhere beyond the West Woods and from the southwest. In front of the left flank of these troops, a battery of artillery was in position, engaging a Confederate battery located just 300 yards farther to the south in front of a farm lane. Behind that enemy battery, a rebel line of battle was hastily being formed along the farm lane by troops that appeared to be coming from the southeast. Looking back to the southwest, Sumner could see a third Federal battery in position. It was forward of the right flank of the division in the bowl, but on the opposite side of the ridge from it, just across the Hagerstown pike from the Dunker

Church. This battery was firing to the southwest across the pike at a target which Sumner could not see because of the southern turn of the ridge.²¹

As Sumner was completing his visual reconnaissance, his staff officers were at last beginning to return. With them came Brigadier General George G. Meade, who, although junior in rank and experience to the other two division commanders of his corps, had at the direction of Hooker succeeded to command of the First Corps. Rather than the rosy picture of near victory that Sumner probably got from his meeting with Hooker, Meade told Sumner that the First Corps, after driving the enemy nearly to the little white building, had been entirely repulsed and driven to the rear. Meade nevertheless asked Sumner where he wanted the First Corps' line to be reformed. The line that Sumner indicated was most likely one that supported the most forward positions of troops that Sumner had seen during his reconnaissance. But Meade told Sumner "that his men were already a mile or two behind that line."²²

²¹*Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 368; OR 19, pt. 1, 227-8, 308, 505, 509; Carman, chapter 17, p. 7-8. Sumner would soon learn that the troops lying down below the ridge were Tyndale's and Stainrook's brigades of Greene's division. The battery on their left front was one of Sumner's own, Battery A, 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery under the command of Capt. John A. Tompkins. There is no evidence indicating that Sumner did or did not recognize this battery at this time. The other two batteries were Monroe's and Edgell's, both of the First Corps. Monroe's was in front of the Dunker Church, and Edgell's was along the Mumma farm lane.

²² Samuel S. Sumner to George B. Davis, April 4, 1897, John C. Ropes Research Files, Military Historical Society Collection, Boston University, Boston; S.S. Sumner, "Antietam Campaign," 10. In testifying before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, General Sumner's recollection was that the only general officer that could be found at this time was Brigadier General James B. Ricketts of the First Corps, and that Ricketts reported that "he could not raise 300 men of the corps." See *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 368. In the two accounts cited here, however, Samuel Sumner

At least one staff officer from Mansfield's corps, sent by General Williams, reported to Sumner at this time. This officer informed Sumner that General Mansfield had been very seriously wounded earlier in the battle and carried from the field, and that Williams was once again in command of the corps. No doubt, this officer identified the troops which Sumner had seen lying below the ridge as two brigades of Brigadier General George S. Greene's division, the Second Division of Williams's corps, and the brigade reforming in the cornfield in front of the East Woods as the brigade of Brigadier General George H. Gordon of the First Division of that corps. As to the rest of the corps, he could say only that their situation was desperate, the men nearly exhausted, their ammunition spent, and Williams was at that time ordering them "withdrawn to the first line of woods in the rear." Although there is no record of it, the idea of Williams on his own authority ordering a withdrawal at this point in the battle, knowing that reinforcements in the form of the Second Corps were just arriving, coupled with the fact that Williams had sent a staff officer rather than reporting in person, may have angered Sumner and caused him to disparage Williams's conduct before the staff officer.²³

who was there as his father's aide-de-camp recalled that Meade was present and explained the repulse of the First Corps. Neither Meade nor Ricketts mentioned a meeting with Sumner in their reports of the battle. Sears in *George B. McClellan, The Young Napoleon* (p. 309-10) mentions Sumner talking to Meade and Williams.

²³ OR 19, pt. 1, 476; Alpheus S. Williams, *From the Cannon's Mouth, The Civil War Letters of General Alpheus S. Williams*, ed. Milo M. Quaife (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1959; reprint, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 127. Carman says that after sending a staff officer, Williams came himself to brief Sumner on the situation of the Twelfth Corps. See Carman, chapter 17, p. 4. This assertion, however, is not substantiated by Williams's in his report of the battle or in his published letters.

Another staff officer who approached Sumner at this time was his own Chief of Artillery, Major Clarke. Just after Sumner received his orders from army headquarters at 7:20 a.m., Clarke, possibly accompanied by Sumner's senior aide, Major Lawrence Kip, had ridden off to get the six Second Corps batteries that were already across the Antietam into motion. Clarke could now report that five of the batteries—Woodruff's, Owen's, Pettit's, Thomas's and Frank's—were just north of the East Woods and could be positioned in a relatively short time to support any maneuver that Sumner might wish the corps to undertake. The sixth battery, Tompkins's, already was in position and firing. It was this battery that Sumner had seen on the left of Greene's division firing at a rebel battery three hundred yards in its front near the farm lane. A little earlier, Major Kip had told Tompkins to report to Hooker, and Hooker sent Tompkins forward to that position to replace a battery that was nearly out of ammunition.²⁴

As these staff officers reported to Sumner concerning what they knew of the progress of the battle and the current situation, the battle itself seemed to cease almost completely. As Williams put it in a letter home to his family just a few days later, "Not an enemy appeared. The woods in front were as quiet as any sylvan shade could be." There was no question at this point that Hooker's corps was completely used up and out of action, and that Williams's corps after a hard fight was in a desperate situation. Still, progress

The controversy created by Williams's remarks concerning Sumner's decision to attack into the West Woods will be dealt with later.

²⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 308, 309, 326; Theodore Reichardt, *Diary of Battery A, First Regiment, Rhode Island Light Artillery* (Providence: N. Bangs Williams, Publisher, 1865), 64-5.

toward the accomplishment of McClellan's plan of battle had been made, even if at a terrible price. The First and the Twelfth corps had driven the enemy from his initial defensive positions on the height of land, and their most advanced units were within a mile of Sharpsburg. The current lull in the battle indicated one of two things: that the enemy also was used up and withdrawing, or that he was attempting to bring up reinforcements in order to regain the lost ground. In either case, the key to continuing the battle was the woodlot just beyond the height of land, the West Woods. If the attack were to continue according to McClellan's plan those woods would have to be secured. If they remained occupied or could be reoccupied by the enemy, they would be a redoubt blocking any further Federal advances toward Sharpsburg or the country west of the town. If the enemy was bringing up reinforcements for a counterattack, those woods would cover the preparations for it and be the perfect line of departure. But, if the woods were seized and held by the Federals the rebels would be denied a cohesive defensive line north of the town, and be forced to fall back toward the Potomac. There they could be boxed in with the help of Burnside and Porter advancing from the south and east.²⁵

Sumner's reconnaissance and the reports that he had received indicated to him that the West Woods might be practically in Federal hands already. He had noted some fighting beyond the ridge toward the northern extremity of the woods, but that had now died away. Some rebels had been seen withdrawing over the ridge toward the center of the woods, but not in large numbers. Most convincingly, though, he had seen that large

²⁵ Williams, 127; S.S. Sumner, "Antietam Campaign," 10.

Federal formation entering the southern end of the woods around the little white building—the Dunker Church—without encountering any resistance. If Sedgwick's division were committed to an assault into the center of the woods, it would go in on the right flank of the troops at the white building, and on the left flank of whatever troops were fighting in the northern end of the woods. In addition, Sedgwick would enter the woods on the flank and rear of any rebel force that might still be opposing the Federals at the northern end. Sedgwick's flanks in turn would be protected by the Federal troops at either end of the woods. The decision for Sumner was simple. Sedgwick's division must be committed at once to an assault into the center of those woods. At the same time, French's division could be sent in on the left of Greene to drive off the enemy line being formed along the farm lane to the south, preventing it from moving against Sedgwick's rear. Time was of the essence, and Edwin Vose Sumner was not a man to allow the momentum of the attack and the success of the initial assault to slip away in a fog of doubt or unreasonable caution.

II

By the time that Sumner completed his reconnaissance and made his decision to secure the West Woods, Sedgwick had his division waiting in the East Woods. There the three brigade lines of battle were at a halt, and redressing their formations after being slightly disordered on the left as some of the corps batteries—Woodruff's and Owen's—attempted to pass through the woods and Howard's brigade from north to south on the

Smoketown road. It took only seconds for Sumner to explain to Sedgwick what he wanted him do, and to send off aides with orders for French. With a few shouted orders to the brigade commanders, Sedgwick's division was ready. The order to move forward was given and Gorman's brigade stepped out of the woods, went to right shoulder shift, and started off to the west at the double quick. As it did the rebel artillery fire which had ceased for a time was renewed against the advancing regiments.²⁶

Both Sumner and Sedgwick now positioned themselves behind Gorman's line and began to follow it toward the front. Sumner was on the right of the line. As they started across the open area, passing in front of the brigade of troops at the edge of the cornfield, Sumner looked back expecting to see the line of the second of Sedgwick's brigades, Dana's, emerging from the woods. Dana's and Howard's brigades were supposed to be following Gorman at intervals of only fifty to seventy-five yards. But to Sumner's astonishment, Dana's brigade was nowhere to be seen. In a loud and excited voice he exclaimed, "Where is my second line?" Almost immediately, General Gibbon from Hooker's corps, who happened to be nearby and overhear Sumner's exclamation, rode up and offered his services to carry whatever message Sumner might want him to. However, instead of asking Gibbon to go in search of the missing brigade—a staff officer most likely already had galloped off on that errand—Sumner asked him to assist Major Clarke in the placement of the corps batteries. Sumner, of course, knew Gibbon well from regular army days, and knew his reputation as a West Point artillery instructor, author of

²⁶ George A. Bruce, *The Twentieth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), 168.

The Artillerist's Manual, and as the commander of a regular battery. Sumner indicated that Major Clarke would be with the batteries in the vicinity of the East Woods, and Gibbon turned and rode off in that direction.²⁷

Sumner now turned and spurred his horse to catch up with Gorman's brigade, again riding to the right of the brigade line. His reason for wanting to be on the right, rather than to the center or the left, was the fighting at the north end of the West Woods. Up to this point, he had been able to discern this fight only by sound and rising smoke. He could not see what was going on because of the intervening ridge running through the open area. By riding to the right of Gorman's line, Sumner would be able to observe the situation in the northern end of the West Woods just as soon as the brigade crested the ridge. If he should find the enemy there in strength, presenting a threat to the flank of Sedgwick's advance, he would be able to do something about it before it was too late. As he caught up with the infantrymen, Sumner noticed that the 1st Minnesota, on the right of the brigade line, was making this grand charge across the open area with its colors furled and cased. To a man with Sumner's keen and well developed sense of what inspired men, especially volunteers, in battle, this was wrong. Those standards represented the honor and esprit of the regiment and the men who served in it, and in this war the unification cause for which they were fighting. "In God's name, what are you fighting for?" he roared in a voice that could be heard by the entire regiment. "Unfurl those

²⁷Ernest Waite, *History of the Nineteenth Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865* (Salem, MA: Salem Press Co., 1906), 134; OR 19, pt. 1, 311, 319; Gibbon, 87-8. Gorman gives the distance between the lines as fifty yards, Dana says that it was to be seventy-five yards.

colors," he demanded, and the color bearers no doubt were quick to uncase and display the pride of their regiment and themselves.²⁸

Gorman's line very quickly covered the four hundred yards between the western edge of the East Woods and the crest of the ridge. As the line went over the ridge, Sumner got his first look at what lay to the west of the height of land. Just beyond the crest of the ridge was the Hagerstown pike with its stout post and rail fences that the soldiers would have to climb because the fences were too sturdy to be broken down quickly. West of the turnpike several pasture fields intervened between the road and the woodlot. Ahead of Gorman's right flank regiments, the distance to the wood line was approximately three hundred yards. Across these open fields the ground fell away rapidly into a deep but very wide ravine before the northern extension of the woodlot was reached. Just to the left, however, in front of Gorman's center, the intervening pasture was only two hundred yards in width bringing the eastern edge of the woods nearly to the crest of the ridge above the ravine. This lower pasture ran some four hundred yards to the south at which point the woods came all the way out to the turnpike. It was in this area that Gorman's left flank regiments were crossing the road and preparing to enter the tree line. South of that point, the woods bordered the turnpike all the way to the white building. Sumner was no doubt pleased to see that Federal troops did indeed occupy the area on Gorman's right between the crest of the ridge and the woodlot. As it crossed the turnpike, the right flank of the brigade passed over several companies of the large regiment that extended the line of

²⁸Carman, chapter 17, p. 26.

Gordon's brigade in the cornfield, and in continuing across the pasture and down into the ravine it would pass diagonally in front of two other brigades. These brigades seem to have been fighting in tandem in a southwesterly direction across the pasture toward the extreme northern end of the woodlot and already had skirmishers in the woods. As Sumner expected, enemy resistance to Gorman's advance was practically nonexistent and the brigade swept on to the west and disappeared into the trees.²⁹

In leaving the East Woods and advancing to the west, Gorman's brigade, as well as Dana's and Howard's coming behind it, had to pass over the ground where the majority of the fighting had taken place. In a letter home not long after the battle, Private Bowen in the 15th Massachusetts told his uncle, "The field was strewn with dead men where Hooker had fought before us. One reb held up his hand and waved it as if to say, don't hurt me. As I stepped [sic] over him said I, no one will hurt you." Lieutenant John P. Reynolds in Company G, 19th Massachusetts in Dana's brigade stumbled over a dead Confederate color bearer still holding on to his flag. Reynolds quickly stripped the standard from its pole and gave it to one of the regimental commander's orderlies for safe keeping as a trophy, but it was never to be seen again. In crossing the Hagerstown pike, Gorman's soldiers began to receive some small arms fire for the first time. As the men of the 1st Minnesota were climbing the west fence of the pike, a musket ball smashed the leg of Sergeant Sam Bloomer of Company B. He was one of the color bearers that

²⁹OR 19, pt. 1, 244, 314, 317, 514, 515; Patrick, 149; Carman, chapter 17, pp. 26, 51. The troops near the turnpike belonged to the 124th Pennsylvania. The brigades in vicinity of the northern end of the woodlot were Goodrich's of Williams's corps and Patrick's of Hooker's.

Sumner had just ordered to display his flag. Even without doing it under fire, crossing the pike proved to be an especially grim task as the historian of the 19th Massachusetts in the second line behind Gorman's brigade remembered it. "On one side of this turnpike lay rows of union dead,—in some instances taking in every man in the line—while on the opposite side lay the dead Confederates, equally thick, showing how terribly in earnest these lines had been which lay on each side of the narrow road and shot at each other. A terrible sight to go into battle over!"³⁰

As already noted, Dana's and Howard's brigades were to have followed Gorman's at intervals of no more than fifty to seventy-five yards. There was some confusion, however, upon their leaving the East Woods that caused a delay and a lengthening the intervals between the brigades. As Dana came out of the woods, he found immediately in front of him "a line of troops lying on the ground, which I took to be the first line, . . . and I accordingly halted and ordered my men to lie down." It was not long, Dana remembered, before an officer of Sedgwick's staff or perhaps Sumner's rode up, and "I received an order to move forward at double-quick and enter the woods in front." In Howard's brigade there was additional confusion that resulted in its delay in following Dana. As Howard's brigade was just leaving the woods to follow Dana across the open area, a staff officer of Sumner's galloped up and ordered Howard to send a regiment to the support of the brigades that Sumner had just seen fighting their way toward the northern end of the West Woods. Howard halted his brigade and immediately ordered away the

³⁰Bowen, 134; Waitt, 135; *History of the First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry*, 200.

71st Pennsylvania, which was on the right of the brigade line of battle. But no sooner had these Pennsylvanians started off than heavy small arms fire was heard from deep inside the West Woods indicating that Gorman's brigade finally had made contact with what might be the enemy's main line. Sedgwick now suddenly appeared and ordered Howard to continue forward with his whole brigade and to close up in support of the other brigades of the division. Howard delayed just long enough for the 71st Pennsylvania to return and resume its position in line before moving his brigade over the crest of the ridge,

across the fences of the Hagerstown Turnpike, and on toward the West Woods where Gorman and Dana had gone.³¹

As Dana and Howard worked to get their brigades across the open area, Gorman, well ahead of them, continued his drive deeper into the West Woods (figure 28). Like the East Woods, the West Woods was open below the canopy and not a significant obstacle to the advance of the regimental formations of the brigade. Gorman reported that it was here “where the enemy’s heavy lines of infantry first came into view, the front of which retired in considerable disorder before our advance.” As Sumner had hoped, Gorman’s brigade had come into the wood on the flank and rear of the enemy force fighting against the two Federal brigades attacking toward the northern extension of the woodlot. Gorman now pressed his brigade forward through the woods and down into the ravine pushing the enemy ahead of him. He wrote, “We pursued them until we passed the strip of woods and emerged into the edge of a field.” Here the enemy chose to make a stand among the buildings, haystacks, hedgerows, fences, and orchard trees of the Alfred Poffenberger farm

³¹OR 19, pt. 1, 305, 320, 495; Charles Albert Whittier, “Reminiscences of the War, 1861-1865, or Egotistic Memoirs,” TMs (photocopy), Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, Boston Public Library, Boston, 5; Richard Elliott Winslow III, *General John Sedgwick, The Story of a Union Corps Commander* (Novato, CA: Presidio Press, 1982), 46. The brigade behind which Dana had his men lay down could only have been Gordon’s, or at least a part of it. In his report, Gordon says that he reformed his brigade at the edge of the East Woods, but later says that two of his regiments, the 3rd Wisconsin and the 27th Indiana, were sent out into the open area and were laying down under the ridge. The staff officer sent to get Dana moving toward the West Woods may have been Lieutenant Charles A. Whittier, and aide of Sedgwick’s. In his memoir, Whittier tells of being sent by Sedgwick, after discussing the matter with Sumner, to bring up the rear two lines.

situated on the very edge of the woods and at the deepest part of the ravine. The Confederate infantry was supported by several batteries and some additional infantry positioned on the slope and high ground that constituted the western side of the ravine and overlooked the farm and the woodlot. Gorman remembered that on reaching the western edge of the woods “my whole brigade became hotly engaged, giving and receiving the most deadly fire it has ever been my lot to witness. Although the firing was not so rapid, it was most deadly, and at very close range. We also had to stand the most terrific fire of grape and canister, which told fearfully on the three right regiments of the brigade.”³²

What Gorman did not know, however, was that his whole brigade was not advanced to the far edge of the woodlot as he believed. At some point in crossing the open area, Gorman had ordered his regiments to move at a right oblique in order to shift the brigade more toward the northern end of the woods. Undoubtedly, this was to ensure that the brigade closed with those Federal brigades already fighting in the northern portion of the woods on Gorman’s right flank. The 34th New York, however, on the extreme left of the brigade line did not get the order to right oblique, and so it continued toward the West Woods with its left flank guiding on the Smoketown road. This brought the New Yorkers into the woods just to the right of the Dunker Church. Colonel James A. Suiter, the regimental commander, was at this point forced to halt the regiment because of another Federal formation immediately in front of him. Riding forward he found that it was the

³² OR 19, pt. 1, 311.

125th Pennsylvania, one of those brand new nine months regiments just recently assigned to the Twelfth Corps. Although Suiter did not know it at the time, this was the formation of troops that Sumner had seen entering the woods when he made his reconnaissance just a few minutes before. It was the formation that Gorman was supposed to be just to the right of so that it covered Sedgwick's left flank. As the fighting developed along Gorman's front on the west edge of the West Woods, what Gorman, Sedgwick, and Sumner did not realize was that the brigade's left flank was completely in the air with a gap of some three hundred yards between it and the next nearest Federal unit to the left. That gap encompassed a deep ravine that came into the West Woods from the southwest and extended in an easterly direction nearly all the way through the woods to the Hagerstown pike. The gap should have been filled by the 34th New York, and would have been filled by the 34th New York had it gotten the order to right oblique with the rest of the brigade.³³

From his position on the right, Sumner continued to observe as Gorman's brigade swept into and through the West Woods. Satisfied that everything on the right was secure, he turned the head of his horse toward the south to see for himself how things were going on the left. Moving along behind Gorman's active line of battle, he picked his way south and east until he was again on the crest of the ridge near the Hagerstown pike. Here he observed Dana's brigade crossing the turnpike and pasture, and entering the woodlot to close up behind Gorman. Sumner then crossed the lower pasture to the east,

³³ OR 19, pt. 1, 316.

and, getting out on the turnpike, rode south toward the Dunker Church. His thoughts were now beginning to focus on what should be done next. With the West Woods in Federal hands, he could begin to think about how best to carry out his orders from McClellan to continue the attack to the south and west. Reaching the vicinity of the white brick church, Sumner noted that the battery that had been in position just across the pike was withdrawing, one of its pieces needing to be dragged back by hand using a prolong. The battery now was going into position five hundred yards in the rear along the north side of the Smoketown road just outside of the East Woods. The battery that had been in position just south of the Smoketown road along the lane to the Mumma farm was withdrawing back into the East Woods. Greene's division, the troops that Sumner had seen lying down on the eastern slope of the ridge at the southern end of the open area, was still there, and was still supported by Tompkins's battery on the left. Sumner also observed that French's division in battle formation was moving forward on the left of Greene's division.³⁴

Now in front of the Dunker Church, Sumner could see down the Hagerstown pike nearly to the village of Sharpsburg, although his view of the terrain to the west of the road was restricted by the woods that continued south from the white building and only very gradually pulled away from the road. Looking in the direction of Sharpsburg, Sumner

³⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, p. 228; J. Albert Monroe, "Battery D, First Rhode Island Light Artillery at the Battle of Antietam, September 17, 1862" in *Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States* (Reprint, Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1993), vol. 36, p. 252. Hereinafter cited as MOLLUS. S.S. Sumner, "Antietam Campaign," 11.

could see at a distance of about five hundred yards, Confederate guns being withdrawn from a position they had occupied on a ridge just on the west side of the turnpike. Immediately across the road from these guns was the left flank of the Confederate infantry line that Sumner had earlier seen forming along the farm lane.

What was now beginning to trouble Sumner was the fact that Sedgwick's division was stopped at the western edge of the West Woods, and he could tell by the sound that the fighting there was growing more intense, especially toward the southern extremity of the woods. If the corps was going to accomplish McClellan's orders and continue the advance to the south and west, then Sedgwick would have to overcome that resistance and break out of the woods. Only one third of his division was engaged thus far, so it was likely that he had the necessary forces to effect the breakout. In addition, there were those two brigades of Greene's division just across the road, and French's division beyond that. But French had been ordered to engage the Confederate line along the farm lane, and could not be recalled to support Sedgwick. Still, if French were ordered to press his attack, it would aid Sedgwick in breaking out from the woods, and in continuing his attack. The two divisions would then be able to drive the enemy back in front of Burnside's and Porter's corps which by now should be across the Antietam and approaching the town from the east and southeast. To support his own two divisions in this movement, Sumner would use the troops of Greene's division, those two brigades at the northern end of the woods, and Gordon's brigade that was still in the vicinity of the East Woods. From where Sumner was sitting he could see no Confederate force that

could stop him. Accordingly, several staff officers were sent to order Greene to get his division ready to move forward, while several others, including Captain Sumner, were dispatched with orders for French “to make a vigorous attack in order to aid the advance of the leading division.” Having accomplished this, Sumner himself set out to find Sedgwick and appraise him of the plan.³⁵

As all of this was going on, both Sedgwick and Gorman were beginning to discover the problem of the unsupported left flank (figure 29). Going in search of the 34th New York, Gorman discovered the 125th Pennsylvania in the woods some three hundred yards across the ravine to his left. Captain Church Howe, one of Sedgwick’s aides, was searching the southern extremity of the woods as well. He came across the 34th New York in the vicinity of the Dunker Church. Colonel Suiter told Howe that he was unsupported on his left, and that he thought the enemy might be there in strong force.

³⁵ S.S. Sumner to G. B. Davis, 4 April 1897, John C. Ropes Research Files, Military Historical Society Collection, Boston University; S.S. Sumner, "Antietam Campaign," 11; OR 19, pt. 1, 510, 512. Captain Sumner's letter places General Sumner in front of the Dunker Church at the time that he called for French's division to come on the left of Sedgwick. The reports of Col. Lane establish that Sumner attempted to elicit the support of Greene's division.

Howe told Suiter that he thought whoever was there were friends. Lieutenant William R. Wallace of Company C volunteered to go out on the left and find out. After a few minutes he returned saying that indeed the enemy was out there in strong force and maneuvering against the left of the 34th New York. At that point, Lieutenant Richard Gorman of Gorman's staff arrived. Suiter asked him to find the brigade commander and inform him of the problem. At the same time, Howe rode off to find Sedgwick and appraise him of the situation.³⁶

Another officer who was becoming acutely aware of the open flank on the division's left was Dana. After crossing the Hagerstown pike, the left regiment of his brigade, the 7th Michigan, entered the woods at the southern end of the lower pasture, the point where the woods came all the way out to the pike at the head of the ravine between the left of Gorman's line and the right of the 125th Pennsylvania and 34th New York. Dana later reported that "hardly had my left regiment entered the woods when a tremendous musketry fire opened on my left front, apparently perpendicular to my line of march and flanking the first line [Gorman's]." Dana's response was to allow his three right regiments to continue on to close up with Gorman's line, while he ordered the 42nd New York to change front to the left and move down into the woods and the ravine to assist the 7th Michigan. Although it was not true, Dana believed at the time that whatever enemy force was down in the woods to his left had "apparently broken through the first line." By leading two of his regiments into the woods at that point, though, Dana without

³⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 311, 316.

knowing it was about to plug the gap between the left of Gorman's line and the right of the 125th Pennsylvania—the gap that had been created when the 34th New York became detached from Gorman's line while crossing the open area.³⁷

When Sumner left the Dunker Church to go in search of Sedgwick, he rode north along the Hagerstown pike to the lower pasture. There he found Howard's line stopped only a few yards from the West Woods. Although neither Howard nor any of his men could see the enemy in front, they were close enough to the fighting that bullets were whizzing through the ranks, forcing them "to protect themselves by taking advantage of the rocks, trees, and hollows, or by the old plan of lying down." Sumner passed through Howard's line and entered the woods where he found the three remaining regiments of Dana's line only a few yards in the rear of Gorman's. Like Howard's line, Dana's regiments were suffering from the fire directed at Gorman. As the historian of the 19th Massachusetts on the right of the brigade line recalled, "It was awful to lay there with no chance to reply, but Col. Hinks sat on his horse near the centre of the regiment, amid the heaviest fire of which he seemed to be the special object, watching the movements of the enemy, and as his men remarked, exhibiting no consciousness of danger." To the left of the 19th, the men of the 20th Massachusetts despite taking heavy casualties themselves "stood leaning on their muskets, and some of the officers commenced smoking."³⁸

³⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 320.

³⁸ Howard, *Autobiography*, 1: 296; Waitt, 137; Bruce, 169.

Still looking for Sedgwick, Sumner continued forward until he was directly behind Gorman's line. The men of that brigade were loading and firing furiously. In the approximately fifteen to twenty minutes since they had reached the western edge of the woodlot, each man had fired about half of the eighty rounds that he carried into battle. Private Bowen of the 15th Massachusetts wrote home, "I shot 4 times at an officer on a horse, but did not fetch him, so I gave up and went to fireing [sic] into the crowd wich [sic] were much nearer." As Sumner rode along the rear of this regiment, he was confronted by a very excited Lieutenant Colonel John W. Kimball, the regimental commander. Kimball told Sumner that for some unknown reason the 59th New York of Dana's brigade, which had been in position some thirty or forty yards behind the 15th Massachusetts, suddenly moved forward and now was firing into the rear of the Bay Staters killing and wounding many of them. Kimball went on to say that he had been unable to get the New Yorkers either to advance to the front or to stop shooting into the rear of his regiment and he pleaded with Sumner to do something about it. Kimball reported that Sumner "immediately rode to the right of the Fifty-ninth Regiment, ordered the firing to cease and the line to retire, which order was executed in considerable confusion."³⁹

³⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 311, 313; Bowen, 134; Carman, chapter 17, pp. 44-5. Carman's narrative has this incident occurring after the discovery of the Confederate attack on Sedgwick's left. But Colonel Kimball's report places it prior to that. The forward movement of the 59th New York was most likely in response to the fire it was taking from the front, and the fact that it was one of the regiments that Dana had allowed to continue forward as he supervised the 42nd New York and 7th Michigan on the brigade left.

As the 59th New York ceased its firing and began to withdraw to its former line in the rear, Sumner became painfully aware that something else was now going terribly wrong. The firing down in the woods on the left of Sedgwick's division was growing more intense and seemed to be coming nearer. Suddenly, Major Chase Philbrick of the 15th Massachusetts rode up and pointed out to Sumner a large enemy force in the ravine to the left, advancing on the flank of the division. Looking back toward the rear lines, Sumner could see the lower pasture that he had crossed only minutes before filled with hundreds of disorganized soldiers fleeing for the rear. And not just any soldiers; they were Second Corps soldiers, his soldiers! It was completely unbelievable, it was impossible, but it was true and something had to be done about it immediately. "My God!" he was heard to exclaim, "We must get out of this."⁴⁰

Sumner realized at once that the enemy force coming up out of the ravine had somehow gotten into the southern end of the woods and now was driving north into the left flank and rear of Sedgwick's division. Perhaps they had broken the line from the front or perhaps they had gotten between Sedgwick's regiments and the troops that had preceded him into the woods near the Dunker Church. There was no time, though, for an analysis of what had gone wrong, only for action. The solution was to get Howard to reposition his brigade to meet the enemy's attack. He must have the brigade fall back to a better position, form a line facing to the south, stop the Confederate advance, and, if

⁴⁰ Francis A. Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Olde Soldier Books, n.d.), 106; Ford, 196; Waitt, 137; Bruce, 169.

possible, drive the rebels back. With this in mind, Sumner turned and rode toward Howard's line. As he rode along behind those regiments, he tried to get them up and moving through shouted orders and gestures. "Back boys," he kept calling to them "for God's sake move back; you are in a bad fix." Howard at that time was to the extreme right of his brigade line. He later remembered that his first intimation that something was wrong was when he saw Sumner riding toward him and motioning violently with his arms concerning what he wanted Howard to do. "The noise of the musketry and artillery was so great that I judged more by the gestures of the general as to the disposition he wished me to make than by the orders that reached my ears." The position that Sumner wanted Howard's brigade to take up was along the stacked rail fence across the north end of the lower pasture. Given the line of battle formation that the brigade was in, his was a difficult maneuver, even for the best of regiments not under enemy fire. In later years, however, Howard came to believe that if he had not been so new to the brigade he could have done it. He would later write, "I think, even then, I could have executed such an order with troops which, like my old brigade, had been some time commanded by myself, and thoroughly drilled; but here, quicker than I can write the words, the men faced about and took the back track."⁴¹

Actually, the only regiment of Howard's to break was the regiment on the extreme left, the 72nd Pennsylvania (figure 30). Disrupted by the rush of refugees from the ravine in the West Woods, it recrossed the open area to the East Woods even as the rest of

⁴¹ Carman, chapter 17, p. 42; Howard, *Autobiography*, 1: 296; OR 19, pt. 1, 306; Howard, "Personal Reminiscences," *National Tribune*, 3 April 1884, p. 1.

Howard's brigade withdrew toward the North Woods. The 72nd rallied once it reached the East Woods, but it would be well into the afternoon before it found its way back to the brigade. With the collapse of the 72nd, the other three regiments of the brigade began to spontaneously move off to the north, albeit in good order. Howard managed to get the 106th Pennsylvania, the third regiment from the left, to hold for several minutes behind the rail fence across the northern end of the lower pasture, the position that Sumner had indicated he wanted Howard to hold. From there the 106th briefly checked the onrush of the Confederates, firing volleys at them as they left the woods and started north across the pasture. This gave Howard the opportunity to rally the 69th Pennsylvania, which had been in line second from the left, and position them to fire at the oncoming enemy. The 71st Pennsylvania on the right of Howard's line held its position long enough for its

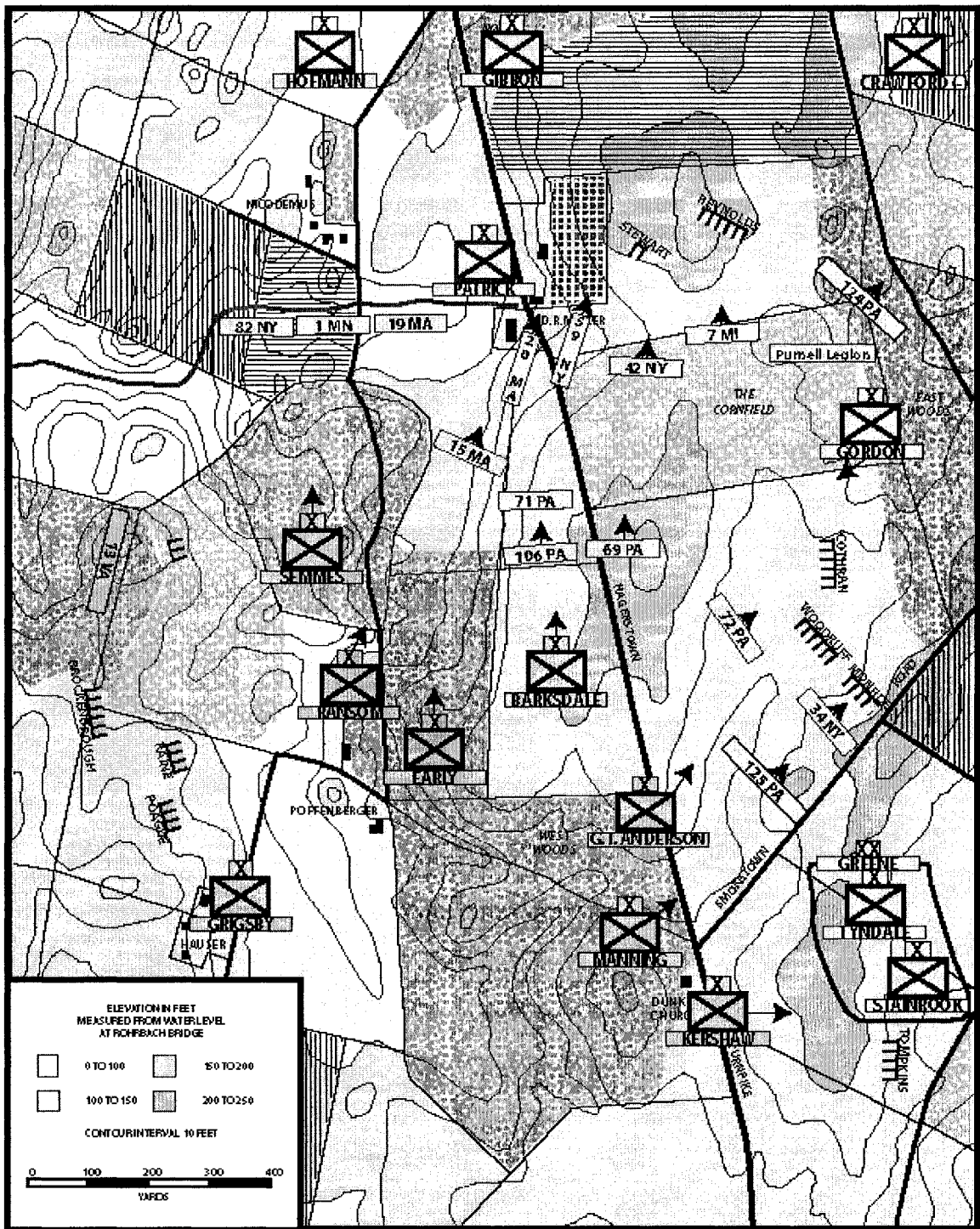


Figure 30. Withdrawal of Segdwick's Division from the West Woods, 9:45 a.m., 17 September 1862.

front to clear so that it could take the enemy under fire. Although apparently not working together, these three regiments made a fighting withdrawal back across the open area to the North Woods where they were finally reformed as a brigade.⁴²

Although Howard's was the first of Sedgwick's brigades to turn away from the enemy, his left regiment was not the first to be attacked and broken. The crisis had started down in the ravine where Dana had taken the 7th Michigan and the 42nd New York. Just as these two regiments were about to take up a position that would have plugged the gap between the left of Sedgwick's line and the 125th Pennsylvania, they were subjected to a terrible concentration of fire from enemy units advancing up the ravine against them. In his final report, Dana described what happened. "The Forty-second moved nobly up to its work, but before it was formed in its new position, and whilst it was in disorder, the enemy was close up on it, and the fire which was poured upon it and the Seventh Michigan was the most terrific I ever witnessed." Dana went on to report that both regiments were eventually shattered by this fire, and the remnants began to withdraw from the woods, though this was not until "after nearly half of the officers and men were placed hors de combat." In leaving the woods, the survivors fled through the ranks of Howard's left regiment, the 72nd Pennsylvania, disrupting it, and then continued back across the open area to the North Woods before Dana and the regimental officers were finally able to get them to reform. Here Dana found that he had

⁴²OR 19, pt. 1, 307, 318; Carman, chapter 17, pp. 43-4, 48; Isaac Jones Wistar, *Autobiography of Isaac Jones Wistar, 1827-1905, Half a Century in War and Peace* (Philadelphia: Wistar Institute of Anatomy and Biology, 1937), 404-5.

been wounded by a musket ball, so he directed Colonel Norman J. Hall of the 7th Michigan to take command of the two regiments present, and sent an aide to find the senior regimental commander, Colonel William R. Lee of the 20th Massachusetts, and tell him to assume command of the brigade. Dana then left the field to seek medical assistance.⁴³

While Dana was attempting to rally the 7th Michigan and the 42nd New York, his remaining three regiments were still in position in the West Woods with their left flank now completely open. The first indication that any of these regiments had concerning their situation was when they discovered the enemy attacking their left and rear. Private James Peacock in the 59th New York on the left of the line, wrote home that the regiment was “completely flanked on the left and in two minutes more would have been prisoners if gen [sic] Sumner himself had not rood [sic] in through the terrific fire of the enemy and brought us off.”⁴⁴

In the 20th Massachusetts, the next regiment to the right, the rebels were suddenly sighted in the rear, not twenty rods away. The cry, “The enemy is behind us!” was raised, but not everyone in the regiment was alerted. Captain Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. observed an Irishman of Company G down on one knee calmly loading and firing to the rear of the regiment. Holmes shouted to the man that he was firing into his own ranks.

⁴³ OR 19, pt. 1, 318, 320, 321.

⁴⁴ James Peacock as quoted by his father Jonathan Peacock to another son, Erastus Peacock, 27 October 1862. TMs (photocopy), Fifth Maryland Unit File, Antietam National Battlefield, Sharpsburg, MD.

When the soldier persisted, Holmes struck him on the back of the neck with the flat of his sword, knocking him over. It was then that Holmes realized that the enemy was everywhere behind the regiment. It was an impossible situation. The regiment attempted to face about “but was so crowded in the centre of the division that only a few could fire without killing men on our own side.” It was at this point that Sumner, probably in the process of moving the 59th New York to the rear, ordered the 20th to fall back to the right and rear. The regiment maintained its composure and “retired by the right flank with arms at a shoulder and at the ordinary step.” Sumner accompanied them walking his horse and “keeping all near him steady.”⁴⁵

The 19th Massachusetts was the most fortunate of Dana’s regiments because it was on the far right of the line, and therefore not only had the most time to react but some space to maneuver as well. Although officers and soldiers were falling everywhere about him, Colonel Hinks calmly directed the regiment in a change of front and marched it north and out of the woods until he found a stonewall that he thought a suitable place to take position and resist the further advance of the enemy.⁴⁶

Gorman was probably the first officer in Sedgwick’s division to realize that there was a problem on the left. He had been across the ravine on his left to discover the gap between his brigade and the 125th Pennsylvania, and one of his aides had been informed

⁴⁵Bruce, 169; Catherine Drinker Bowen, *Yankee from Olympus* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1944; reprint, New York: Book of the Month Club, 1980), 172.

⁴⁶ John G.B. Adams, *Reminiscences of the Nineteenth Massachusetts Regiment* (Boston: Wright & Potter Printing Company, 1899), 44-5; Waitt, 138-9.

of enemy activity on the left of the 34th New York in the vicinity of Dunker Church, which he no doubt communicated to Gorman. Gorman attempted to report the matter to Sumner when he was behind the 15th Massachusetts talking with the regimental commander. Gorman said that he “informed the general that my left must be supported or I could not hold the position.” It was just at this point that Major Philbrick rode up and pointed out the enemy advancing through the ravine. Without answering Gorman, Sumner rode off immediately toward Howard’s brigade, but Gorman “heard Maj. Gen. Sumner directing the third line to face about, in order to repel the enemy, which had broken our left, supposing the design to be to take up a better position than the one just previously occupied.”⁴⁷

Gorman reported that the attack of the enemy on the flank of his brigade “was so sudden and in such overwhelming force that I had no time to lose, for my command could have been completely enveloped and probably captured.” Gorman was no doubt correct because he had the enemy in front to contend with as well as on his flank and rear. At the same time that the attack was beginning on the flank and rear, Gorman perceived an enemy column making for his right front. He then gave an order to his regiments “to move quietly by the right flank so as to unmask the second and third lines, to enable them to direct their fire to check the rapid advance of the enemy on my rear.” However,

⁴⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 311, 316.

Gorman found that the second and third lines were already gone, and the order reached no one except Colonel Alfred Sully of the 1st Minnesota on the extreme right.⁴⁸

Colonel Kimball of the 15th Massachusetts on the left of the line did not need orders. Finding his regiment caught in a deadly crossfire, he “immediately and without orders ordered my command to retire, having first witnessed the same movement on the part of both the second and third lines.” According to the regimental historian, the movement was made in good order and that after retiring about one hundred yards to the right and rear the regiment faced about and with a volley checked the advancing foe. The regiment continued out of the woods to the northeast, crossed the open area to the North Woods where it was under the cover of friendly artillery. Gorman was there also and ordered the regiment into position. Kimball was proud of the fact that the regiment “retired slowly and in good order, bringing off our colors and a battle-flag captured from the enemy.” Apparently, though, this was not the experience of every soldier in the 15th. Private Bowen wrote home saying, “All hands ran for dear life. I pulled to the left to get out of range of the guns and got off safe and sound. The rebs chased us like the Devil for about a half or 3/4 of a mile when our batteries opened on them with grape and they give up the chase. . . . No God Damned Southerner is a going to catch me unless he can run 29 miles an hour. That’s my *gate*.”⁴⁹

⁴⁸ OR 19, pt. 1, 311.

⁴⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 313; Ford, 197; Bowen, 135.

To the right of the 15th Massachusetts was the 82nd New York. Colonel Henry W. Hudson kept this regiment in position until it was clear that it was being outflanked, and he received an order to fall back. He noted in his report that he did not “leave until the two brigades in our rear were falling back and the regiments on our left [only the 15th Massachusetts was on his left] were moving.” Hudson moved the regiment almost due north to the edge of the woodlot where he found the 1st Minnesota under Colonel Sully. Sully was the senior colonel of the brigade so Hudson reported to him for orders, and Sully had the 82nd New York form on the right of the 1st Minnesota. Together the two regiments withdrew from the woods, coming out on the right of the 19th Massachusetts of Dana’s brigade, already positioned behind its stone wall. All three regiments now came under Sully’s command. He held these regiments at the stone wall until he was threatened on the right and forced to withdraw. A second position was taken up behind another stone wall on the farmstead of Jacob Nicodemus until the right again was threatened and the three regiments again were forced to withdraw. In their third position just north of the Nicodemus farm and opposite the North Woods, the regiments received additional support in the form of a section of artillery and a small brigade from Hooker’s corps under Lieutenant Colonel J. William Hofmann, which had not been previously engaged. Here the tide of the Confederate attack finally ebbed.⁵⁰

One of the officers who might have been able to orchestrate a more orderly fighting withdrawal from the West Woods, or even organize an effective counterattack was the

⁵⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 314, 317.

division commander, Major General John Sedgwick. But when the Confederate attack against the left of his division began, Sedgwick was not with the main body. Alerted to the plight of the 34th New York by his aide, Lieutenant Howe, Sedgwick had ridden across the ravine and was near the Dunker Church to judge the situation for himself. Colonel Suiter, the 34th's commander, reported that as Sedgwick moved down the line of his regiment "he discovered the situation of my command, and that the point could not be held by me, and gave the order for me to retire, which I did." By this time, however, the enemy's attack up the ravine against the left of Sedgwick's division was fully developed and Sedgwick could not recross the ravine to the main body of the division. In addition, the attack had enveloped both the right and left of the 125th Pennsylvania in front of the 34th New York, and the 125th was giving way. Sedgwick had no choice but to accompany the 34th New York as it left the woods and started back across the open area along the Smoketown road toward the East Woods followed by the 125th Pennsylvania.⁵¹

Once back at the East Woods, Sedgwick helped to rally and position both the 34th New York and the 125th Pennsylvania in support of some batteries which were in position there. One of these was Battery D, 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery under the command of Captain J. Albert Monroe. This was the battery that Sumner had seen across from the Dunker Church during his original reconnaissance, and later saw withdrawing to its present position on the immediate right of the Smoketown road at the edge of the East

⁵¹ OR 19, pt. 1, 316; John Sedgwick, *Correspondence of John Sedgwick, Major-General*, 2 vols. (New York: De Vinne Press, Printed for Carl and Ellen Battle Stoeckel, 1902-3), 2: 85.

Woods. It was behind this battery that the 34th New York and the 125th Pennsylvania were positioned. Another battery was just going into position farther out in the open area to the right front of Monroe's battery. Sedgwick might well have recognized this battery for it was one of his own, Battery I, 1st US Artillery under the command of Lieutenant George A. Woodruff. This was the first battery of the Second Corps that Major Clarke, the corps artillery chief, had brought forward that morning. After receiving a request from Sumner to help with the positioning of the corps batteries, General Gibbon had found Clarke in the East Woods. Gibbon told Clarke that he knew of a good position for a battery to support the then advancing troops of Sedgwick's division. Clarke gave Gibbon Woodruff's battery which was placed in the position that Sedgwick now found it.⁵²

These batteries were in place not a moment too soon, for just at that point the enemy infantry that had driven Sedgwick's division from the West Woods came bursting out into the open area in pursuit. As soon as the front of his battery was clear of the troops of Sedgwick's division who were rapidly withdrawing back across the open area, Woodruff opened on the oncoming Confederate infantry with canister, thirty rounds from each of his six guns. Monroe's battery joined in the effort. Being armed with smoothbore twelve-pounder Napoleons, both of these batteries were ideally suited for this kind of work, and the enemy was soon forced to retire back across the turnpike to the relative safety of the woods. Woodruff reported that the enemy remained in the woods "and we

⁵² OR 19, pt. 1, 228, 306, 309, 316; Gibbon, 87-8.

continued our fire, using spherical case or canister according to their distance at different times.”⁵³

As all of this was happening, Clarke was attempting to bring another of the Second Corps’ batteries south through the East Woods, Owen’s Battery G, 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery. In his report Owen said that after emerging from the woods “the head of my column had hardly got into the field when our infantry came retreating over the hill, closely followed by the enemy, coming out of the woods.” Unable to go into battery in the open area under those circumstances, Owen turned his column to the left, parked it in the pasture field just north of the Mumma orchard, and applied to Clarke for further orders. Recognizing that he could not hope to get any more batteries into position in the open area with the rebel infantry bearing down on it, Clarke responded by telling Owen that there was more artillery than could be used at that point, and directed Owen to keep his battery under cover where it was for the time being.⁵⁴

South of the Smoketown road another of the Second Corps’ batteries was in action trying to stop a second wave of rebel infantry that was pouring out of the West Woods from the vicinity of the Dunker Church. This was Tompkins’s battery that earlier had been sent forward to support the left of Green’s division. Tompkins’s guns were down in the bowl below the crest of the ridge that turned south from the Smoketown road and so Tompkins was not aware of the advance of the enemy’s infantry “until the head of the

⁵³ OR 19, pt. 1, 309; Monroe, “Battery D,” MOLLUS 36:252-3.

⁵⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 325.

column gained the brow of a hill, about 60 yards from the right gun of the battery.”

Tompkins immediately had his guns oblique to the right and open against the on rushing enemy with double canister. His guns, however, were ten-pounder Parrott rifles, less suited to close range work than the Napoleons of Woodruff’s and Monroe’s batteries, and so the Confederates got close enough to the battery that the three guns on the right had to be abandoned for a time. Fortunately, the infantry of Greene’s division counterattacked through the battery at this point, driving the enemy back across the ridge, and pursuing them all the way into the West Woods. This short action left the ground in front of the battery covered with the enemy’s dead and wounded, and a battle flag that the rebels failed to take with them. The flag was picked up by Greene’s advancing infantrymen, leaving battery member Theodore Reichardt to complain to his diary that it “should have been given to the battery, as it fell before the infantry support advanced.”⁵⁵

This second, more southerly thrust of rebel infantry from the West Woods also caused Woodruff to withdraw his battery closer to the East Woods. He reported, “A heavy mass of rebel infantry soon moved to our left in such a way as to be almost entirely covered from our fire by the peculiar nature of the ground. A change of front was impracticable from the want of time, and the fact that while protecting one flank we should expose the other. Being still without supports, our only course was to retire, and accordingly I fell back about 200 yards to the edge of the woods, where we were supported on the right and could protect our left. After firing from this position a few rounds, the rebels, who by this

⁵⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 308, 505; Reichardt, 65.

time had met some of our infantry, were again driven back.” The position that Woodruff took up at this point was the same one that until just a few minutes before had been held by Monroe’s battery, which was withdrawing to its original position on a hill top north of the Joseph Poffenberger farmstead.⁵⁶

As Sumner was leading some of Sedgwick’s regiments out of the West Woods and across the northern part of the open area toward the North Woods, he sent members of his staff to find and order forward any troops capable of resisting the continuing advance of the enemy. One of these staff officers found Williams who in turn directed the only available brigade of his corps, Gordon’s, which was still in the vicinity of the East Woods, to move forward. After Sedgwick’s division had passed by this brigade on its way to the West Woods, Gordon had sent two of his regiments, the 3rd Wisconsin and 27th Indiana, which had suffered considerable loss already that morning, some two hundred yards out into the open area where they took a position just below the crest of the ridge. Two other regiments, the 2nd Massachusetts and 13th New Jersey, were at the western edge of the woodlot, while Gordon’s last regiment, the 107th New York still was at the extreme southern end of the woods. Deeming “it of the utmost importance that my command should move forward with the least possible delay,” Gordon immediately ordered the 2nd Massachusetts and 13th New Jersey to move forward. These two regiments advanced all the way to the Hagerstown pike to find that “a large force of the enemy lay concealed in the woods, while a not inconsiderable number showed themselves

⁵⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 228, 310; Monroe, “Battery D,” MOLLUS 36:253. The infantry referred to in Woodruff’s report was Greene’s division.

in the open fields beyond.” In this position, the regiments were subjected to such a galling fire from the enemy that after a brief period they were forced to fall back to the opposite side of the ridge and take up a position where they were supported by the 3rd Wisconsin, 27th Indiana, and 107th New York that by that time had been brought up from its position at the south end of the East Woods. Gordon reported, “So strong was the enemy, that an addition of any force I could command would only have caused further sacrifice, without gain.” Still, the effort of Gordon’s brigade significantly helped to disrupt the Confederate pursuit of Sedgwick’s regiments north of the West Woods by threatening the flank of that pursuit.⁵⁷

In the vicinity of the North Woods, some units of the First Corps were also coming to the support of Sedgwick’s hard-pressed regiments. Gibbon had witnessed the debouching of those regiments into the open area as he was positioning Woodruff’s battery. After helping to rally those that fled toward the East Woods, Gibbon decided that it was time he got back to his own brigade in the North Woods. Arriving there, he got his men up and gave orders “to allow no stragglers to go to the rear of the brigade and after some considerable difficulty a number of regiments were halted and re-formed in its front.” Out on the ridge in the northern part of the open area, the battery of Captain John A. Reynolds, Battery L, 1st New York Light Artillery, and a section of Battery B, 4th US Artillery under Lieutenant James Steward were still in position and able to open with canister on the rebel formations advancing along the Hagerstown pike. And lastly, it was

⁵⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 477, 495-6, 500.

Major General Abner Doubleday, commanding a division of the First Corps, that sent Hofmann with his brigade and a section of artillery into position to the west of the North Woods and the turnpike to provide support to Colonel Sully and his ad hoc command as they completed their fighting withdrawal from the West Woods.⁵⁸

As the shattered regiments of Sedgwick's division reached the vicinity of the East Woods and the North Woods, the Confederate pursuit finally began to falter through a combination of the Federal efforts to stop it and the consumption of its own momentum. The Southerners now fell back, retiring into the West Woods. For at least a few minutes now, this part of the field was generally quiet as both sides sought to consolidate their positions and reform their broken and exhausted regiments for a continuation of the fight. It was only at this point that the officers of the corps and the division could begin to assess the full extent of the disaster that had befallen Sedgwick's division. Not only were the regiments of the division scattered over a mile of terrain from the southern tip of the East Woods to the northern edge of the North Woods, but much of its leadership was in one way or another placed *hors de combat*. Sumner himself came through the heaviest of the combat unscathed, but Lieutenant Colonel Revere, his Inspector General, and one of his aides, Captain Joseph C. Audenreid, were severely wounded. Sedgwick received three wounds, but kept in his saddle for more than an hour before faintness from the loss of blood at last forced him to hand over the command of his division to Howard. Although their brigade was the first to become engaged and the last to leave the West

⁵⁸ Gibbon, 88-9; OR 19, pt. 1, 230, 236.

Woods, Gorman and all of his regimental commanders came through the ordeal unhurt. Sometime during the withdrawal, Dana received a wound serious enough to cause him to turn his brigade over to Colonel Hall of the 7th Michigan, leaving that regiment in the command of one of its captains. In addition, Colonel Hinks of the 19th Massachusetts, who so calmly braved the worst of the fight and in doing so managed to extract his regiment from the woods, was now down wounded, as was Lieutenant Colonel George N. Bomford of the 42nd New York. Because Howard moved up to command of the division, Colonel Joshua T. Owen of the 69th Pennsylvania left his regiment to command the brigade. Also in that brigade, Colonel Isaac J. Wistar of the 71st Pennsylvania was wounded leaving his regiment in the hands of a captain.⁵⁹

The greater catastrophe, though, was the tremendous number of casualties that the division suffered in the West Woods. The Consolidated Morning Report for Sedgwick's division for 12 September, the closest report to the day of battle, showed a present for duty strength in the three brigades to be 7,057 men, officers and other ranks. The initial return of casualties filed with Howard's report of the battle on 20 September, showed 351 killed, 1,556 wounded, and 321 missing for a total of 2,228 casualties, 31.6 percent of the division's total strength. As the regiments reassembled in the North and East Woods during the late morning of 17 September, however, the casualties would seem much greater because hundreds of soldiers were still temporarily separated from their regiments and trying to find their way back. The losses suffered by Sedgwick's division in the West

⁵⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 276, 306; Winslow, 47.

Woods would be the largest of all the Federal divisions engaged in the Battle of Antietam, the bloodiest single day of combat in all of American history.⁶⁰

III

Sometime after 8:30 a.m., McClellan and the army headquarters staff began to realize that all was not going as well over on the battlefield as they had believed up to that point. Several staff officers were at the front on the right and sent back reports of Hooker's being wounded and Mansfield killed. One of these messages, possibly the first received at headquarters, was from Major Herbert Von Hammerstein, one of McClellan's aides-de-camp. "General ~~Sumner~~ Hooker is wounded in the foot. General Sumner is coming up. The enemy is driven on our left and retiring, they open briskly on the right. General Mansfield killed." A second message from another aide, William S. Albert, said simply, "Hooker wounded and left the field. Sumner is OK. Things look blue." Yet another message coming through the headquarters signal station was from Lieutenants Edward C. Pierce and William F. Barrett, who had established a signal station on the field with Hooker's corps. They confirmed that Hooker was wounded and that Sumner had arrived and taken command.⁶¹

⁶⁰ War Department, Consolidated Morning Report of Second Division, Second Corps, Army of the Potomac, 12 September 1862, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's to 1917*, Box 3, Entry 65, RG 94, National Archives; OR 19, pt. 1, 308.

⁶¹ Herbert von Hammerstein to Albert V. Colburn, 17 September 1862, and William S. Albert to Randolph B. Marcy, 17 September 1862, *Papers of George Brinton McClellan*, Series I, Volume 80, Items 16261 and 16245 respectively, Library of Congress.; OR 19, pt. 1, 134.

One of the advantages that McClellan enjoyed at Antietam was a well developed signal system managed by Major Albert J. Myer as the Army of the Potomac's Chief Signal Officer, and manned by a number of lieutenants from the various infantry regiments who had volunteered for this special and sometimes hazardous duty. During the battle of the seventeenth, a number of signal stations were established on the battlefield itself, while others were established at important points affording observation over the battle area. Among the latter was a signal station established on the crest of Elk Mountain about two miles southeast of McClellan's headquarters at the Pry house. According to Major Myer, "The view from this position commanded Sharpsburg and Shepherdstown, with very many points of the battle-fields, the approaches to it, and the country in the vicinity."⁶²

This station was manned on the morning of the seventeenth by Lieutenants Joseph Gloskoski and Norman H. Camp. Unfortunately, a complete record of the messages received and sent by them during the battle has not survived, and those that have are not marked to indicate the time of day, though some are numbered sequentially. As reported by Gloskoski, the earliest message sent on the seventeenth from the Elk Mountain station, number 640, came in response to a message received from Burnside asking for information on enemy troop movements. Gloskoski's response to this inquiry may have reported enemy reinforcements headed toward the West Woods at about the time that Sumner was making his decision to commit Sedgwick's division to secure those woods.

⁶² OR 19, pt. 1, 122.

It read in part, “They are moving a strong force of infantry from Shepherdstown into the woods west of Sharpsburg and northerly to our right.” Another message from Gloskoski that although unnumbered was apparently a follow-on to the first read, “Another column of the enemy’s infantry is moving into the woods west of Sharpsburg & northerly to our right.” A third message, also unnumbered, warned, “The movement continue[s] in the same direction—one more Battery & two Regts. of Infantry by passed the woods west of Sharpsburg just now.”⁶³

Although the exchange described above was initiated by Burnside from his signal station on the left with the signal station on Elk Mountain, the headquarters or central station near the Pry house served as a clearing house for messages sent by all of the remote stations, so these reports of the enemy’s reinforcement of the left of his line in front of Sumner may have prompted a 9:10 a.m. message from Ruggles to Sumner which read, “Gen. McClellan desires you to be very careful how you advance, as he fears our right is suffering. P.S. Gen. Mansfield is killed and Hooker wounded in the foot.” Before that message could reach the front, however, Sedgwick’s division was well on its way to the West Woods, and in all probability the message did not reach Sumner until well after the fight there was over.⁶⁴

⁶³ War Department, Report of J. Gloskoski, Lieutenant & Acting Signal Officer, Messages Received by the Chief Signal Officer, 1862-1864, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 4084, Pt. 1, RG 393, National Archives.

⁶⁴ OR 51, pt. 1, 842.

When McClellan had this warning sent to Sumner, he still was confident that the battle was going well and according to his plan, and it would be sometime until he learned of what happened to Sedgwick in the West Woods. In addition to receiving messages from his aides at the front and through the signal stations, McClellan could observe the battle across Antietam Creek from two locations. One was from a bluff above the creek to the rear of the Pry house, and the other was from the headquarters of Fitz-John Porter on a hill just south the Boonsboro pike and above the Middle Bridge. From neither of these locations, however, could he observe the West Woods directly because of the intervening height of land. Consequently, it was with the expectation of continuing the battle according to plan that McClellan now took two more steps toward its fulfillment.⁶⁵

At the same time that he was sending the warning message to Sumner concerning the right, Ruggles also was preparing a message for Burnside that said, "Gen. McClellan desires you to open your attack. As soon as you shall have uncovered the upper stone bridge [Middle Bridge] you will be supported, and, if necessary, on your own line of attack. So far all is going well." Concerning his plan of battle, McClellan would later write that it was his intention to have Burnside attack as soon as he thought the situation on the right looked favorable, which he obviously did at this time. McClellan's confidence was also reassured by the fact that Franklin's corps was now within a mile and a half of headquarters and would soon be available as a reserve. Franklin had been sent

⁶⁵ Strother, "Personal Recollections," 281.

orders during the night of the sixteenth to the seventeenth telling him to bring his two divisions to Keedysville, and to have Couch's division occupy Maryland Heights above Harper's Ferry. In compliance with those orders, Franklin had started his march at 5:30 a.m. Thus McClellan could promise Burnside support on his own line of attack if he needed it. Ordering Burnside to begin his attack at this time also would aide Sumner on the right by preventing Lee from taking any forces—or any more forces—from his right and transferring them to the left to resist Sumner's advance.⁶⁶

The second step that McClellan took was to release Richardson's division to join the Second Corps on the battlefield. McClellan had held Richardson back when Sumner was ordered to the front because McClellan wanted him replaced on the line north of the Middle Bridge by Morrell's division of Porter's corps which had just arrived the previous afternoon and was still in the vicinity of Keedysville. With this relief in place, Richardson started for the front by the same route that the other two divisions of the corps had used earlier. It was a fortuitous move, because the presence of Richardson's division at the front was sorely needed.⁶⁷

IV

⁶⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 56, 376; 51, pt. 1, 844.

⁶⁷ The actual order to Richardson to move to the front at this time has not been found. However, the 7:20 a.m. written order to Sumner specified that "Genl. Richardson's Division will not cross till further orders."

On the morning of 17 September 1862, George Brinton McClellan committed the Army of the Potomac to battle against Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia based on the plan that he had formulated on the sixteenth, but then failed to supervise the army in the execution of that plan. Hooker initiated the battle at first light by attacking the Confederate left with his corps in accordance with McClellan's plan. Hooker's move, however, is curious for two reasons. First, he had pointed out to McClellan on the afternoon of the sixteenth that if he had to attack the whole rebel army alone, without reinforcements or a supporting attack on the enemy's right, "the rebels would eat me up." Yet, that is exactly what Hooker did on the morning of the seventeenth. Second, the reinforcements that Hooker wanted were available on the morning of the seventeenth in the form of Mansfield's corps a mile to the rear of Hooker's position, but Hooker made no attempt to get Mansfield to come forward and cooperate in the initial assault. This in itself is doubly curious in that Hooker later claimed that he had been told by McClellan on the afternoon of the sixteenth that he, Hooker, would command all of the forces making the main attack on the Federal right. As a consequence of Hooker's actions, the massive assault on the Confederate left called for in McClellan's plan of battle was reduced to a fragmented attack made sequentially and separately by Hooker's and then Mansfield's corps. In this piecemeal commitment, both corps were used up.⁶⁸

The failure to properly execute McClellan's plan, however, cannot be laid entirely on Hooker. Ultimately, the responsibility for coordinating the execution of the plan lay with

⁶⁸ OR 19, pt. 1, 217.

the army commander. If the plan called for a massive main assault on the Confederate left with three army corps in conjunction with supporting attacks by additional corps on the Confederate right, it was McClellan's responsibility to see that it happened that way, and this he did not do. Hooker's corps was sent across the Antietam alone on the afternoon of the sixteenth, and McClellan reinforced him only when Hooker pointed out the folly of attacking with so small a force. Having committed a second corps against the Confederate left, McClellan failed to coordinate their efforts on the evening of the sixteenth and the morning of the seventeenth, his directive to Hooker that he would command all forces on the right notwithstanding. It was also McClellan, not Hooker, who held back Sumner's corps until 7:20 a.m. despite his instruction to Sumner the evening before to be "ready to march one hour before daylight." And it was McClellan who failed to send orders to Burnside to begin the supporting attack on the Confederate right until 9:10 a.m.⁶⁹

McClellan's failure to coordinate the opening of the battle on the seventeenth has long been recognized as the reason for his lack of success at Antietam. Sumner testified before the Committee on the Conduct of the War on 18 February 1863 that he believed if he had been authorized to coordinate the assault of Hooker's, Mansfield's, and his own corps, "we could not have failed to throw them [the enemy] back in front of the other divisions of our army." Jacob D. Cox, who commanded the Ninth Corps at Antietam, wrote after the war, "It is this failure to carry out any intelligible plan which the historian

⁶⁹ OR 51, pt. 1, 839, 844.

must regard as the unpardonable military fault on the National side. To account for the hours between 4 and 8 on that morning, is the most serious responsibility of the National commander.” Modern historians have, for the most part, adopted this critical interpretation of McClellan. Sears in *Landscape Turned Red* concluded that the “Army of the Potomac was being maneuvered in disjointed, slow-motion fits and starts.”⁷⁰

It was, of course, a direct result of this piecemeal commitment of the army corps that placed Sumner in the singular situation in which he committed Sedgwick’s division to the West Woods. No other decision by any officer of the Army of the Potomac that day, McClellan included, has been as severely criticized by historians of the battle. In 1882, Palfrey wrote, “What General Sumner may have expected or even hoped to accomplish by his rash advance, it is difficult to conjecture.” Five years later Francis Walker would write of Sumner’s decision in his history of the Second Army Corps, “All his life in the cavalry, he has the instincts of a cavalry commander. What shall stay him?” Murfin in *Gleam of Bayonets* accused Sumner of forging “ahead on his own,” and Sears concluded that the decision to commit Sedgwick was “based almost entirely on misapprehension.” Greene thought it brought about by “grossly negligent reconnaissance.”⁷¹

⁷⁰ *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 368; Francis Winthrop Palfrey, *The Antietam and Fredericksburg*, vol. 5, *Campaigns of the Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1882), 120; Jacob D. Cox, “The Battle of Antietam,” *North to Antietam*, vol. 2, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (New York: Century, 1887-1888; reprint, New York: Castle Books, 1956), 643; Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1983), 234.

⁷¹ Palfrey, *Antietam and Fredericksburg*, 88; Walker, 102; James V. Murfin, *The Gleam of Bayonets: The Battle of Antietam and the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (New

As shown in this chapter, however, Sumner did make an effective reconnaissance as he arrived at the front, and his decision to send Sedgwick into the West Woods was based on as perfect a knowledge of the actual situation as any officer there could be expected to have. What is more, it was the right decision at the right time. The West Woods was the key to the battle, and the West Woods was almost entirely undefended as the subsequent advance of Sedgwick's division clearly demonstrated. What undid Sumner and Sedgwick in the West Woods was the timely arrival of the division of Lafayette McLaws, and his decision—made without reconnaissance—to send two of his four brigades into the woods. It was his good fortune that one of those brigades, Barksdale's, entered the woods at the base of a draw (figure 29, page 334) that channeled it directly to the tenuous link between the 7th Michigan and the 125th Pennsylvania. Ezra Carman in his "The Maryland Campaign of 1862" wrote that, "After firing six to eight rounds the right of the 125th Pennsylvania gave way in disorder, carrying with it a few files of the 34th New York, and it was just before this that the 7th Michigan closed up on the right of the 125th Pennsylvania and had its left wing almost swept away by the terrific fire that had broken the Pennsylvanians." This created and widened a gap between the two Federal regiments that allowed Barksdale's regiments to debouch from the woods on the left and rear of

York: Bonanza Books, 1965), 235; Sears, *Landscape Turned Red*, 222; A. Wilson Greene, "I Fought the Battle Splendidly," George B. McClellan and the Maryland Campaign," in *Antietam: Essays on the 1862 Maryland Campaign* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1989), 70.

Sedgwick's division, opening the way for Early's and G.T. Anderson's brigades to follow.⁷²

Sumner has also been severely criticized for sending Sedgwick to the West Woods without waiting for French's division to get into position to support him. Palfrey wrote that if French's division had been properly formed in support of Sedgwick that "such an enterprise might have had some chance of success," and that "whether it was by accident or under orders, it proved a most unfortunate divergence." Walker wrote that a mere twenty minutes would have sufficed to get French into proper position, "But Sumner does not wait." Sears interpretation is that French found himself alone and without orders, a situation in which he decided "to direct his command southward to come in on the left of George Greene's brigades then holding the plateau in front of Dunker church." Greene's judgment is that, "Sedgwick's advance left William French's division behind, and those troops drifted south to encounter a hornet's nest at the Sunken Road."⁷³

The interpretation given here, however, is that Sumner gave French positive orders to attack south toward the Sunken Road at the same time that he ordered Sedgwick to the West Woods, because during his reconnaissance Sumner could observe a Confederate line of battle being established there. They were the brigades of Colquitt, Rhodes, and G.B. Anderson of D.H. Hill's division. Seeing this, Sumner could not have ordered

⁷² Carman, chapter 17, p. 35.

⁷³ Palfrey, *Antietam and Fredericksburg*, 88, 92; Walker, 102; Sears, *Landscape Turned Red*, 235; A. Wilson Greene, "I Fought the Battle Splendidly," George B. McClellan and the Maryland Campaign," in *Antietam: Essays on the 1862 Maryland Campaign* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1989), 70.

Sedgwick west to the West Woods while leaving unattended a Confederate force to the south that would be in Sedgwick's rear. French's division was still in its original formation approaching the East Woods, and thus ready to attack to the south, so Sumner ordered it against the Sunken road. As will be seen in the next chapter, French reported that his "division faced to the left, forming three lines of battle adjacent to and contiguous with Sedgwick's and immediately moved to the front." Clearly, the move was no accident. Moreover, Sam Sumner, the corps commander's son and aide, recalled in his letter to G.B. Davis in 1897 that when he and his father were in front of the Dunker Church, he was sent to order French "to make a vigorous attack in order to aid the advance of the leading division [Sedgwick's]" Captain Sumner further recalled that in his ride to deliver this order to General French, he "passed a Battery heavily engaged, I think it was a Rhode Island Battery, commanded by Captain Tompkins." Captain Sumner, therefore, knew where to look for French. Tompkins' battery was at that point due east of the Dunker Church. If French had not been given positive orders to move south, he would still have been in the vicinity of the East Woods. French, furthermore, reported that Captain Sumner "directed me to press the enemy with all my force," which clearly indicates that French at that point was already engaged in the vicinity of the Sunken road.⁷⁴

The final criticism of Sumner's performance during this period concerns the tactical arrangements he sanctioned in committing Sedgwick's division to the West Woods.

⁷⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 323-4; Samuel S. Sumner to George B. Davis, April 4, 1897, John C. Ropes Research Files, Military Historical Society Collection, Boston University, Boston.

First, historians have faulted Sumner for leaving the flanks of Sedgwick's division uncovered. Palfrey believed that French's division should have been used to cover Sedgwick's flanks, and Walker's interpretation was that Sedgwick "with his flank absolutely unprotected, [marched] past the real front of the enemy." Murfin recognized that there was support available for Sedgwick's move into the woods, but still writes of his "left and right dangerously exposed to a surprise flanking attack."⁷⁵

Based on his reconnaissance, however, Sumner believed that Sedgwick's flanks would be covered as the division entered the West Woods. He had seen Greene's division below the ridge south of the Smoketown Road and the huge 125th Pennsylvania entering the woods in the vicinity of the Dunker Church. Both of these units would be on Sedgwick's left. On the right there was still fighting, but if the movement of the division was properly directed, Sedgwick would be outflanking the enemy there, not vice versa. Sumner himself rode to the right of the division as it made its charge toward the West Woods to ensure that this was true, and Gorman's brigade made a right oblique movement during the charge to bring it on the flank of the enemy units fighting Goodrich's and Patrick's brigades, which then covered the right of the division.

The second criticism of Sumner's tactical arrangements is the formation used by Sedgwick's division. Palfrey wrote, "There is nothing more helpless than a column of long lines with short intervals between them, if they have anything to do other than to press straight forward with no thought of anything but the enemy before them." Walker

⁷⁵ Palfrey, *Antietam and Fredericksburg*, 88-9; Walker, 104; Murfin, 235.

resorted to hyperbole in considering Sedgwick's formation; "But, surely, they are not going to attack the enemy in that order!"⁷⁶

In this case, Sumner's critics are correct. The long brigade lines of battle used by Sedgwick's division were suited only to fighting directly to the front, and did not readily allow for maneuvering should an attack come from any other direction. No doubt this lack of maneuverability contributed substantially to the division's being driven from the West Woods with heavy casualties. In Sumner's defense, it can only be said that the tactical dilemma created by the rifled musket caused commanders at all levels throughout the war to experiment with formations that would make the best use of the firepower capabilities of the new weapon, and that the line of battle backed up by a sequence of lines of battle was the most often used formation to achieve that goal.

⁷⁶ Palfrey, *Antietam and Fredericksburg*, 89; Walker, 102.

CHAPTER 9
THE SUNKEN ROAD

I

French's division crossed Antietam Creek on the morning of 17 September 1862 directly behind Sedgwick's. For his movement to the battlefield, French, undoubtedly following Sumner's directions, had his division in the same three brigade column formation that Sedgwick was using. Max Weber's brigade of long service but untested regiments, which had joined the division only the afternoon before, constituted the left column of the formation. The center column was made up of the three new nine-month regiments, brigaded together under Colonel Morris of the 14th Connecticut, while the right column was Kimball's brigade of three veteran regiments augmented by the last of the new nine-month regiments, the 132nd Pennsylvania.¹

Like Sedgwick, French expected that to go into action his regiments would face to the front and move forward as three successive brigades in line of battle, Weber in front, Morris second, and Kimball bringing up the rear as the reserve. In sending his untried regiments into action first, while keeping Kimball's veterans in the reserve position,

¹ War Department, *War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 71 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), series I, vol. 19, pt. 1, 323. Hereinafter cited as OR. All references are to Series I unless otherwise noted.

French at the division level was following the established doctrine of the day. As espoused by the famous West Point instructor and military theorist, Dennis Hart Mahan, the doctrine specified that the reserve “should, in all cases, be composed of the best troops of the army, since upon its efforts depend our own safety and the defeat of the enemy. The object of the reserve is to supply the want of strength in our line of battle, and this it does by coming to the aid of the troops first brought into action, when they are weakened, exhausted, and in a partial state of disorganization from the murderous struggle.” French could not know at this point just how prophetic Mahan’s instruction would be.²

Once across the stream, French took just enough time to have his regiments tighten their formations, and then the division was off to the west, following the route that Sedgwick had taken just moments earlier. It was a demanding march, especially for new troops, since the route was cross-country and mostly uphill. George C. Maquire, a thirteen-year-old marching with the company of the 5th Maryland in which his two brothers served and of which his brother-in-law was first lieutenant, remembered that as they started up from the creek, there was a cornfield that “so many men had gone over

² Dennis Hart Mahan, *Lithographic Notes on the Composition of Armies and Strategy* (West Point, NY: Privately Printed, n.d.), 13. From 1832 until 1871, Mahan was the principal instructor of Grand Tactics at West Point. As such, virtually every West Point trained officer in the Civil War studied under him. For the Second Army Corps at Antietam this meant all three division commanders, as well as two of the nine brigade commanders.

and dripped the water from their clothing on to this soft ground that it had become a sea of mud that it was hard to pull ourselves through.”³

The march was also made all the more difficult by the drama unfolding ahead. According to Lieutenant Hitchcock in the 132nd Pennsylvania, “It was now quite evident that a great battle was in progress. A deafening pandemonium of cannonading, with shrieking and bursting shells, filled the air beyond us, toward which we were marching.” As they rode along leading the men of their regiment, Hitchcock and his colonel, Richard Oakford, became engaged in a serious conversation concerning performing their duty and leaving all else up to providence. Hitchcock confessed that his greatest “fear was not that I might be killed, but that I might be grievously wounded and left a victim of suffering on the field.” No doubt he was not the only man in French’s division who felt that fear above all others this morning. Very shortly, the men of the division began to hear—most of them for the first time—the sound of volleys of musket fire, a sound exponentially more ominous than the shrieking and bursting of the shells that they had been subjected to for the previous two days. As Hitchcock described it, “These volleys of musketry we were approaching sounded in the distance like the rapid pouring of shot upon a tinpan, or the tearing of heavy canvas, with slight pauses interspersed with single shots, or desultory shooting.”⁴

³ George C. Maguire, Sr. “My Remembrance of the War, Etc.: 1861-1865,” TMs (photocopy), p. 79, Fifth Maryland Unit Files, Antietam National Battlefield, Sharpsburg, MD.

⁴ Frederick L. Hitchcock, *War from the Inside: The Story of the 132nd Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry in the War for the Suppression of the Rebellion, 1862-*

Before long French arrived at the East Woods with the head of his division (see figure 28, page 328). Here he saw the same horrific sights that had greeted Sumner and Sedgwick only minutes before. As he surveyed this scene of horror, a staff officer from Sumner arrived with orders for French to take his division into action in support of the attack being made by Sedgwick. No doubt the staff officer appraised French of the position of Greene's division southwest of the burning Mumma farm buildings and of the brigades of Confederate infantry which were then taking position some five hundred yards farther to the south and the southeast. French was to attack their position to prevent them from advancing against the left of Greene's division, or, worse, attacking toward the East Woods and what was now the rear of the Federal forces on the right. It had been Sumner's plan all along that when the two divisions of his corps reached the battlefield, they would face front and side by side in consecutive brigade lines of battle, advance to the south as called for by the army commander's plan of battle. To French, it was obvious that this maneuver was now to be executed exactly as planned. Accordingly, without hesitation French faced his brigades to the left "forming three lines of battle adjacent to and contiguous with Sedgwick's" division. He then ordered the division to move to the front. The historian of the 14th Connecticut would later write that for the men of his regiment, this "was perhaps the supreme moment of their experience, as there

1863 (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1904; reprint, Alexandria, VA, Time-Life Books, 1985), 56-7; Francis Galwey, "At the Battle of Antietam with the Eighth Ohio Infantry" in *Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States* (Reprint, Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1993), vol. 22, pp. 72-3. Hereinafter cited as MOLLUS.

shot through the minds of the men the thought of the loved ones at home; [and] the terrible possibilities of the engagement made vivid by the ghastly scenes through which they had already passed at South Mountain.”⁵

As soon as the division started forward, it came under fire from some of the enemy’s batteries positioned ahead of it to the south. From the East Woods, the brigades had to incline slightly to the southeast to bypass the burning Mumma farm buildings on the east side, and then turn again to the south and slightly southwest to come in on the left flank of the Federal troops on their right. This put the farmstead of William Roulette, which was about three hundred yards southwest of the Mumma farm, squarely in their path. Among the buildings of the Roulette farm, enemy skirmishers “had taken a strong position for defense.”⁶

In Weber’s brigade, now the lead brigade of the division, the 1st Delaware was on the right of the line, the 5th Maryland in the center, and the 4th New York on the left. As the 1st Delaware turned back to the south, the right of the its line passed through the Mumma orchard, and then brushed pass the burning Mumma buildings as the regiment moved through the large meadow separating the Mumma farm from the Roulette farm. At this

⁵ Ezra Ayers Carman, “The Maryland Campaign of 1862,” chapter 18, p. 7, Carman Papers, Library of Congress, Washington; Max Weber to Antietam Battlefield Board, 10 December 1892, Antietam Battlefield Board Papers, Transcription by Antietam National Battlefield; OR 19, pt. 1, 323; Charles D. Page, *History of the Fourteenth Regiment, Connecticut Volunteer Infantry* (Meriden, CT: Horton Printing Co., 1906; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1987), 35-6. Given that French wrote in his report that the advance of his division was “contiguous with Sedgwick’s,” it is possible that he mistook Greene’s division for Sedgwick’s.

point, the regiment began to take small arms fire from the edge of a cornfield directly ahead that was apparently occupied by some enemy skirmishers. The center regiment, the 5th Maryland, was the basis of the brigade's alignment as it turned to the south. Weber directed that the color guard at the center of that regiment head directly for the Roulette house. On reaching the Roulette buildings, however, the regimental commander, Major Leopold Blumenberg, decided to treat the buildings as an obstacle and ordered his four left companies to break to the rear of the regimental line so as to skirt the buildings to the right. Three of the companies obeyed his order, but the left most company, Company A, "did not hear or heed the command and marched through the house yard by the flank." Some of the enemy's skirmishers who had been in position in and around the Roulette house and outbuildings abandoned their position on the approach of the 5th Maryland, but since the regiment did not sweep through the farmstead in battle order, it did not completely clear it of the enemy, leaving that task for Morris's brigade coming on behind them. On the left of the brigade line, the 4th New York, still marching to the southeast, passed north of the Roulette farm before making its turn back to the southwest. Once it did make the turn, the regiment was just on the east side of the Roulette farm lane that ran southwest from the farmstead. As the right flank of the regiment guided along the farm lane fence, it cooperated with the 5th Maryland in driving some enemy skirmishers away from the Clipp house at the southeast corner of Roulette's orchard.⁷

⁶ Carman, chapter 18, p. 8; OR 19, pt. 1, 323.

⁷ War Department, George R. Graham, "The Fifth Maryland at Antietam," Antietam Studies, Antietam National Battlefield Board, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office*,

Once clear of the Roulette farmstead and orchard, the brigade found itself on open ground. Two hundred and fifty yards ahead of it was a ridge running in a southeasterly direction. The ridge was a spur of the height of land, which was just to the right of the brigade. Directly in front, the ridge was divided into two hills by a gully through which ran the Roulette farm lane. Both hills were strongly occupied by the enemy's infantry. Weber, who had ordered the brigade to fix bayonets even before the advance from the East Woods began, now determined to send the whole brigade forward in a bayonet charge to drive the enemy from his position on the ridge ahead. As the brigade moved forward, the 1st Delaware on the right of the line had to cross the fence at the southern end of the cornfield through which it was passing. This threw the regiment into some disorder, but being already under a galling fire it was hurriedly reformed as it continued to move forward at the double quick. Faced with this onslaught of Federal strength, the enemy quickly abandoned the position on the ridge and began to fall back (see figure 31). When Weber's regiments reached the crest of the ridge, however, they discovered that the enemy had only fallen back on their main line, which was formed in a sunken farm lane about fifty yards beyond the crest "while across the road on rising ground, was a second line and their batteries." As the three regiments started down the reserve slope toward the sunken road, the entire Confederate line in the road rose up as a single entity and

1780's to 1917, RG 94, National Archives; Carman, chapter 18, p. 8; John D. Hemmingen, "Diary of John D. Hemmingen, Company E, 130th Pennsylvania," TMs (typescript), 17 September 1862, Michael Winey Collection, Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA. Carman said that the 5th Maryland passed to the right of the Roulette house,

delivered a scathing volley that Captain William P. Seville in the 1st Delaware described as “so destructive that even veteran troops would have been repulsed.”⁸

while Hemmingen pointed out that Weber’s brigade in obliqueing to the right exposed the 130th Pennsylvania to fire from the enemy’s skirmishers among the Roulette buildings.

⁸ Max Weber to Antietam Battlefield Board, 10 December 1892, Antietam Battlefield Board Papers, Transcription by Antietam National Battlefield; William P. Seville, *History of the First Regiment Delaware Volunteers* (Wilmington: Historical Society of Delaware, 1884; reprint, Baltimore, Longstreet House, 1986), 47-8; War Department, George R. Graham, “The Fifth Maryland at Antietam,” Antietam Studies, Antietam National Battlefield Board, *Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1780’s to 1917*, RG 94, National Archives. Seville and Graham disagree as to when the order to fix bayonets was given. Seville says it was before the brigade started from the East Woods, Graham says it was as they reached the open ground below the orchard.

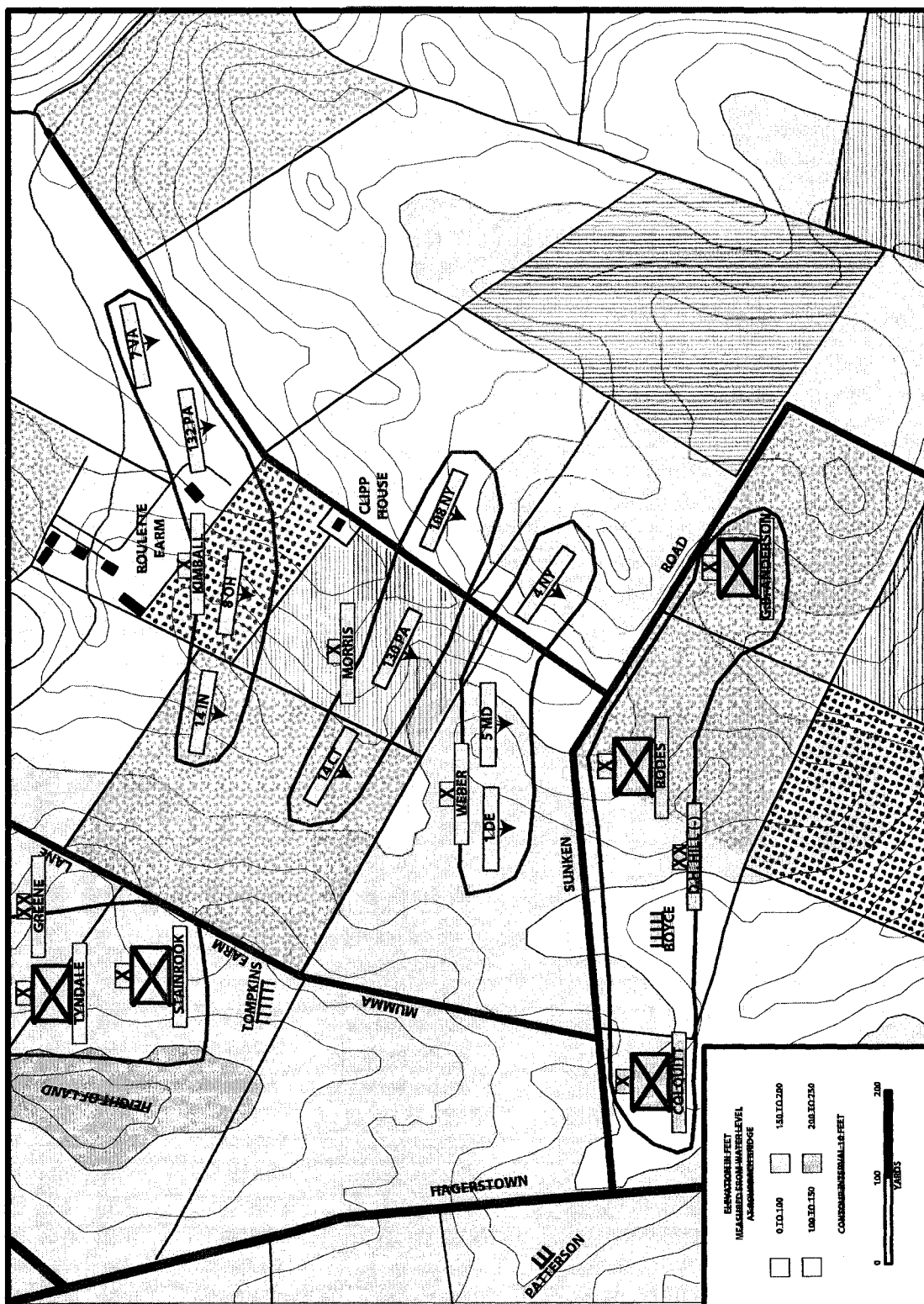


Figure 31. Topographic map of the area around Fragerstown, 17 September 1962.

Weber's brigade was in fact repulsed with a loss of perhaps twenty-five percent of its strength. Both the 5th Maryland and the 4th New York immediately withdrew back across the crest to the comparative safety of the forward slope of the ridge where the officers undertook to reform their broken ranks. Behind the main body of the 1st Delaware, however, that crest was a greater distance to the rear, perhaps 150 yards, so most of the regiment was rallied under fire and then moved back to within fifty yards of the enemy line where it began to return fire. The right of the regiment, which seemed to receive a greater amount of fire, fell back all the way to the near edge of the cornfield before it was rallied. After the war, the regimental chaplain, Thomas G. Murphey, attributed this phenomena to the fact that the soldiers of Company A, the extreme right company, "wore the Zouave uniform and were always conspicuous, and, it is supposed that, on the day of the battle, they attracted the especial attention of the enemy, for they suffered, in numbers, more heavily than other companies." The regimental historian, however, took exception to that explanation by pointing out that the 1st Delaware approached the enemy line at an oblique angle that put the right of the regiment closer to the sunken road than the rest. Once rallied, the 5th Maryland and the 4th New York returned to the crest of the ridge above the sunken road and established their own firing lines. In doing so, they managed to beat back several spontaneous advances made against them from the road. The colors of the 5th Maryland had not withdrawn behind the crest at the climax of the charge and remained perhaps some thirty feet in front of the point

where the regiment rallied. The officers now had the men crawl forward and dress on their colors while keeping up fire on the enemy in the sunken road below.⁹

Following behind Weber's brigade at a distance of approximately two hundred yards was Morris's. On the right of that brigade line was the 14th Connecticut. After leaving the East Woods, the right most company of the regiment, Company A, passed through a corner of the Mumma orchard where Sergeant Major William B. Hincks and a few others took the opportunity to pick and eat some apples. As the regiment started across the meadow below the orchard, it obliques slightly to the right to avoid becoming entangled among the Roulette buildings. This put it on a direct course for the cornfield southwest of the Roulette house that the 1st Delaware had already passed through. On the left flank of the regiment, however, Company B had to break off from the line in order to deal with "some belligerent sharpshooters" that were left behind by Weber's brigade at Roulette's spring house. As these rebels beat a hasty retreat from the farmstead, the men of Company B were surprised to see the owner of the property emerge from the basement of his house. Before making his own hasty retreat for the Federal rear, Roulette shouted

⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 336; Seville, 48; Thomas G. Murphey, *Four Years in the War: The History of the First Regiment of Delaware Veteran Volunteers* (Philadelphia: James Claxton, 1866), 79-80; War Department, George R. Graham, "The Fifth Maryland at Antietam," *Antietam Studies*, Antietam National Battlefield Board, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's to 1917*, RG 94, National Archives; Carman, chapter 18, p. 10-1.

excitedly to the men from Connecticut, "Give it to 'em! Drive 'em! Take anything on my place, only drive 'em! Drive 'em!"¹⁰

The next regiment to the left of the 14th was the 130th Pennsylvania, which had to cross Roulette's farmyard and garden "composed of a large bank barn, wagon shed, stone wall on which stood the garden fence, the dwelling house, and a spring house behind which the rebel skirmishers had taken shelter." Companies A and F, marching by the flank, passed the Roulette house on the right. Farther to the left, Company K passed across the farmstead going between the Roulette garden and the massive barn. To the right of Company K, Company E came directly up against the garden wall and fence that the men found too high to scale. According to Private John D. Hemmingen, all of the men of that company "laid hold of the fence and with a mighty pull the entire fence came down and fell on Theodore Boyles" crushing several of his ribs. The fence on the other side of the garden was more easily "demolished by knocking off the pickets with the butts of our muskets." But there, Hemmingen remembered, the 130th encountered a foe for which it was not prepared. "In the line of our advance a number of beehives were overturned, and the little fellows resented the intrusion, and did most unceremoniously charge

¹⁰ Carman, chapter 18, p. 10-1; Page, 36; Henry S. Stevens, *Souvenir of Excursion to Battlefields by the Society of the Fourteenth Connecticut Regiment and Reunion at Antietam, September 1891, With History and Reminiscences of Battles and Campaigns of the Regiment on the Fields Revisited* (Washington: Gibson Brothers, Printers, 1893), 51. Page refers to "Major Hincks," but at the time of the battle Hincks was still the regimental Sergeant Major.

upon us, accelerating our speed through the orchard toward the entrenched position of the enemy.”¹¹

Once clear of the Roulette buildings, the companies of the 130th Pennsylvania came back together in line of battle, continuing south through Roulette’s orchard and then out into the plowed field beyond that. To the left of the 130th, the 108th New York, which had passed to the left of the farmstead, kept pace with it on the east side of the farm lane. At this point, these two regiments were reunited with the 14th Connecticut, which extended the brigade line across the cornfield on the right. Here the brigade was brought to a halt, and the soldiers ordered to lie down. Private Spangler of the 130th Pennsylvania recalled that as they were lying prostrate in the plowed field “the Confederates on the crest of the hill fired volleys into our ranks. The bullets flew thicker than bees, and the shells exploded with a deafening roar.” This was just at the time that Weber’s brigade was starting its charge, and all of the regiments of Morris’s brigade suffered from the enemy’s overshooting as the battle for the ridge in front of them gained in intensity.¹²

Having lost somewhere between a quarter and a third of its strength in little more than the first five minutes of combat, elements of Weber’s brigade now began to waver. So

¹¹ Hemmingen, 17 September; John Hays, *The 130th Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers in the Maryland Campaign and the Battle of Antietam: An Address Delivered June 7, 1894 Before Capt. Colwell Post 201, G.A.R.* (Carlisle, PA: Herald Printing Co., 1894), 8; Edward W. Spangler, *My Little War Experience, with Historical Sketches and Memorabilia* (York, PA: York Daily Publishing Company, 1904), 33.

¹² Hemmingen, 17 September; Hays, 8; Spangler, 34; Page, 37; Stevens, 51-2.

many men were leaving the ranks at this point that it began to appear as if the whole of his line was about to give way, and quite possibly it was. The Chaplain of the 14th Connecticut, Henry S. Stevens, later recalled, "Not only their wounded fell back through our lines to be cared for by us but the frightened 'skeedaddlers' also in large numbers."¹³

This situation was exacerbated by the 14th Connecticut when it arrived at the fence at the south end of the cornfield and impulsively fired into the rear of Weber's brigade, causing the 1st Delaware to fall back through the ranks of the 14th. According to the 14th's acting regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel Sanford H. Perkins, this "threw three companies of my right wing into confusion." Perkins reacted immediately by having the left of the regiment open fire, while he proceeded to rally the right. As Captain Seville of the 1st Delaware remembered it, "At this moment the supporting troops behind us, instead of charging through our line upon the enemy, halted in the cornfield and fired on us from the rear, thereby forcing the command to retire a few yards to avoid the fire from our supports." As the 1st Delaware withdrew from its forward position, its colors were left behind in the hands of its wounded lieutenant colonel, Oliver Hopkinson. A portion of the 5th Maryland also fell back against Morris's line at this time. As a soldier of that regiment later recalled, a small body of rebels came out of the road and made a rush for the regimental colors. The color bearers saw them coming and

¹³ Stevens, 52.

quickly withdrew “while the boys in line met the venturesome rebels and sent them back quicker than they came.” A portion of the line, however, followed the colors to the rear.¹⁴

Exactly what orders were given to the regiments of Morris’s brigade at this point, and by who, is not clear. It is clear, though, that the 14th Connecticut surged forth to the crest of the ridge, as what was left of the 1st Delaware rallied behind it and then came back into line with the 14th. At least one company of the 5th Maryland seems to have done the same. Several officers of the 1st Delaware “rallied a large number of the men for the purpose of returning to the original line, recovering the colors, and holding the position, if possible.” To the left of the 1st Delaware and 14th Connecticut line, the 130th Pennsylvania was given orders to move forward and take the crest of the hill to the right of Roulette’s lane from which the colors of the 5th Maryland had just fallen back.

According to Private Spangler in K Company, this was done in “gallant style” and the

¹⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 332, 333; Page 37-8; Francis A. Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Olde Soldier Books, n.d.), 111; Seville, 48; War Department, George R. Graham, “The Fifth Maryland at Antietam,” Antietam Studies, Antietam National Battlefield Board, *Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1780’s to 1917*, RG 94, National Archives. In their official reports both Morris and Perkins say that the 5th Maryland broke, and that its withdrawal disrupted the right of the 14th Connecticut. Page repeats the story as does Walker. However, it seems most improbable that any withdrawal of the 5th Maryland, which was in the center of the front line, would disrupt the extreme right of the second line. More likely, the troops that disrupted the right of the 14th Connecticut came from the 1st Delaware which was directly in front of the 14th, and Seville admits that the 1st Delaware withdrew when it was fired into from the rear. Page says that the 14th Connecticut fired impulsively on reaching the cornfield fence, but Perkins in his report says that he did not order the regiment to fire until after the right of the regiment had been disrupted by soldiers from the first line withdrawing through it. Graham establishes that there was at least some withdrawal from the 5th Maryland line at this time, but refutes the idea that the regiment broke.

enemy, who had advanced to the hill on the withdrawal of the 5th Maryland, was driven “pell-mell into a sunken road.” Rallied by its officers with the help of Weber, the 5th Maryland also moved back to the crest. In helping to move the regiment back to the line, though, Weber was seriously wounded and had to be carried from the field. Also out of action was the 5th Maryland’s commander, adjutant, and senior company commander, leaving the regiment for the time being without any central directing authority. Across the Roulette farm lane from the 130th Pennsylvania and 5th Maryland, the 108th New York moved up on that hill to the line established by the 4th New York. As the 108th reached the crest, it started down the reverse slope toward the sunken road, and, like the 4th before it, met such a severe fire that it immediately withdrew behind the crest and laid down.¹⁵

The fight for the sunken road now became a contest of firepower, with the force on the Federal side a confusing, swirling combination of what little remained of Weber’s regiments and the newly arrived line of Morris’s brigade, both intermingled on the crest of the ridge overlooking the enemy positioned in the sunken road below and on the rising ground beyond.

¹⁵ Stevens, 52; Seville, 48-49; Spangler, 34; OR 19, pt. 1, 334, 336; War Department, George R. Graham, “The Fifth Maryland at Antietam,” Antietam Studies, Antietam National Battlefield Board, *Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1780’s to 1917*, RG 94, National Archives.; Carman, chapter 18, p. 12; George H. Washburn, *A Complete Military History and Record of the 108th Regiment N.Y. Vols., From 1862 to 1894* (Rochester, NY: Press of E.R. Andrews, 1894), 24-5.

As the intensity of the fighting increased, Captain Samuel Sumner finally found General French just to the rear of his line and delivered the orders given to him by General Sumner a few minutes before in front of the Dunker Church for French to press his attack in order to support Sedgwick's advance. French's response was to follow Mahan's dictum, and order Kimball's brigade, the reserve, with its three veteran regiments and the new 132nd Pennsylvania "to charge to the front."¹⁶

At the point in time when Kimball received his orders to move to the front, his brigade was halted in line just south of the Roulette farm. On the right of the brigade line was the 14th Indiana and next to it on the left the 8th Ohio, then the 132nd Pennsylvania, with the 7th Virginia on the very left. Kimball rode out in front and along the line making a short speech in which he told the men, "Boys, we are going for the 'Johnnies' now, and we'll stay with them all day if necessary." He then ordered the brigade to fix bayonets and started it forward toward the front line. As the line cleared the Roulette orchard, the farm lane evenly divided the regiments of the brigade. At this point, however, Kimball ordered an oblique to the left so that the brigade would overlap the

¹⁶ Samuel S. Sumner to George B. Davis, April 4, 1897, John C. Ropes Research Files, Military Historical Society Collection, Boston University, Boston; Samuel S. Sumner, "The Antietam Campaign," in *Civil War and Miscellaneous Papers*, vol. 14, *Papers of the Historical Society of Massachusetts* (Boston: Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1918; reprint, Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1990), 11-2; OR 19, pt. 1, 324. French's report makes it sound as if the order that Captain Sumner delivered was in response to the attack on Sedgwick's left flank in the West Woods. As shown in Chapter 4, however, the order was sent before the attack on Sedgwick's flank was discovered. French is also mistaken in his report in saying that Morris's brigade was being held in reserve at this time.

battle line ahead somewhat on the left. This caused the left most company of the 8th Ohio to cross to the left side of the farm lane before the line was ordered to move forward again. In addition, the 132nd Pennsylvania and the 7th Virginia were bent back from the right wing of the brigade creating a formation in echelon. As Sergeant Galwey of the 8th Ohio later remembered it, "This formation was adopted because there were no troops of ours on our left then, nor for some time afterwards."¹⁷

With the adjustments to his line completed, Kimball ordered the entire brigade forward at the double quick (see figure 32). On the right, the 14th Indiana and 8th Ohio charged all the way to the crest of the ridge, where they found the firing line composed of the stalwarts of Weber's and Morris's brigades. There, without any specific orders being given, they halted and spontaneously took the enemy in the sunken road below under fire. The veteran Galwey justified the halt by pointing out that this was normal for a line of

¹⁷ T.N. Rownsdale, "Story of Antietam, As Told to My Son," TMs (photocopy), p. 2, Unit Files, Antietam National Battlefield, Sharpsburg, MD.; Galwey, "At Antietam," MOLLUS, 22:74-6; Thomas Francis Galwey, *The Valiant Hours, Narrative of "Captain Brevet," An Irish-American in The Army of the Potomac*, ed. W.S. Nye (Harrisburg, PA; Stackpole Company, 1961), 40; Franklin Sawyer, *A Military History of the 8th Regiment, Ohio Volunteer Infantry: Its Battles, Marches, and Army Movements* (Cleveland, OH: Fairbanks & Co., Printers, 1881), 78.

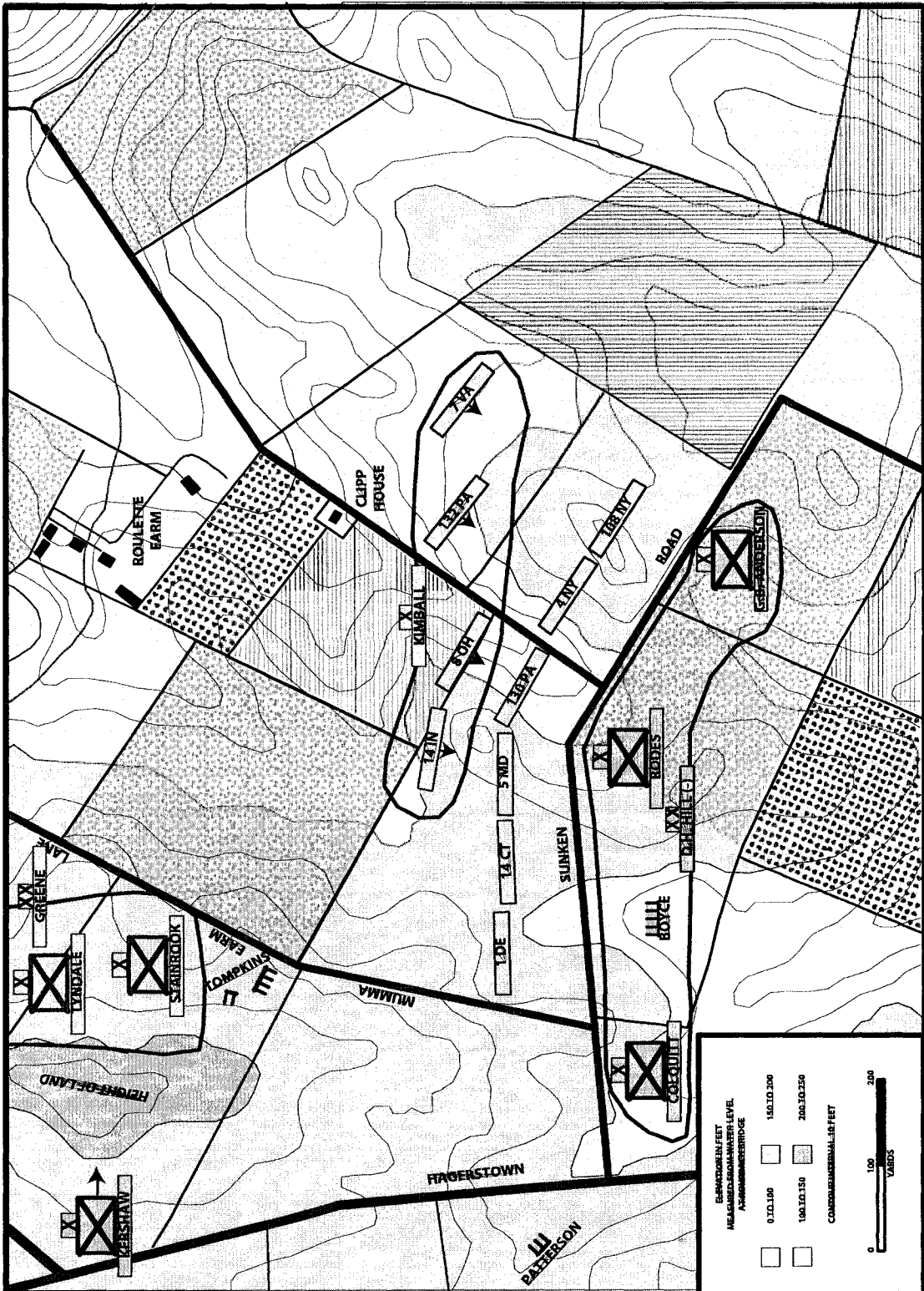


Figure 52. Trenching operations, 17 September 1862.

troops “when they come to a slight swell in the ground, a fence, a ditch, or any other temporary advantage for a firing line.” In addition, he said, “We had no orders to halt, it is true, but it is also true that, not at least for some time after, did we have an order to go on.” On the left of the lane, the new 132nd Pennsylvania, despite seeing their beloved colonel killed as they charged up the ridge, seemed determined to drive the enemy from his position with the bayonet. Adjutant Hitchcock remembered that just below the crest, the regiment encountered a large body of troops, probably the 108th New York, laying down and doing nothing. “They were in our way, but our orders were forward, and through and over them we went.” But on reaching the crest, the Pennsylvanians “were met by a terrific volley from the rebels in the sunken road down the other side, not more than one hundred yards away, and also from another rebel line in a corn-field just beyond.” Like the 4th and 108th New York before it, the 132nd Pennsylvania withdrew to the safety of the forward slope of the ridge.¹⁸

French’s entire division now was deployed as one long firing line along the crest of the ridge overlooking the sunken road. The ridge itself served the division as well as a field work. In each of the regiments, except those on the extreme right where the distance between the crest and the sunken road was much greater, the soldiers could take position below the crest on the forward slope where they were protected from enemy fire, load their weapons, and then return to the crest to fire down the reverse slope into the road. In the 132nd Pennsylvania, and no doubt in other regiments as well, the soldiers “were

¹⁸ Sawyer, 78; Galwey, “At Antietam,” MOLLUS, 22:77; Hitchcock, 59, 66.

ordered to lie down just under the top of the hill and crawl forward and fire over, each man crawling back, reloading his piece in this prone position and again crawling forward and firing.” As Lieutenant Hitchcock put it, “These tactics undoubtedly saved us many lives, for the fire of the two [enemy] lines in front of us was terrific.”¹⁹

For the Confederates below in the sunken road, which would become known to history as the Bloody Lane, the situation was not good. This lane, which at first seemed a natural entrenched position for a line of infantry, now became a death trap for those who manned it. Franklin Sawyer in the 8th Ohio remembered that “the men in the sunken road increased their wall of protection by piling up fence-rails and also their dead in their front.” Because the ground to the rear of the road was open, covered in corn that was by now largely knocked down, and rose rapidly to another ridge, attempting to escape from the road was as hazardous as remaining, if not more so. Private Spangler in the 130th Pennsylvania recalled one Confederate soldier who “tried to climb over the fence at the further side of Bloody Lane, but was shot in the rear as he reached the top, his body hanging on the upper rail. When our regiment buried him, it was found that he had been riddled with seventeen bullets.” Instead of attempting a general withdrawal to the next ridge above the road, however, the Confederates tried several times to reinforce the line in the road. Galwey in the 8th Ohio remembered seeing line after line of the enemy’s troops “advancing along the ridge, through the corn. They come up opposite us and sink out of sight in the sunken lane. It is a mystery that so many men could crowd into so

¹⁹ Hitchcock, 59.

small a space.” Private Rownsdale in the 14th Indiana reminisced with a mixture of pride and sadness that “we did our best to kill them all before they could reach their ditch. It was truly pitiful to see them tumble as they came down the slope, but they came in splendid alignment, their colors fell as fast as they were raised and each time they fell there was a man to seize them but he couldn’t more than wave them once until down he would go.”²⁰

Several times the Confederates attempted to charge out of the road and retake the ridge with the bayonet, but Federal fire always stopped them. Kimball recorded two such sallies in his official report. In the first, “The enemy, having been reinforced, made an attempt to turn my left flank by throwing three regiments forward entirely to the left of my line, which I met and repulsed, with loss, by extending my left wing, Seventh Virginia and One hundred and thirty-second Pennsylvania, in that direction.” Sawyer in the 8th Ohio witnessed this attempt at turning the left, and credited his regiment with delivering an oblique fire to the left, and in doing so “helped hasten the speed of the rebel retreat.” Regarding the second attempt Kimball wrote that the enemy “made a heavy charge on my center, thinking to break my line, but was met by my command and repulsed with great slaughter.” Spangler in the 130th Pennsylvania saw this attempt and later recorded it as being made by a score or more of the enemy who attempted to work their way along the

²⁰ Sawyer, 78; Spangler, 36; Galwey, *Valiant Hours*, 41; Rownsdale, 3.

rail fences lining Roulette's farm lane on the immediate left of his regiment. In the end, Spangler wrote, "All these brave men were killed."²¹

Inevitably, there also were individual attempts at surrender on the Confederate side. Galwey recalled "white handkerchiefs were once raised at several points along the Confederate line in the sunken road. For a moment we ceased firing. But the handkerchiefs were quickly withdrawn, so we resumed our fire." T.N. Rownsdale in the 14th Indiana said that he "noticed a white flag waving in the rebel line for sometime but thought it was a wounded man asking for protection in this way; the officers ordered us to cease firing, and the rebels called to us that they wished to surrender. We started to go to them and when near their line were fired on by a line in their rear." John Hemmingen in the 130th Pennsylvania saw the same little white flags, but recorded the event in his diary as a ruse because as soon as the firing ceased the rebels "poured a deadly volley into our ranks." He reported, "They tried the same deception a second time, which partially succeeded. The third time their white flags went up, our fire was withheld for a moment until every rifle could be reloaded, then with deliberate aim we gave them the first volley which must have caused them greater loss than we had so far sustained."²²

As hapless as the situation was for the Confederates in the sunken road, though, at this point in the fight, perhaps an hour and a half after his initial engagement, French no longer had the strength of numbers to drive his enemy out of the road with the bayonet,

²¹ OR 19, pt. 1, 327; Sawyer, 78; Spangler, 35.

²² Galwey, *Valiant Hours*, 41, 43; Rownsdale, 5; Hemmingen, 17 September.

and casualties were continuing to mount despite the advantage that he had in the intervening ridge. Any attempt to move his line forward would be met by a tremendous volume of fire at close range from a still well-manned entrenchment. So the battle now was a question of holding his position on the ridge until reinforcements could be found with the strength capable of breaking the Confederate line. The immediate problem was that the soldiers on the firing line already had shot away most of the sixty to eighty rounds of ammunition that they carried into the battle with them that morning, and there was no chance of resupplying them without sending them some distance to the rear. The solution was to strip the dead and wounded of their weapons and ammunition. Lieutenant Hitchcock recalled that, "Soon our men began to call for more ammunition, and we officers were kept busy taking from the dead and wounded and distributing to the living." In the 130th Pennsylvania, Private Spangler found that in loading and firing as fast as he could, he had very quickly used up all of the eighty rounds that he carried with him. Turning over the body of a soldier of the 1st Delaware, Spangler found in his cartridge box "ten Enfield rifle cartridges, which fortunately fitted the barrel of my Springfield rifle." In the 8th Ohio, the soldiers were complaining "that their guns were foul or their ammunition exhausted. The ground was covered with arms along the field and the men were ordered to change their pieces for these, and the officers at once went to picking up and distributing ammunition, and in this way, and by cutting the cartridge boxes from the dead, a good supply was soon obtained."²³

²³ Hitchcock, 61-2; Spangler, 35-6; Sawyer, 79.

Stripping the dead and wounded of their weapons and ammunition allowed French to hold on to the ridge and bought another hour and a half for the Federal side. At that point the situation was becoming exceedingly desperate, but it was also at that moment that the first of the brigades of Richardson's division came up behind the left of French's line.

II

Richardson received orders from army headquarters to move his division to the front at a little past 9:10 a.m. As with Sumner's other two divisions, Richardson's men had been up since 2:00 a.m. preparing for battle and awaiting orders. The brigades of the division were still in position south of McClellan's headquarters at the Pry House where they had been since their arrival at Antietam Creek on the afternoon of the fifteenth. Two of the regiments of Caldwell's brigade, the 5th New Hampshire and the combined 61st/64th New York were acting as headquarters guard at the Pry House, while the remainder of the brigade and Meagher's and Brooke's brigades were positioned just below the crest of the ridge above Antietam Creek in support of the heavy batteries of the Artillery Reserve. The delay in moving to the front gave a few of the men of the division the opportunity to watch the early stages of the battle from a distance. Private Ephraim E. Brown of the 64th New York wrote in his diary about seeing his colonel and lieutenant colonel, Francis C. Barlow and Nelson Miles, sitting "in their saddles viewing the heavy fighting & charging about a mile away in front of us near the Rebel Centre." Lieutenant Thomas Livermore of the 5th New Hampshire thought that he could see everything. "The

whole face of the country in front of us was filled with the smoke of battle and burning houses [Mumma farm] on the opposite plain . . . and through it we could see the dim outlines of the country and the contending lines sometimes, and continually the flashes of musketry and of artillery.”²⁴

When the orders to go to the front were received, however, no time was lost. The division marched immediately with Meagher’s brigade in the lead, followed by Brooke’s and then Caldwell’s brigades. At first, the division marched to the northeast along the Boonsboro pike until it was beyond the lane leading to the Pry House, and then the brigades one by one turned northwest following the route down to Antietam Creek that Sedgwick’s and French’s divisions had taken two hours before. Richardson himself led the way to the stream, and reaching it sat astride his horse watching as each of his regiments came down the slope and waded in. As each regimental commander passed by, he cautioned him in a stern manner, “No straggling to-day, Colonel! Keep your men well up and in hand.” Once across the creek, the regiments halted briefly giving the soldiers an opportunity “to empty their shoes, wring their stockings, and adjust their equipments.” The colonel of the 5th New Hampshire, Edward E. Cross, used the time to have the roll

²⁴ William Child, *A History of the Fifth Regiment, New Hampshire Volunteers in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (Bristol, NH: R.W. Musgrove, Printer, 1893; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1988), 120; Francis C. Barlow to Antietam Battlefield Board, 20 May 1893, Ezra Carmen Papers, Copy at Antietam National Battlefield.; Ephraim E. Brown, *The Civil War Diary of Ephraim E. Brown, 1862*, ed. Patricia A. Murphy (Lakeland, FL: By the Editor, 1999), 23; Thomas Livermore, *Days and Events, 1860-1866* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1920), 132.

called so that he would know exactly how many men he was taking into battle that day. The report he received from his adjutant “showed three hundred and one bayonets and eighteen officers, not counting the surgeons and chaplain.” Cross then made a short speech in which he told his soldiers, “The enemy are in front and the Potomac river is in their rear. We must conquer this day, or we are disgraced and ruined. I expect each one will do his duty like a soldier and a brave man. Let no man leave the ranks on any pretense. If I fall leave me until the battle is won. Stand firm and fire low.”²⁵

When the march was resumed, the brigades climbed the steep and muddy slope of the bluff west of the stream, but then, responding to the sounds coming from French’s battle in the vicinity of sunken road, Richardson turned them toward the southwest, away from the westerly course that the other two divisions of the Second Corps had followed from that point. This new route took the brigades down into a ravine, passed the farmstead of Henry Neikirk, and then up and over the crest of a second ridge, and down into a second ravine through which an extension of the Roulette farm lane ran from northwest to southeast along a split rail fence. It was here that Richardson ordered his brigade commanders to form their regiments in line and make their final preparations for going into action to include having the soldiers divest themselves of all unnecessary equipment

²⁵ Child, 120-1; James B. Turner, “‘Gallowglass’ Reports on Antietam,” in *My Sons Were Faithful and They Fought: The Irish Brigade at Antietam: An Anthology*, ed. Joseph G. Bilby and Stephan D. O’Neill (Hightstown, NJ: Longstreet House, 1997), 39; OR 19, pt. 1, 293, 299; William A. Osborne, *The History of the Twenty-Ninth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Late War of the Rebellion* (Boston: Albert J. Wright, Printer, 1877), 184; Nelson A. Miles, “My Recollections of Antietam,” *Cosmopolitan Magazine* 53 (October 1912): 588; Livermore, 132.

and fix their bayonets. Being first in the order of march and therefore all the way at the bottom of the ravine, Meagher had his regiments go into line of battle along the farm lane with the 69th New York on the right, and the 29th Massachusetts, 63rd and 88th New York in that order extending the line to the left. Caldwell's brigade, which at some point during the march had come up even with and on the left of Brooke's brigade, formed line of battle to the left of Meagher. The order of regiments in Caldwell's line from right to left was the 61st/64th New York, 7th New York, 81st Pennsylvania, and 5th New Hampshire. To back up his division line of two brigades, Richardson had Brooke form his brigade to the rear of Meagher's.²⁶

The line of battle that Richardson formed in the ravine was approximately eight hundred yards north of the eastern half of the sunken road and roughly parallel to it. In front of Meagher's brigade, the movement would be uphill until the crest of the ridge overlooking the sunken road was reached. From this point, the final fifty to seventy-five yards to the road on the right would be downhill, while on the left, because of a projection of the ridge out from the road toward the north, it would be across fairly level ground. The hillside immediately in front of the brigade line was covered in corn for the first third of the way, and then by pasture with a plowed field on the left for the last three hundred yards. Not counting the one in the ravine where the regiments formed their line of battle,

²⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 277, 285, 293, 299; D. P. Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns* (Boston: Patrick Donahoe, 1869; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1987), 303; Turner, 39, 41; Child, 121; Charles A. Fuller, *Personal Recollections of the War of 1861* (Sherburne, NY: News Job Printing House, 1906), 58.

the brigade would have to cross two more split rail fences, one at the far edge of the cornfield, and one at the near edge of the plowed field. This second fence continued to the right all the way across the pasture to the Roulette farm lane. In addition, two hundred yards farther on, a post and rail fence crossed the pasture from the west edge of the plowed field to the farm lane. This fence was just 75 yards below the crest of the ridge, and 175 yards in front of the sunken road on the reverse slope. The forward movement of Caldwell's brigade would not be so nearly encumbered. Although the rise to the crest of the ridge was sharper than it was in front of Meagher's regiments because of the northerly projection of the ridge, the movement would be almost entirely across pasture land with only one intervening split rail fence, and that well below the crest of the ridge. The only troublesome obstacle would be a post and rail fence running almost due south and slightly diagonally across the brigade front from right to left. This fence might be a problem for the 61st/64th New York on the right of the brigade line in attempting to maintain contact with Meagher's left regiment.

All final preparations having been made, Richardson now ordered Meagher and Caldwell to move their brigades forward. According to Meagher in his official report, his brigade moved through the cornfield with steadiness "and displayed themselves in admirable regularity at the fence" on the far side. Lieutenant James B. Turner on Meagher's staff recalled that while moving through the cornfield "the shot and shell of the enemy poured over our heads, and crashed in the hollows in the rear" while "on the

right, the sound of musketry was deafening.” Once out into the pasture beyond the cornfield, the brigade began to be subjected to small arms fire coming from a body of the enemy that pushed out from their positions in and beyond the sunken road to the crest of the ridge, driving back the mixed regiments that formed the extreme left of French’s line. This enemy line delivered against the oncoming Irishmen “a mighty volley with deliberate aim” that proved to be “frightfully destructive.” Although Meagher’s line wavered a little, he did not allow his regiments to interrupt their advance in order to return fire, but rather, riding out in front of them, personally led the brigade on toward the crest. The alignment of the regiments, however, was disrupted by the exceptionally strong split rail fence across the middle of the pasture, which, according to Turner, “Impeded the progress of the men, and the crossing of which, . . . caused a momentary derangement of the dressing.” Meagher ordered the fence torn down, but this proved to be slow work because of the lack of an experienced pioneer corps, and he later reported that “I had the misfortune to lose the services of many good officers and brave men.”²⁷

Beyond the fence, the brigade was subjected to an even greater volume of fire from the enemy line on the crest of the ridge. Lieutenant Turner would describe it by saying, “The fire as we mount the slope is terrific, but the advance never falters or wavers.” Lieutenant James J. Smith, adjutant of the 69th New York, remembered that his regiment at this point “marched over some Troops that were lying on the ground under the shelter of the brow of the hill.” Although exactly which regiment or regiments these troops

²⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 293-4; Turner, 41; Conyngham, 303-4; Osborne, 185-6.

belonged to is not known, they no doubt were a part of French's division. When the brigade was about halfway across the pasture and the plowed field, and only about a hundred yards from the Confederate line on the crest, Meagher finally ordered the regiments to halt, and gave the command to open fire. In the 29th Massachusetts, William Osborne noted that, "The volley that played out along the line towards that terrible crest made the hills ring far and wide. It was spitefully done, and very effective, for instantly the Confederates fell back from the summit into the sunken road, receiving as they did so several other volleys." Meagher reported that his "orders were, that after the first and second volleys delivered in line of battle by the brigade, the brigade should charge with fixed bayonets on the enemy." It was his belief that he could completely rely "on the impetuosity and recklessness of Irish soldiers in a charge," and he "felt confident that before such a charge the rebel column would give way and be dispersed." But in spite of these orders, he allowed the regiments to deliver five or six volleys before he personally ordered the 69th New York forward, and sent Captain G.M. Miller, the brigade assistant adjutant general, and Lieutenant John J. Gosson, his senior aide-de-camp, to order forward the 63rd and 88th New York on the left of the brigade line.²⁸

At first, the charge of the Irish Brigade seemed to be everything that Meagher hoped it would be (see figure 33). He later reported that, "Despite a fire of musketry, which literally cut lanes through our approaching line, the brigade advanced under my personal

²⁸ Turner, 41; James J. Smith to Antietam Battlefield Board, 10 April 1893, Ezra Carmen Papers, Copy at Antietam National Battlefield; Osborne, 186; OR 19, pt. 1, 294.

command within 30 paces of the enemy.” But then, under that terrible fire from the sunken road that had already stopped all of French’s brigades, things began to go wrong. The 69th New York advanced only a short distance before the bearer of its regimental color went down. The standard was quickly taken up by Captain James E. McGee of Company F, who having seen his command decimated by the fire from the road, moved out in front with the color to lead the regiment on. But then, Captain Felix Duffy, acting regimental major that day, was shot dead while out in front leading the charge, and the regimental commander, Lieutenant Colonel James Kelly, was wounded a second time in

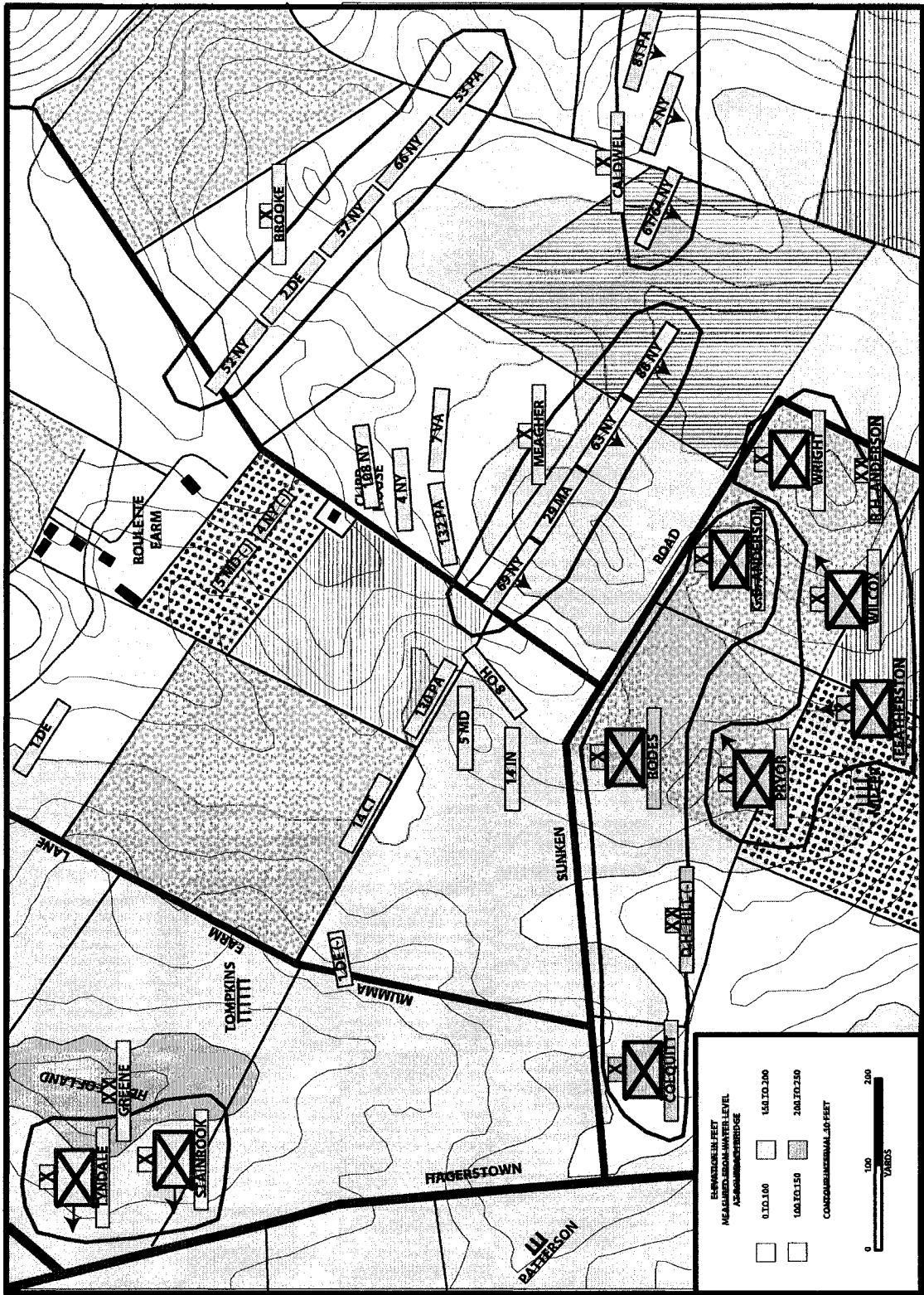


Figure 53. Water level measurements at various points, 17 September 1862.

the face and forced to leave the field. Under the continuing withering fire from the road and the loss of its key leaders, the regiment halted and then slowly began a withdrawal back to the line from which it had opened fire.²⁹

Among the factors contributing to the abandonment of the charge by the 69th New York was the fact that the 29th Massachusetts on its left apparently did not move forward with it. Osborne recalled that while the 69th and 63rd New York on the flanks of the 29th were suffering greatly from the fire coming from the sunken road, the 29th itself “was protected by a little ridge in its front and a slight depression of the ground upon which it stood.” This singular topographical feature not only shielded the New Englanders from the fire coming from the sunken road, but it gave them a clear shot with their longer range Springfield and Enfield rifled muskets over the line in the road at the enemy in the cornfield beyond, the shots of the 29th “cutting off the stalks of green corn as would a scythe, and having their effect upon the enemy who were hiding there.” In such a comfortable position, it may well have seemed to Lieutenant Colonel Joseph H. Barnes commanding the regiment, that the development of his regiment’s firepower was a better tactic than the shock action of a bayonet charge. Still, this decision would not have been Barnes’s prerogative had Meagher ordered him to charge. In his report of the battle, Meagher specifically mentioned giving orders to the 69th New York and sending orders

²⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 294, 297; James J. Smith to Antietam Battlefield Board, 10 April 1893, Ezra Carmen Papers, Copy at Antietam National Battlefield. Smith says that the 69th New York received an order to abandon the charge, but he does not say who issued that order, and there seems to be no other record of it.

to the 63rd and 88th New York, but he did not mention giving or sending orders to the 29th Massachusetts. As already discussed, his preference in this situation was for “relying on the impetuosity and recklessness of Irish soldiers,” which the Boston Brahmins of the 29th definitely were not. If Meagher actually failed or forgot to order the 29th Massachusetts to charge with the rest of the brigade, it may have cost him the success of the brigade charge and the unnecessary deaths of dozens of his beloved Irish soldiers.³⁰

Just as the 69th New York was stepping off, an officer of Meagher’s staff was delivering orders to Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Kelly, commanding the 88th New York on the extreme left of the brigade line, to charge the enemy in his front immediately “and take the enemy’s colors if possible.” But here, as with the 69th New York on the right, things very quickly went awry. Kelly reported, “I at once gave the order, and my regiment advanced about 20 or 30 paces; but seeing that I had not support, I halted and inquired for Colonel Burke, and asked why he did not advance.” Colonel John Burke was the commanding officer of the 63rd New York on the right of the 88th, but he was nowhere to be found. The only officer of the 63rd that Kelly could find was Captain Joseph O’Neill, the commanding officer of Company A. O’Neill’s company actually was on the right of the 63rd, but it had been so devastated in the advance up to the ridge that he felt obligated to find and report his situation to Colonel Burke. As Kelly reported the conversation, O’Neill said that “he would advance with me if he had any one to command

³⁰ Osborne, 186; OR 19, pt. 1, 294.

the regiment, but not knowing who was in command he did not wish to do so.” Also looking for Colonel Burke at this time was the lieutenant colonel of the 63rd, Henry Fowler. As the regimental lieutenant colonel, Fowler’s job was to direct the right wing of the regiment, but the devastation done to the right as it moved up to the crest of the ridge was so great that Fowler would report that it “had fallen before me.” Like O’Neill, Fowler went to the left looking for Burke, but instead found only the regimental major, Richard C. Bentley, and O’Neill. At that point, Fowler reported, “The colonel not being present, as a necessity I, without orders, assumed command.” Before Fowler could order what was left of the 63rd forward to the support of the 88th, however—if indeed such orders had reached him—both he and Bentley were severely wounded and compelled to leave the field. Thus, Meagher sadly would report, “The charge of bayonets I had ordered on the left was arrested, and thus the brigade, instead of advancing and dispersing the [enemy] column with the bayonet, stood and delivered its fire.”³¹

As Meagher’s brigade was fighting its way to the crest of the ridge overlooking the sunken road, Caldwell’s brigade, which had been ordered forward from the ravine at the same time as Meagher, was moving slowly forward on Meagher’s left. In this movement, Caldwell had two advantages that Meagher did not. First, as already discussed, the ground to his front was open with few obstructions to disrupt the movement or the alignment of the brigade. Second, almost the entire brigade line of battle was beyond the eastern end of the ridge behind which the sunken road lay. The brigade’s forward

³¹ OR 19, pt. 1, 294-6, 298.

movement, therefore, was along the slope of the end of that ridge as it dropped down toward Antietam Creek. This meant that the movement could not be seen or opposed even from the extreme right of the enemy's line, which ended on the top of the ridge at the point where the sunken road made a right angle turn to the south. A direct forward movement of the brigade, therefore, eventually would bring it beyond the enemy's right flank.

Having no enemy in front, Caldwell was at first cautious causing the brigade formation to take the form of an echelon to the left as the 61st/64th New York on the right of the brigade line, the only regiment that could directly observe the movement and engagement of Meagher's brigade, moved forward more quickly in attempting to keep up with and maintain contact with Meagher's left. Lieutenant Fuller of the 61st New York would relate in his memoirs that, "They were in our plain sight and we could see them drop and their line thin out. The flags would go down but be caught up, and down again they would go. This we saw repeated in each regiment a number of times." As the 61st/64th New York came up with the stalled line of Meagher's brigade, it halted as did all of the other regiments of Caldwell's brigade, some of the regimental commanders having their men lay down. Barlow reported remaining in this position for about fifteen minutes, all the while under fire from some enemy sharpshooters who killed Captain Manton C. Angell and one or two others. This fire came from a large tree on the crest of the ridge in front of the regiment. Barlow called for a number of marksmen to fire into the tree, which a half dozen or so of them did at once. As Fuller remembered it, "The

boys fired rapidly into the tree and in a brief time two Confederate gentlemen dropped to the ground, whether dead or alive I do not know, but we had no more trouble from that source.”³²

As the regiments of Caldwell’s brigade awaited developments, Meagher’s situation was becoming increasingly desperate as the soldiers began to run out of ammunition, just as had happened to French’s brigades earlier. Osborne in the 29th Massachusetts remembered that after approximately an hour at the front, the ammunition of the soldiers was nearly all expended, and the company commanders were reporting “that the guns of their men were getting so hot that the rammers were leaping out of the pipes at every charge.” To make matters worse, the brigade now was leaderless. While riding along the firing line encouraging the men, Meagher’s horse had been shot, and Meagher was caught underneath the pommel of the saddle as the animal fell. Temporarily stunned, Meagher was carried to the rear. All of Meagher’s staff also was out of action, either killed or wounded, and neither Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Kelly of the 88th New York nor Lieutenant Colonel Barnes of the 29th Massachusetts, the remaining ranking officers of the brigade present on the line, assumed overall command.³³

³² Fuller, 58; Livermore, 133; OR 19, pt. 1, 289.

³³ Osborne, 186; James J. Smith to Antietam Battlefield Board, 10 April 1893, Ezra Carmen Papers, Copy at Antietam National Battlefield; OR 19, pt. 1, 295; Turner, 43; Conyngham, 306. With regard to Meagher’s fall, a rumor would be circular after the battle that he was drunk and as a result had fallen from his horse. There is, however, no real evidence to substantiate this story (See Hitchcock, 63-4). In Osborne’s account, it is interesting that he notes ramrods “leaping out of the pipes at every charge.” The 29th Massachusetts was partially armed with the Enfield rifled musket. Although an excellent

III

If there was any solace in the situation at this point, it was that Richardson, who was observing the battle from a point to the rear of Meagher's brigade, was well aware of its condition. Richardson now sent off one of his staff officers to order Barlow to bring his 61st/64th New York up on the left of Meagher's line, while Richardson himself rode to the left in search of Caldwell with the intent of ordering him to bring to the right the rest of his brigade to relieve Meagher. Barlow, who had been able to observe the situation of the Irish Brigade, responded to his orders from Richardson by immediately ordering his companies to face by the right flank and then, sword in hand, led them at the double quick to the right, reforming them in line of battle just under the crest of the ridge and a little to the rear of the left flank of Meagher's line. Barlow then ordered his line forward, reporting that, "My regiments at once advanced over the crest of the hill, and bravely engaged the enemy and fired destructively." Fuller remembered that in moving to the front "instead of halting his men where Meagher had, he [Barlow] rushed forward half the

weapon, and the second most numerous on the Civil War battlefield, soldiers frequently complained that the barrel bands tended to become loose at times. Enfield barrel bands were secured by a screw clamp that had to be constantly tightened to ensure that the band remained in place, which would be especially true as the wood of the stock under the barrel contracted when the barrel became hot. The Model 1842 Musket and Model 1855 and 1861 Rifled Muskets did not have this problem because their barrel bands were held in place by band springs imbedded in the stock in front of the bands.

distance to the rebel line and at once opened fire. We were so near the enemy, that when they showed their heads to fire, they were liable to be knocked over.”³⁴

At the same time that Richardson was sending orders to Barlow and looking for Caldwell to bring the rest of his brigade to the relief of Meagher, Barnes in the 29th Massachusetts was also becoming concerned with the situation of the Irish Brigade. Having received no orders since starting forward from the ravine, he decided to find out how the regiments on his right and left were faring. Much to his dismay, he discovered that both the 69th New York on his right and the 63rd New York on his left were down to half their strength and barely able to maintain their positions against the forays of the enemy from the sunken road. Realizing the desperateness of the situation, Barnes determined on an equally desperate course of action to hold the enemy in check until the brigade could be relieved; he would have his regiment make a charge against the enemy in the sunken road in his front. He communicated the plan to Major Charles Chipman who took charge of the left of the 29th, while Barnes saw to getting the right wing ready.

³⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 289; Francis C. Barlow to Antietam Battlefield Board, 20 May 1893, Ezra Carmen Papers, Copy at Antietam National Battlefield; Fuller, 58-9; Brown, 23. Fuller says that Meagher called to Barlow asking him to bring his regiment over to the assistance of the Irish Brigade, but that Barlow refused to do so until he received orders from a proper authority. The exact movements of the 61st/64th New York here and in the paragraphs that follow are problematical at best. The interpretation here is based on the fact that both Barlow in his official report and Osborne in his history of the 29th Massachusetts said that the 61st/64th New York formed on the left of the Irish Brigade before moving against the sunken road. Barlow says that he formed his line of battle on the left of the 63rd New York, but in this he was mistaken as it was the 88th New York that was on the left of Meagher's line. However, both regiments were so reduced in numbers by that time that they probably appeared to Barlow to be just one regiment.

When Barnes gave the order, “Forward!,” the regimental color bearer, Sergeant Francis M. Kingman, stepped off smartly to the front followed by the entire regiment. Inspired by the bravado of the 29th, those left on the line from the other regiments of the Irish Brigade joined the rush forward. Osborne recalled that, “The shouts of our men, and their sudden dash toward the sunken road, so startled the enemy that their fire visibly slackened, their line wavered, and squads of two and three began leaving the road and running into the corn.”³⁵

Although by no means a coordinated movement, the combined surge of the 61st/64th New York and the 29th Massachusetts along with the remnants of the Irish regiments and even some men from French’s division, proved to be more than the Confederates manning the eastern most portion of the sunken road line could stand (see figure 34). Osborne remembered it as being “altogether too much of a shock for the enemy; they broke, and

³⁵ Osborne, 186-7.

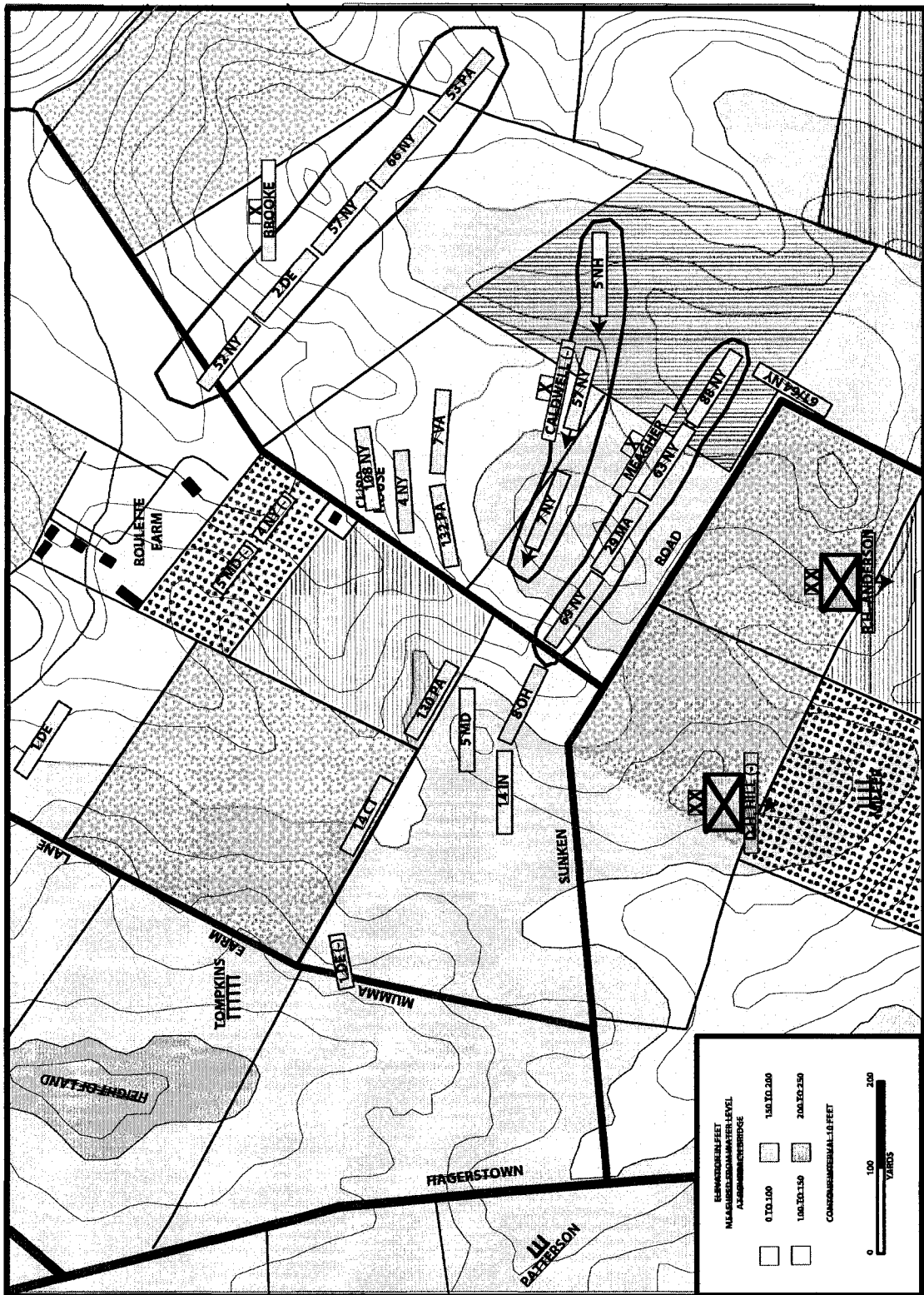


Figure 34. The Contour Map of the Area of the Farm, 17 September 1862.

fled for the corn-field.” As with the 61st/64th New York, however, the charge of the 29th Massachusetts did not actually carry into the road. Rather, the regiment halted just yards from the road and poured a very destructive fire from close range upon those who remained in the sunken road as well as those fled from it.³⁶

At this point, Barlow, looking west toward the lowest point of the sunken road line, realized that “the portion of the enemy’s line which was not broken then remained lying in a deep road, well protected from a fire in their front. Our position giving us peculiar advantages for attacking in flank this part of the enemy’s line, my regiments advanced and obtained an enfilading fire upon the enemy in the aforesaid road.” Barlow achieved this position by moving his companies by the left flank and toward the front, and then reforming his line of battle perpendicularly across the sunken road. According to Fuller, the 61st/64th New York then resumed firing. “The result was terrible to the enemy. They could do us little harm, and we were shooting them like sheep in a pen” It was not long before white flags began to appear among the soldiers in the outflanked enemy line, and Barlow ordered his men to cease fire, although effecting this took a little time and was only achieved by the officers going in front of the line and physically throwing up the weapons of the men still firing. Once the firing was stopped, Barlow moved his line forward nearly to the point where the sunken road intersects the Roulette farm lane coming in from the north. Here he accepted the surrender of more than three hundred of the enemy, including the battle flags of three enemy regiments. Looking back up the

³⁶ Osborne, 187.

road, Fuller witnessed a scene that he would never forget. “The dead and wounded were a horrible sight to behold. This sunken road, . . . was a good many rods long, and, for most of the way, there were enough dead and badly wounded to touch one another as they lay side by side. As we found them in some cases, they were two and three deep.”³⁷

Just as Barlow was getting his regiment into position across the sunken road, the remaining three regiments of Caldwell’s brigade were moving in from the left behind what remained of the Irish Brigade. As Osborne in the 29th Massachusetts remembered it, “Now the rush of troops was heard in the rear; now the air was rent with wild yells.” According to Lieutenant Livermore in the 5th New Hampshire, the relief of the Irish Brigade was accomplished as “we moved up behind them in an unwavering line of battle, and just before we reached them, at the command, we ‘broke by right of companies to the front,’ while they broke to the rear by companies and we passed through them, and then came ‘by companies into line,’ when we again found ourselves advancing in a well-ordered line of battle.” Going from line of battle into company columns, however, temporarily made the companies a better target for enemy artillery, and a single shell after tearing through the state color impacted in Company G, wounding eight men at once.

³⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 289; Fuller, 59; Nelson A. Miles, *Serving the Republic: Memoirs of the Civil and Military Life of Nelson A. Miles, Lieutenant General, United States Army* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1911), 45; Nelson A. Miles, “My Recollections of Antietam,” *Cosmopolitan Magazine* 53 (October 1912): 588; Brown, 24. The capture of three hundred prisoners and three battle flags by the 61st/64th New York is mentioned in several reports of the battle including McClellan’s and Caldwell’s, although the reports vary between two and three colors captured (see OR 19, pt. 1, 59, 285). None of these reports says to what regiments these colors belonged.

Despite this mishap, the three regiments continued their advance toward the sunken road, halting just before they reached it. Livermore later described the eerily paradoxical scene. “We stood nearly on the edge of the sunken road which ran along the border of an extensive cornfield, behind us the greensward for a hundred yards was dotted with the dead and wounded, and away across the creek our great guns were hurling shells over the valley and above our heads at the enemy; on our left, the country as far as we could see was quiet and undisturbed, except, perhaps, by a few skirmishers, and the flight of shells overhead.”³⁸

The halt of Caldwell’s three regiments at the edge of the sunken road was a brief one. Livermore remembered “that while we fired by file a little before we advanced across the road, . . . we did not meet with great opposition here, probably because the Irish regiment we relieved had done considerable toward using up the line we first dealt with.” All three regiments now swept across the road, making prisoners of those few enemy soldiers who remained in the road. Sergeant Charles A. Hale of the 5th New Hampshire later described what he saw and experienced as his regiment moved forward. “What a bloody place was that sunken road as we advanced, . . . ; the fences were down on both sides, and the dead and wounded were literally piled in there in heaps. As we went over them in crossing the road, a wounded reb made a thrust at me with his bayonet; turning my head to look at him I saw that he was badly hurt, and kept on.” Once across the road and into the cornfield beyond, Caldwell reported “the enemy opened upon us a terrific fire from a

³⁸ Osborne, 187; Livermore, 134, 135-6; OR 19, pt. 1, 59, 288; Child, 122 .

fresh line of infantry, and also poured upon us a fire of grape and canister from two batteries, one in the orchard just beyond the corn-field, the other farther over to the right.” Caldwell noted that while his “regiments bore this fire with steadiness,” there was some wavering of the 7th New York on the right of the advancing line. Accordingly, he went to the right to help in rallying that regiment, and then stayed with it, personally leading it forward.³⁹

As Caldwell was on the right of the line assisting the 7th New York, the 5th New Hampshire and the 81st Pennsylvania continued on into the cornfield until they came up against the enemy’s hastily reassembled line on the crest of the ridge approximately 150 yards south of the sunken road. Here both regiments stopped and opened fire. After only two to three minutes, though, Lieutenant Colonel George Gay of the 5th came to Colonel Cross and reported that a strong enemy force was maneuvering to the left behind the ridge in front in an attempt to flank the regiment and all of Caldwell’s line. Cross went with Gay to the left of the line and saw for himself that several enemy regiments were indeed attempting to gain a position on his flank. He then summoned Sergeant Hale, who was nearby, and ordered him to “run and find the General [Caldwell] and tell him that the enemy is on our left flank.” Hale started for the rear at once. On reaching the sunken road, however, he noticed the wounded rebel soldier who only minutes before had made the bayonet thrust at him. Hale recalled that the reb “was not so pugnacious this time,

³⁹ Livermore, 137; Charles A. Hale, “My Personal Experiences at the Battle of Antietam,” TMs (typescript), p. 2, John Rutter Brooke Papers, Historical Society of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, PA; OR 19, pt. 1, 285.

though I saw him glaring [sic] at me as I picked my way over the heaps.” Hale continued on north of the road until “reaching the rise of ground where I could see back down the slope, I looked anxiously up and down for the General, but he was not in sight.” Looking back across the road toward where he had left Cross, he saw two enemy battle flags moving forward high above the corn tassels. Just then, Hale observed that “down among the corn there was a tremendous [sic] commotion and shouting, and some sharp firing, indicating that something serious was going on; it was the Fifth New Hampshire changing front.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Child, 123; Hale, 2-3. In addition to Hale’s story of not being able to find Caldwell, there are two others which call into question the whereabouts of Caldwell during this phase of the battle. One is in Child (p. 121-2) where sometime prior to the 5th New Hampshire’s crossing of the sunken road, either at the point where Richardson initially ordered Caldwell’s brigade to move to the right behind Meagher or when the regiment was about to move forward to pass through Meagher’s regiments to the front, Richardson came around the left of the regiment looking for Caldwell. Child’s remark is that Caldwell “was not there just then.” The other account, which is similar to Child’s, is in Livermore (p. 137-8). Livermore says that as the regiment was advancing up to the sunken road, he saw Richardson on foot toward the right of the regiment crying out, “Where’s General ----?” According to Livermore, some soldiers hollered back to Richardson that Caldwell was behind a hay stack in the rear to which Richardson replied, “God damn the field officers!” Livermore had earlier mentioned (p. 133) that he himself had seen “General ---- under the hill and behind the haystack out of harm’s way.” Livermore’s inference, of course, is to cowardice on the part of Caldwell. But Caldwell in his official report (OR 19, pt. 1, 285) says that he received Richardson’s orders to move his brigade behind Meagher’s and that he acted on those orders. As has already been pointed out, Caldwell also reported that after the brigade crossed the sunken road he was with the 7th New York on the right of the brigade line, which would certainly account for why Sergeant Hale could not find him north of the road. Caldwell’s report does not seem to be embellished. He gives full credit to Barlow for his flanking of the sunken road, and to Cross for his subsequent repositioning of the 5th New Hampshire to save the brigade from being flanked. Caldwell takes no credit for himself where the regiments are concerned, except in helping to steady the 7th New York and led it forward. Given the confusion on the field during the battle, it is entirely plausible that Richardson and Hale,

Immediately after sending off Sergeant Hale, Cross realized that the proximity of the enemy force maneuvering to gain his left flank would not allow him the luxury of awaiting orders from Caldwell (see figure 35). The enemy by now was within two hundred yards “advancing in line of battle yelling awfully.” Accordingly, he undertook a change of regimental front by having several of the companies on the left of the line file off to the left and rear, and then he brought the remainder of the regiment into line with them. This maneuver brought the left of the regimental line back to the point where the sunken farm lane reached its eastern most point and made the sharp right angle turn to the south. According to Cross, the movement “was executed in time to confront the advancing line of the enemy in their center with a volley at very short range, which staggered and hurled them back.” But the enemy was thrown back only a short distance where they rallied and once again maneuvered to get on Cross’s left flank. As before, Cross was able to keep his

both on foot, could not find Caldwell. But that in itself is not evidence of cowardice or dereliction of duty on the part of Caldwell.

regiment squarely in front of the enemy line, and as they came on a second time, he met them again with a deadly volley at short range stopping their forward advance.⁴¹

By now, Cross's maneuvering of his regiment had opened a wide gap on his right with the rest of the brigade line. This development, however, did not go unnoticed by Major H. Boyd McKeen commanding the 81st Pennsylvania, the regiment that had been to the right of the 5th New Hampshire during the advance across the sunken road and into the cornfield. From approximately the center of the cornfield, McKeen now brought his regiment over to again take position on the right of the 5th New Hampshire. For about the next ten minutes, the battle between the two opposing lines degenerated into a general contest of firepower accentuated by "a stream of shouts, curses, and appeals to 'Fire! Fire! Fire faster!'" At one point, a rebel color bearer advanced to within fifteen yards of the 5th New Hampshire line, waving his color defiantly in the faces of the men from the Granite State. Lieutenant Livermore remembered, "Our men fairly roared, 'Shoot the man with the flag!' and he went down in a twinkling and the flag was not raised in sight again." Livermore also remembered seeing Colonel Cross exhorting his men to do their utmost by screaming at them to "put on the war paint." Cross's face, Livermore noted, already was stained black with gun powder and sweat, and the soldiers took the cue to blacken their own faces with powder by rubbing them with the torn ends of their cartridges. According to Livermore, Cross then "cried out, 'Give'em the war whoop!'"

⁴¹ OR 19, pt. 1, 288, 292; Child, 123; Hale, 3. McKeen in his report says that in coming to the aide of the 5th New Hampshire, he found that they had taken up "position on the edge of the corn-field and in the old road."

and all of us joined him in the Indian war whoop until it must have rung out above all the thunder of the ordnance.”⁴²

With the 5th New Hampshire and 81st Pennsylvania maneuvering to the left and Barlow’s 61st/64th New York still far to the right in the vicinity of the junction of the sunken road and Roulette farm lane, the four regiments of Caldwell’s brigade were now dangerously spread out across the entire length of the cornfield south of the sunken road, a distance of at least five hundred yards. Only the wavering 7th New York was left to hold the center of the brigade line, but with large gaps on both of its flanks. Fortunately, when Richardson ordered Caldwell to relieve Meagher’s brigade, he also sent orders to Brooke to bring his command forward, and it was at this point that these regiments arrived in the cornfield to support Caldwell.

IV

Brooke’s brigade was last in the division column of march as it approached the battlefield after crossing Antietam Creek. Brooke deployed his regiments in line of battle in the ravine behind Meagher, with the order of regiments from left to right being the 53rd Pennsylvania, 66th New York, 57th New York, 2nd Delaware, and 52nd New York. When Meagher moved forward from the ravine toward the sunken road, Brooke followed at a distance. As Meagher’s regiments reached the crest of the ridge above the sunken

⁴² OR 19, pt. 1, 288, 292; Child, 123-4; Livermore, 140-3. Child is mistaken in saying that the 7th New York came to the aid of the 5th New Hampshire along with the 81st Pennsylvania.

road and became fully engaged with the Confederate line in the road, Brooke got his regiments into a prone position well below the crest so that they were protected from the effects of overshooting. It was in this position that the brigade remained until Major John M. Norvell, Richardson's Assistant Adjutant General, arrived with orders for Brooke to move his brigade forward.⁴³

As Brooke started his brigade to the front, he discovered that Meagher had already been relieved by Caldwell and the Irishmen, going to the rear, passed through Brooke's regiments just as they were approaching the crest of the ridge. Once on the crest, Brooke halted his brigade momentarily and watched as Caldwell's regiments charged across the sunken road and into the cornfield beyond. He observed the Confederate attempts to drive Caldwell back by turning the left of the line, and the gap that was developing between Caldwell's left two regiments and the 7th New York in the center of his line. In addition, there was a gap between the right of the 7th New York and the left of Barlow's 61st/64th New York, which was still in the vicinity of the junction of the sunken road and the Roulette farm lane.

⁴³ OR 19, pt. 1, 299; John R. Brooke to Antietam Battlefield Board, 11 April 1893, Ezra Carmen Papers, Copy at Antietam National Battlefield; Josiah Marshall Favill, *The Diary of a Younger Officer Serving with the Armies of the United States During the War of the Rebellion* (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1909), 186-7; Gilbert Frederick, *The Story of a Regiment, Being a Record of the Military Services of the Fifty-Seventh New York State Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865* (Chicago: C.H. Morgan Co., 1895), 88. In his official report, Brooke recorded the order from Richardson as being "to move forward." In writing to the Antietam Battlefield Board thirty-one years later he said that it was "to relieve" Meagher, and that he was surprised to find Caldwell's brigade "interposed" between his and Meagher's.

At this point, Brooke decided—or was ordered by Richardson—to continue forward with his brigade and to bring his line up in direct support of Caldwell's (see figure 36). Accordingly, Brooke ordered all of his regiments to move across the road and into the cornfield with the exception of the 53rd Pennsylvania that he held back as a reserve. The youthful Lieutenant Favill of the 57th New York would later recall this movement as an exhilarating experience "The enemy were in plain sight a very short distance below, and the Fifty-seventh and Sixty-sixth were ordered to charge, which they did in a most gallant manner, led by Colonel Parisen on horseback. Down the slope, over a sunken road strewn with dead and dying, and into a cornfield pell mell we went, driving the flying rebels before us in splendid shape, bayoneting all who did not promptly surrender." In making this movement, Brooke's brigade line became extended and entangled with Caldwell's as his two left regiments—the 66th and 57th New York—oriented on the gap between the right of the 81st Pennsylvania and the left of the 7th New York, and the 2nd Delaware and 52nd New York moved to the right of the 7th New York.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 299; John R. Brooke to Antietam Battlefield Board, 11 April 1893, Ezra Carmen Papers, Copy at Antietam National Battlefield; Favill, 187.

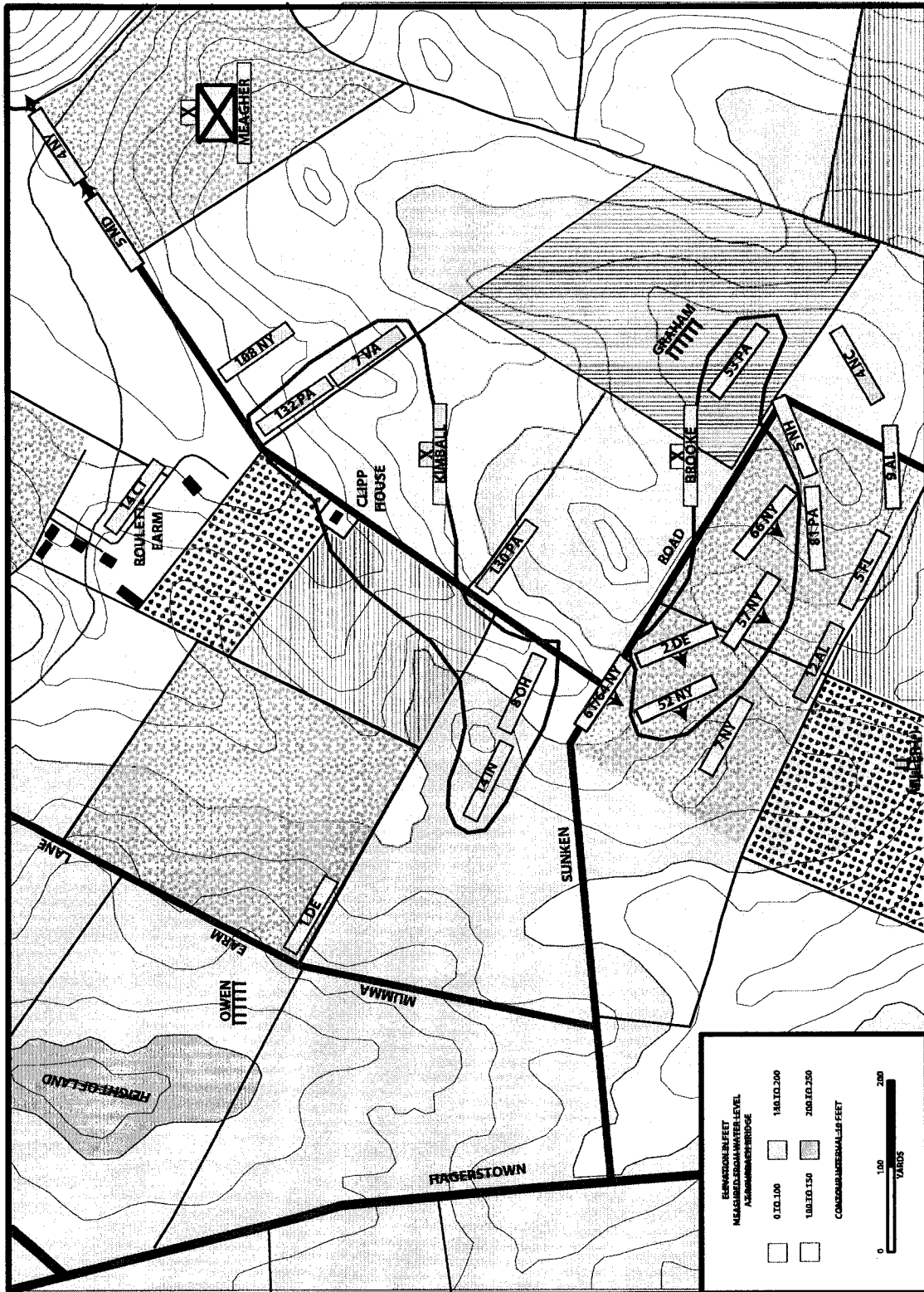


Figure 30. DYCK-KOHLER-FOX-CARROLLWAY 1:50,000, 17 September 1862.

At the same time that Brooke was ordering his regiments to the support of Caldwell's line, Barlow was preparing to move his 61st/64th New York from its position across the sunken road at the Roulette farm lane into the cornfield to catch up with the rest of his brigade. To do this he swung his line around to the left and proceeded directly south into the cornfield from the Roulette farm lane. Coming up on the right of what was now a combined line of battle made up of regiments from both Caldwell's and Brooke's brigades, Barlow noted that there was no longer an enemy force in that part of the cornfield, but found a situation among the Federal regiments that only can be described as confused. "Our troops were joined together without much order—several regiments in front of others, and none in my neighborhood having very favorable opportunities to use their fire." The ability of these regiments to use their fire was about to become critical for just at this point, Barlow noticed a strong rebel force "at no great distance," advancing on his right toward the rear, threatening to turn the right of Richardson's entire division and what was left of French's as well (see figure 37). In response, Barlow quickly wheeled both of his regiments, this time around to the right and "moved to the crest of a hill on our right flank, occupying the only position where I found we could use our fire to advantage." This last maneuver brought the right flank of Barlow's line all the way to the sunken road about 150 yards west of the Roulette farm lane.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 285, 290.

Barlow was not the only regimental commander on the right of the Caldwell/Brooke line to become aware of the rebel force advancing toward the rear of the line. Colonel Paul Frank of the 52nd New York somehow learned that at least two regiments of rebel troops were headed for the right rear. At first, he thought that his proper course of action should be to report the situation to Brooke and get orders from him as to what to do, but Brooke was just then way off to the left near the center of the line and getting orders from him would take too much time. Frank reported, "I therefore took the Fifty-second on the high ground to our right and opened fire on the flank of the rebel regiment." What Frank failed to mention in his report was that he also took charge of the 2nd Delaware, commanded by Captain David L. Stricker, which was on his left and brought it along with the 52nd. Frank's maneuver placed both the 52nd New York and 2nd Delaware on the high ground on the left of Barlow's 61st/64th New York. In addition, the 7th New York, perhaps still under the direction of Caldwell, swung around to the right and came into line on the left of the 52nd New York and 2nd Delaware.⁴⁶

General Richardson himself, still on foot and in the cornfield just behind the Caldwell/Brooke line, also was aware of the danger to his right flank. He found Brooke and ordered him to send the 53rd Pennsylvania, which still was in reserve north of the sunken road, to meet the Confederate advance on the right, head on. Moving initially in file to the right, the 53rd's commander, Lieutenant Colonel Richards McMichael, headed

⁴⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 278, 290, 299, 301; Robert G. Smith, *A Brief Account of the Services Rendered by the Second Regiment Delaware Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion* (Wilmington, DE: Historical Society of Delaware, 1909), 20.

his regiment straight for the Roulette orchard and barn, which he was told must be held at all costs, especially since the barn was being used as one of the Second Corps hospitals. McMichael reported on the move by writing, “Steadily, under a shower of musketry, my regiment advanced to the orchard and gained the barn about 100 yards in front of the main line, and still pressing onward, reached the crest of the hill [to the rear of the Roulette house] and drove back the enemy.”⁴⁷

The main line to which McMichael referred in his report actually was a conglomeration of regiments from French’s division, which, after the abandonment of the sunken road by the enemy, had withdrawn from the crests overlooking the road to the low ground along the Roulette farm lane and among the buildings of the farmstead itself to reform and resupply themselves with ammunition. The first regiments of French’s division to pull back were those of Weber’s brigade, which had been the first to go into action at the sunken road. Greatly reduced in numbers and with Weber himself wounded and out of action, the men of these regiments at the direction of their company officers began to withdraw shortly after the arrival of Morris’s and Kimball’s regiments. Private George R. Graham of the 5th Maryland recalled, “Squad after squad came in from the front, until at least 100 of the Fifth Maryland and almost as many of the Fourth New York, were gathered in the Clipp house and grounds. We were entirely without organization, but the colors of both regiments were there. I do not remember any of the First Delaware.” The men of the 5th Maryland and 4th New York “found the house and

⁴⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 278, 299, 304.

grounds full of wounded men, and the Surgeon busy, on an improvised table in the back yard, operating on the more seriously wounded.” Soon after their arrival, though, General French rode up and learning that this body of men was from Weber’s brigade congratulated them on what they had done and directed them to a hill about a half mile to the rear where he said they would be able to resupply themselves with ammunition.⁴⁸

The regiments of Morris’s brigade were able to make a more organized withdrawal from the sunken road after the Confederates were driven out, but they were widely scattered across the Roulette farm and no longer functioning as a brigade. The 14th Connecticut, retiring by companies, retraced its steps through the cornfield, and entered the Roulette farmstead between the main house and the spring house just a few yards to the north. Here Morris reported to French, who was there with his staff, and French ordered him to report to and support Kimball. Kimball in turn told Morris to hold the stone wall between the Roulette house and barn, so this is where Morris positioned the 14th. Colonel Oliver H. Palmer, commander of the 108th New York, after sending off a guard with 159 prisoners, only was able to muster about one hundred men. On his own initiative, he reformed them just east of the Roulette barn along the farm lane. Morris’s last regiment, the 130th Pennsylvania, had pulled back only a few yards from its position overlooking the sunken road on the left of the farm lane when Meagher’s brigade arrived

⁴⁸ OR 19, pt. 1, 324; War Department, George R. Graham, “The Fifth Maryland at Antietam,” Antietam Studies, Antietam National Battlefield Board, *Records of the Adjutant General’s Office, 1780’s to 1917*, RG 94, National Archives.

and took over the battle. They were still in this position about two hundred yards south of the Clipp House.⁴⁹

Unlike Weber and Morris, Kimball still had fairly good control of his regiments. Upon the arrival of Meagher's brigade on his left, Kimball had ordered the withdrawal of his two left regiments, the 7th Virginia and 132nd Pennsylvania. They were now in position east of Roulette's orchard and lane, perpendicular to the farm lane along the split rail fence that divided the pasture field there. The 8th Ohio and the 14th Indiana, however, were still on the crests just north of the sunken road and west of the farm lane. Their right flank was now the right flank of the division, and it was directly threatened by the new Confederate assault from the west. Kimball, therefore, ordered them to change front to the right and rear, putting these two regiments in position at a right angle to their original line with their backs to the farm lane just south of the Clipp House. Although they now were positioned below the height of land from where the rebel attack was coming, they became the nexus of the new line to resist that attack. The 130th Pennsylvania swung around to come in on the left of this line, and the 53rd Pennsylvania, going back into line of battle, came in on the right of the line.⁵⁰

With the repositioning of two of Caldwell's and two of Brooke's regiments south of the sunken road and Kimball's establishment of a makeshift line of four regiments along the Roulette farm lane, the Confederates charging over the height of land through

⁴⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 332-5; Page, 40; Stevens, 56.

⁵⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 304, 327, 329, 330, 336.

Mumma's cornfield toward the Roulette farm suddenly found themselves facing a large volume of Federal fire coming at them from their front and right, even though in the 14th Indiana, and probably in the 8th Ohio and 130th Pennsylvania as well, the men were by now "using the ammunition taken from their dead and wounded comrades." The rebels came on through this fire until they were within short range of Kimball's line, and nearly among the buildings of the farmstead. Chaplain Stevens of the 14th Connecticut was at this point in a basement room under the north end of the Roulette House caring for several of his wounded comrades. Fearing that the rebels were about to overrun the place, Stevens and some of the men with him decided that it would be best to attempt to avoid an accidental slaughter of those in their care by surrendering. "As we stood outside, a few feet from the door, to surrender our helpless charge if it could be done before the Johnnies shot, the foremost men in butternut came within about two rods of us, when the operations of a battery brought to bear upon the cornfield and of some infantry throwing a flanking fire into the field started those Johnnies on a retrograde movement of the most lively sort."⁵¹

The battery that Stevens referred to was Battery K, 1st U.S. Artillery under the command of Captain William M. Graham. This battery of six brass twelve-pounder Napoleons, part of the army's Artillery Reserve, had been sent to Richardson by Fitz-John Porter, probably at Richardson's request since the two batteries of Richardson's division were detached and under the control of the corps artillery chief at the time and had been

⁵¹ Stevens, 56-7.

since the previous evening. Graham reported to Richardson just north of the sunken road at about the time that Brooke's brigade was crossing the road to support Caldwell's line. Richardson initially assigned Graham the task of driving off an enemy battery south of the sunken road that was contesting the advance of the division. Graham put his battery into action on the high ground in the plowed field at the eastern most extent of the sunken road and reported that he drove off the enemy battery within ten minutes. He then noticed two enemy infantry columns approaching from the right, and repositioned his guns to engage them as they broke out of Mumma's cornfield and neared the line along the Roulette farm lane. Graham was able to report that, "A heavy fire of spherical case and shell was opened upon these troops immediately, which in a short time drove them from the field, with great slaughter, to the woods in their rear."⁵²

In repulsing the threat to the right and rear of their divisions, French and Richardson also had the help of two brigades from Franklin's Sixth Corps, which were just then arriving on the field. These were the brigades of Colonel William H. Irwin and Brigadier General William T.H. Brooks of Major General William F. Smith's division. Following

⁵² OR 19, pt. 1, 60, 206-7, 279, 342, 343; Curt Johnson and Richard C. Anderson, *Artillery Hell, The Employment of Artillery at Antietam* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 35, 75; George R. Large and Joe A. Swisher, *Battle of Antietam: The Official History by the Antietam Battlefield Board* (Shippensburg, PA: Burd Street Press, 1998), 131. Both McClellan's and Hunt's reports say that Graham's battery was not sent to the support of Richardson's division until after Richardson was wounded and Hancock replaced him. However, Hancock's, Hays's, and Graham's reports make it clear that Graham was on the field and in position well before Richardson was wounded and in time to help in the repulse of the Confederate attack on the right of French and Richardson.

the route that Sedgwick's and French's divisions had used earlier, Irwin's brigade moved through the East Woods and advanced toward the West Woods in the vicinity of the Dunker Church threatening the rear of the Confederate advance, while Brooks's brigade moved just east of the Mumma farm and advanced into the Mumma cornfield directly on the left flank of the rebel attacking columns. Brooks did not believe that his brigade had done much to repulse the Confederate assault, reporting that by the time that he got his brigade into action on the right of French's division, "I found that the enemy had been checked and repelled." Barlow, however, who did not know the identity of these two new brigades, gave them more credit in defeating the Confederate threat, stating, "The enemy at length retreated quite precipitately under the fire of the troops on our side, together with another body of Federal troops, which attacked the enemy in turn on their flank and rear."⁵³

While three of his regiments—the 52nd New York, 2nd Delaware, and 53rd Pennsylvania—were assisting in repulsing the Confederate threat to the right of Richardson's and French's divisions, Brooke remained with the 66th and 57th New York, concerning himself with the continuing threat to the left of Caldwell's line still in Piper's cornfield south of the sunken road. By now, he had these two regiments on line to the right of the 5th New Hampshire and 81st Pennsylvania, and the men of all four regiments were firing for all that they were worth against a reinforced Confederate line that refused

⁵³ OR 19, pt. 1, 290, 402, 408, 409-10.

to withdraw. Child, the regimental historian of the 5th New Hampshire, remembered that eventually the Federals got the upper hand in this battle of fire and endurance and obduracy, and the enemy line “broken by the close shooting of the Federal troops, wavered and fell back in disorder.” Seeing an opportunity, Brooke ordered his two regiments to charge the enemy as they attempted to withdraw from the cornfield, and the 5th New Hampshire and 81st Pennsylvania spontaneously joined them. In this charge, Corporal George Nettleton of Company G, 5th New Hampshire picked up the state color of the 4th North Carolina, undoubtedly the flag that Livermore had seen fall with its bearer. The 57th New York captured the colors of the 12th Alabama and took many prisoners, but lost its commander, Lieutenant Colonel Parisen, in the process. The 66th New York also came away with a trophy, the colors of the 5th Florida, and took a number of prisoners as well.⁵⁴

Joining these four regiments in the charge to clear Piper’s cornfield was the 7th and 61st/64th New York (see figure 38). After the enemy columns that had threatened the right and rear had begun their withdrawal from Mumma’s cornfield toward the West Woods, Barlow noted that the enemy was again advancing into the western end of Piper’s cornfield on the right of the 57th New York and to the left rear of his own position. In this effort, the enemy was supported by two pieces of artillery that they brought into position in Piper’s orchard just south of the cornfield. To counter this move, Barlow

⁵⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 278, 288, 292, 299, 302, 303; John R. Brooke to Antietam Battlefield Board, 11 April 1893, Ezra Carmen Papers, Copy at Antietam National Battlefield; Child, 123-4; Livermore, 142-3; Favill, 187; Frederick, 89-90, Hale, 4.

swung the 61st/64th New York around yet one more time, and advanced south through the cornfield until he was on the right of the 7th New York, which had undertaken a similar maneuver to get on the right of the 57th New York. Just as the 61st/64th New York was coming on line with the 7th, though, Barlow, who was on the left of his own line, was struck in the groin by a ball from a spherical case shot and had to be carried from the field leaving Lieutenant Colonel Miles in command.⁵⁵

As the Confederates withdrew from the cornfield and back through the orchard, Caldwell, on orders from Richardson, halted the 5th New Hampshire and 81st Pennsylvania as they reached the southern end of the cornfield. Likewise, Miles halted the 61st/64th New York while it was still in the cornfield, and sent Lieutenant Fuller forward with two men to “watch and report any appearance of the enemy.” Brooke, however, with his two regiments and the 7th New York of Caldwell’s brigade continued in pursuit of the enemy through Piper’s orchard, eventually reaching and occupying the buildings of Piper’s farmstead. But here, Brooke, although no longer threatened by

⁵⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 290; Francis C. Barlow to Antietam Battlefield Board, 20 May 1893, Ezra Carmen Papers, Copy at Antietam National Battlefield.; Henry Gerrish, “Seventh New York Infantry Regiment Memoirs,” TMs (photocopy), p. 28, Civil War Times Illustrated Collection, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA.; Fuller, 60; Henry Gerrish, “Seventh New York Infantry Regiment Memoirs,” TMs (photocopy), pp. 25-6, Civil War Times Illustrated Collection, Military History Institute, Carlisle Barracks, PA. In his report, Barlow says that he was on the right of the 57th New York. But given Gerrish’s account of a frantic move to the left by the 7th and that the regiment afterwards advances to the Piper farm as does the 57th, while the 61st/64th New York does not, it seems reasonable to assume that the 7th was between the 57th and the 61st/64th. Map 10 of the Antietam Battlefield Board Maps also shows the 7th on the left of the 61st/64th at

enemy infantry, found himself with these three now much depleted regiments under a serve cross fire from enemy batteries positioned to his front and right. Private Henry Gerrish of the 7th New York remembered that one of these batteries was so close that he could watch the gunners of one piece as they loaded and pushed it into position. "It was undoubtedly loaded with grape and canister," he wrote, "for it killed and wounded nine." Corporal Hale of the 5th New Hampshire, who in the confusion of the charge had mistakenly gotten himself mixed in with the 57th and 66th New York, thought that "it was simply awful the way the canister was tearing up the ground, and making kindleing-wood [sic] of the fences around Piper's buildings." Brooke, realizing that he was now 450 yards in advance of the division line, assessed his position as being untenable, and

this point, although the indication is that the 61st/64th advances through the cornfield while the 7th does not.

applied to Richardson for permission to withdraw from what was the furthest penetration of the enemy's line to that point in the battle. Richardson not only gave Brooke permission to withdraw from the Piper farmstead, but also ordered Caldwell to pull his regiments back from the southern edge of the cornfield to reform his line.⁵⁶

Richardson now undertook a general consolidation of his division on ground that he considered more defensible than the open slope of the cornfield south of the sunken road, which was under a severe crossfire of round shot and shell from enemy batteries (see figure 39). He brought Caldwell's brigade back north of the road and, to protect it from the enemy's artillery fire, placed it in position under the crest on the north side of the ridge to the left of Graham's battery. Brooke's brigade also was ordered back north of the road to take position under the crest just to the right of the Roulette farm lane, the same protected position that the 29th Massachusetts had been in earlier. Meagher's brigade, having resupplied itself with ammunition and now under the command of Colonel Burke of the 63rd New York—who had reappeared after the brigade was withdrawn from the sunken road—was brought up and went into position under the crest of the ridge to the rear and left of Brooke's brigade and immediately to the right of Graham's battery.

⁵⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 286, 299; Hale, 4-5; Nelson A. Miles, "My Recollections of Antietam," *Cosmopolitan Magazine* 53 (October 1912): 588; Fuller, 60; Gerrish, 28.

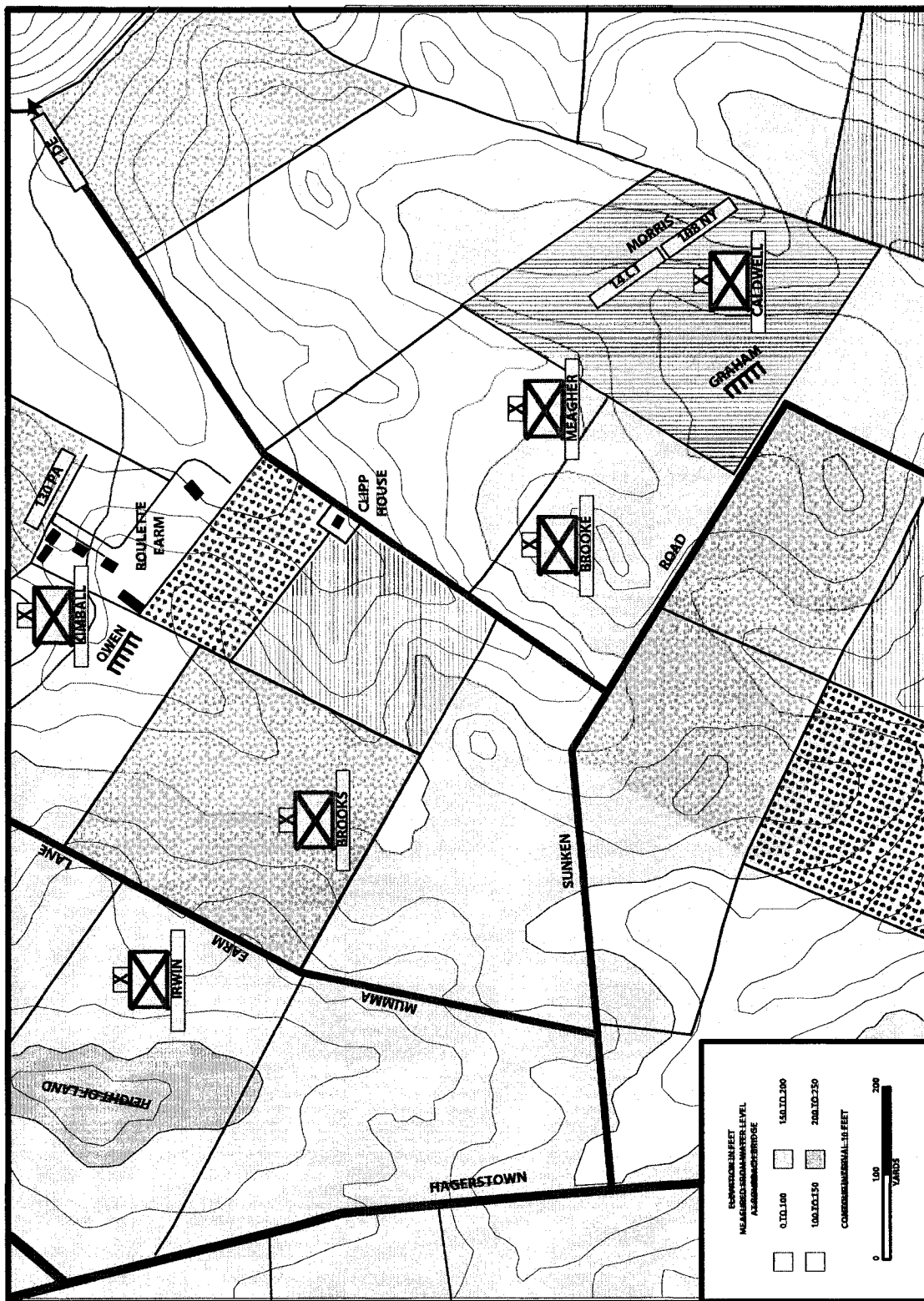


Figure 59. The Contour Map of the Sunken Road, 17 September 1862.

Ammunition wagons were brought as far forward as possible to resupply Caldwell's and Brooke's regiments.⁵⁷

To Richardson's right, French was also working to replenish the ammunition of what was left of his division and to get as much of it as he could back into position for a continuation of the battle. Kimball still had all of his regiments under control, and was reforming his brigade in the vicinity of the Roulette farmstead. Here the men of the brigade had the satisfaction of hearing from French that General Sumner had complimented them by saying that henceforth they should be known as the Gibraltar Brigade for their performance on the crest above the sunken road. In his final report of the battle, French himself would cite Kimball "for a brilliant display of courage never surpassed."⁵⁸

Colonel John W. Andrews of the 1st Delaware now was officially in command of Weber's brigade, but, as already mentioned, two of its regiments, the 5th Maryland and 4th New York, were pretty well decimated and had withdrawn from the field on French's orders. Andrews's own regiment had suffered the loss of a third of its rank and file, and

⁵⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 279, 299; John R. Brooke to Antietam Battlefield Board, 11 April 1893, Ezra Carmen Papers, Copy at Antietam National Battlefield; Child, 124; Walker, 131. Walker notes that Burke was dismissed from the service in October while the Second Corps was at Bolivar Heights.

⁵⁸ OR 19, pt. 1, 324, 330; Galwey, "At Antietam," MOLLUS, 22: 83; Galwey, *Valiant Hours*, 45; Rownsdale, 6; Sawyer, 81. Galwey in *Valiant Hours* says that the compliment to Kimball's brigade was announced by French who said it came from Sumner. Rownsdale says that the compliment came from French, while Sawyer says that it came from Sumner.

eight of the ten company commanders were out of action, three of them killed. Like the 5th Maryland and the 4th New York, the 1st Delaware was withdrawn to a position well to the rear. Andrews would not be able to reform any portion of Weber's brigade that day.⁵⁹

In Morris's brigade, the 14th Connecticut and the one hundred men that comprised what was left of the 108th New York were still holding their positions in the vicinity of the Roulette farmstead. French now made it clear to Morris that he should continue to take his orders from Kimball. Kimball at about this time received a request for support from Brooke, and, since his own brigade was still in the process of replenishing its ammunition, he sent Morris with the 14th and the detachment of the 108th to fulfill the request. Accordingly, Morris led his demi-brigade out of the Roulette yard southeast toward the front. As they ascended the slope east of the Roulette farm lane, a Confederate shell burst in the midst of Company D, 14th Connecticut, "killing three men and wounding four." Although somewhat unnerved by the incident, the regiment closed ranks and kept on as shot and shell continued to fall all around it. Eventually, Morris came up to the crest of the ridge just behind Graham's battery, and here he put the two regiments in line with the 14th on the right and the 108th on the left. The last of Morris's

⁵⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 338 War Department, George R. Graham, "The Fifth Maryland at Antietam," Antietam Studies, Antietam National Battlefield Board, *Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780's to 1917*, RG 94, National Archives.

regiments, the 130th Pennsylvania, Kimball kept with his own brigade, putting them in position in the cornfield just north of the Roulette farm buildings.⁶⁰

The line that Richardson formed with his division north of the sunken road and east of the Roulette farm lane was extended to the west by the two newly arrived brigades of Franklin's Sixth Corps. Brooks's brigade was in position on the immediate right of Brooke and extended the line all the way to the Mumma farm lane. Irwin's brigade then carried it north along the height of land to the Smoketown Road.

Richardson was not at this point threatened by the enemy's infantry, which his division had driven well beyond the Piper farm, but two enemy batteries with rifled guns were aggressively shelling the division's position. Captain Graham's battery was attempting to deal with this threat by returning the enemy's fire as rapidly as possible. But Graham's brass twelve-pounder Napoleons were no match for the longer range pieces that the enemy was using. Graham reported, "I returned this fire as rapidly as possible, but after firing some twenty minutes found that they were beyond my range, my solid shot falling short several hundred yards." Accordingly, Graham approached Richardson, who was just then with the battery, to make him aware of the fact that at this range, he [Graham] could not hope to drive off the enemy batteries. Richardson told Graham not to concern himself with the enemy's artillery, "He wished me to save the battery as much as possible, in order that it might advance with his division at a signal then expected from

⁶⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 328, 332-3; Page, 43-4; Stevens, 57-9; Hemmingen, 17 September; Hays, 10.

Major-General Sumner.” It was just at this point, however, that Richardson was struck by a ball from an exploding shell. The wound was serious and a detachment from the 14th Connecticut was quickly assembled to carry the general to the rear.⁶¹

Richardson’s wounding brought a temporary suspension to the operations of his and French’s divisions in the vicinity of the sunken road. Their losses in officers and men dictated a need for that pause both to reorganize and to resupply with ammunition, something that Richardson had recognized and was in the process of accomplishing when he was wounded. He did not believe that this pause necessarily meant an end to the battle in this area, not even an end to a continuation of the assault by his division beyond the sunken road. But with his wounding, the decision as to when and how the battle would be continued was passed back entirely to Edwin Vose Sumner, the senior Federal officer on the battlefield north of Sharpsburg.

V

Just as with the fighting in the West Woods, McClellan made no attempt to direct or influence the fight for the sunken road. Indeed from his positions of observation near the Pry House and the Boonesboro pike, McClellan could not see most of the fighting in the vicinity of the sunken road, and had to be content with following the progress of the battle—or the lack of it—through reports brought from the front by aides and couriers.

⁶¹ OR 19, pt. 1, 343-4; Johnson, 35; Page, 44; Stevens, 59; Samuel Fiske, *Mr. Dunn Browne’s Experiences in the Army* (Boston: Nichols and Noyes, 1866), 48.

Likewise, Sumner, who was deeply involved with the repulse of Sedgwick's division from the West Woods as the fight for the sunken road developed, could not influence the action there. As discussed in the previous chapter, Sumner had initiated the battle for the sunken road by ordering French to move against it at the same time that he ordered Sedgwick to the West Woods, but there is no evidence to suggest that he directed Richardson to support French. Indeed, Sumner probably did not learn of Richardson's arrival on the field until just after Richardson became engaged. Accordingly, the battle for the sunken road was a tactical fight directed entirely by the division, brigade, and regimental commanders involved.

Several aspects of the fighting at the sunken road uniquely demonstrate the dilemma that commanders at these levels faced in dealing with the transition from the smoothbore musket to the rifled musket. The initial assaults against the sunken road position by all three of French's brigades were made using the bayonet. Whether this was a decision made centrally by French, or individually by the brigade commanders is not clear. French, Weber, and Kimball were professionally trained and experienced soldiers who received their military training before the introduction of the rifled musket. To them, the situation they confronted at the sunken road called for the use of the bayonet as the best weapon to achieve quick and decisive results. Morris, altogether a novice to the military, was most likely following the example—or orders—set by these professionals.

In this case, however, the bayonet charges of three successive brigades did not succeed in breaking the Confederate line as the professionals expected. There are two

possible reasons for this. First, the tactical doctrine of the day called for making such an assault with the regiments in the column by division formation. But, the regiments of French's division were formed and made their charge in the weaker line of battle formation. As pointed out previously in the discussion of the formation of Sedgwick's division, by September of 1862 the line of battle had become the standard fighting formation primarily because it allowed for the full development of a regiment's firepower. Given the increased range and lethality of the rifled musket, as well as that of artillery, it may be that the commanders in French's division chose to make the bayonet assault in line of battle because it was the formation less vulnerable to fire while approaching the sunken road, and because it was the formation that they expected to fight in once the Confederates had been driven from their position. Second, the Confederate position in the sunken road was on a reverse slope that allowed for the massing of Confederate fire and its sudden release at very short range once the Federal formations had crested the ridge. Under this condition, the weapon of every Confederate soldier counted whether it was a musket or rifled musket.

Once the initial bayonet charges proved unsuccessful, however, the fighting reverted to a contest of firepower. In this kind of fight, French's division had two advantages over the Confederates in the sunken road. First, the division was armed almost exclusively with rifled muskets that gave it a decided superiority in terms of firepower. Second, the division firing line was on the crest of the ridge above the sunken road allowing the soldiers to fire down into the massed Confederate formations in the road and behind it.

This also meant that the rear of French's line on the slope of the ridge opposite the Confederate line was not exposed to Confederate fire. Here the soldiers of the division could step back from the firing line, reload and then again advance to the crest of the ridge to fire into the sunken road with a minimum of exposure.

Richardson's approach to the tactical problem of the sunken road position was little different from French's. He had his brigades approach in the line of battle formation, albeit with Meagher's and Caldwell's brigades on line backed up by Brooke's. As described above, Meagher intended to break the Confederate line before him with the bayonet, but allowed too much of a fire fight to develop before attempting the decisive charge. In this fire fight, Meagher's brigade had less of an advantage than those of French's division, because three of the four regiments were armed with smoothbore muskets, and because the terrain on which his two left regiments formed their firing line afforded less protection than the ridge occupied by French's line. As a result, Richardson was forced to call on Caldwell to replace Meagher. What remains unexplained is why Richardson brought Caldwell's brigade in behind Meagher's instead of having it wheel to the right, which would have brought it onto the high ground on the left flank of the Confederate line in the sunken road. It remained for Barlow with his small regiment to see and capitalize on this tactical opportunity.

All-in-all the fight for the sunken road demonstrated the new superiority of firepower over shock action. The fight opened with both sides following the tactical doctrine of the smoothbore era, French attacking with the bayonet, while the Confederates successfully

relied on volley fire to repel the assault. The Confederate position in the sunken road was ideal for this kind of warfare. As the fight evolved into a contest of the tactical use of fire, however, the Confederate position, usually described by historians as a natural trench, turned into a deathtrap for those who manned it. From no part of the sunken road was there a field of fire to a range greater than one hundred yards, and this always up hill at an enemy that could return fire from a largely protected position. The numbers on both sides in this fight were probably about equal, seven Confederate brigades versus five on the Federal side.⁶² The Confederates lost the fight and the sunken road because they were not in the best position to use their fire, while the Federals were.

⁶² This does not count Brooke's brigade which did not enter the fight until after the sunken road position had been abandoned.

CHAPTER 10

AFTERNOON, 17 SEPTEMBER 1862

I

At the point in time that Richardson's division was about to go into action at the sunken road—about 10:30 a.m.—General Sumner was in the process of assessing the situation on the right of the Army of the Potomac and considering what should and could be done next. Immediately after the withdrawal of Sedgwick's division from the West Woods, Sumner's first priority had been the rallying of these troops and the establishment of a defensive line that could be held against any further advance of the enemy. This would be no easy task, for just then there were few brigades still under the control of their commanders. Those brigades that were available for the immediate establishment of a crude defensive line were from the First and Twelfth Army Corps because they had had some time to regroup while Sedgwick was fighting in the West Woods. They included Hofmann's, Gibbon's, and Patrick's brigades from the First Corps, and Gordon's from the Twelfth Corps. These were the same brigades that had spontaneously gone forward to stop the Confederate pursuit of Sedgwick's division as it left the West Woods.

As previously mentioned, Hofmann's brigade with a section of artillery had been sent forward by General Abner Doubleday during the crisis of Sedgwick's withdrawal and had taken position directly west of the North Woods along an unnamed road that ran from the

Hagerstown pike down to the Potomac River, just three quarters of a mile to the west. Hofmann maintained this position for about thirty minutes before he observed that “a large cavalry force was passing in the rear of a narrow strip of wood, evidently attempting to attack us in flank; on the right a heavy body of infantry, much larger than my own, immediately followed.” Thus threatened, Hofmann decided to withdraw his brigade some six hundred yards to the north and reform his line of battle at the edge of a cornfield along a farm lane. “This position,” he reported, “I deemed a strong one, as it would have been necessary for the enemy to pass over a clear field, unprotected from our fire, had he advanced upon it.” In its new position, Hofmann’s brigade was now the extreme right flank of the Army of the Potomac.¹

Both Gibbon’s and Patrick’s brigades were in the North Woods (see figure 40).

Gibbon had initially positioned his brigade there to stop stragglers when he observed Sedgwick’s regiments being driven from the West Woods. Patrick’s brigade had initially

¹ War Department, *War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 71 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), series I, vol. 19, pt. 1, 236. Hereinafter cited as OR. All references are to Series I unless otherwise noted. Hofmann reported the distance from his first to his second position as two hundred yards, but the actual measured distance is six hundred yards.

held a position behind a rock ledge near the D.R. Miller barn, but observing that “every thing [sic] of ours having given way,” he ordered the brigade to retire to the North Woods, and there took position with Gibbon’s brigade “not only to hold against the enemy, if needed, but to catch stragglers & rally them.”²

Nine hundred yards to the southeast, in the vicinity of the East Woods, were the two brigades of Williams’s division of the Twelfth Corps, Gordon’s and Crawford’s. Gordon had his brigade well in hand, holding the East Woods with his regiments in line of battle along the western edge of the woods. This was the position to which he had withdrawn after sallying into the open area between the East Woods and the West Woods to attack the Confederate pursuit of Sedgwick on its flank. Nearby were the regiments of Crawford’s brigade, but these regiments were not at this point acting in concert as a brigade. They had been led into action individually early in the battle, were then scattered and bloodied in the fighting in the vicinity of the East Woods and West Woods, and were just now beginning to get back together. Four of the six regiments of the brigade were forming up behind the north end of the East Woods, while the remaining two regiments, the 124th and 125th Pennsylvania, were in position at the extreme south end of the woods in support of some batteries. The brigade commander, Brigadier General Samuel W. Crawford, had been elevated to command Williams’s division when Williams assumed

² John Gibbon, *Personal Recollections of the Civil War* (New York: G.P. Putnam’s Sons, 1928; reprint, Dayton, OH: Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1978), 88-9; Marsena R. Patrick, *Inside Lincoln’s Army, The Diary of Marsena Rudolph Patrick, Provost Marshal General, Army of the Potomac*, ed. David S. Sparks (New York, Thomas Yoseloff, 1964), 150.

command of the Twelfth Corps in place of the mortally wounded Mansfield. But Crawford, in attempting to rally troops withdrawing toward the East Woods, had received a wound in the right thigh, and although he later claimed that he did not leave his command, he did not afterwards exercise effective control of his brigade or of Williams's division. Crawford reported that as soon as he learned of his elevation to division command, he sent a staff officer to order Colonel Joseph F. Knipe, 46th Pennsylvania, the brigade's senior regimental commander, to take command of the brigade. But Knipe, for unknown reasons, would not receive this order or learn of Crawford's wounding until late in the afternoon.³

In addition to the infantry brigades, there were also a number of artillery batteries in position around which a defensive line could be built. South of the Smoketown road, six hundred yards below the East Woods, Tompkins's battery was still in its original position. Tompkins had received orders from General Sumner that he was "to hold the position and not retire, even if I lost my guns, until relieved." At this point, the battery was actively supporting the regiments on the right of French's division as they battled for the sunken road. Tompkins noted that twice the enemy made advances from the road toward the cornfield occupied by the 1st Delaware and the 14th Connecticut. He reported, "I at once ordered the battery to open on them with shell and case-shot, using 1

³ OR 19, pt. 1, 485, 488.

1/2-seconds and 2-seconds fuses,” and then credited “the rapid and destructive fire of the battery” with forcing the enemy’s withdrawal to their position in the road.⁴

North of Tompkins’s position and in front of the East Woods were four batteries with a total of twenty-two guns. Woodruff’s battery of the Second Corps, which had been instrumental in repulsing the Confederate pursuit of Sedgwick, was the southern most, still holding its position just outside of the woods at the Smoketown road. To Woodruff’s right were three more recently positioned batteries of the Twelfth Corps, those of Captain George W. Cothran, Battery M, 1st New York Light Artillery, Captain Joseph M. Knap, Battery E, Pennsylvania Light Artillery, and Captain John T. Bruen, 10th Battery, New York Light Artillery. Cothran reported that after being ordered forward by Williams at 9:00 a.m. from his position on the high ground north and east of the Mumma farmstead, his battery had taken the Smoketown road through the East Woods and “arrived at the scene of action while the contest was raging the fiercest, and took the most favorable position I could in the open field to the right of the woods, near the center of our line of battle.”⁵

⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 308-9; John A. Tompkins to Ezra A. Carman, 31 March 1896, Ezra Carman Papers, Copy at Antietam National Battlefield.

⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 477, 483; Curt Johnson and Richard C. Anderson, *Artillery Hell, The Employment of Artillery at Antietam* (College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 72, 82; War Department, Antietam Battlefield Board, *Atlas of the Battlefield of Antietam* (Washington: Chief of Engineers, 1908), Map 9. Although all of these batteries are listed as having six guns each at Antietam, the Antietam Battlefield Board Map shows only four guns present at this point from Bruen’s battery.

Covering the gap between the East Woods and the Miller farmstead were eight more guns belonging to the First Corps, six 3-inch Ordnance Rifles of Captain John A. Reynolds's Battery L, 1st New York Light Artillery, and two twelve-pounder Napoleons from Captain Joseph B. Campbell's Battery B, 4th US Artillery under the command of Lieutenant James Stewart. Both of these batteries, however, had been heavily engaged in the fighting since the very beginning of the battle and were desperately in need of relief.

Behind this very thin defensive line, the remaining brigades and divisions of the First Corps and Sedgwick's division were attempting to reform themselves. Meade's and Ricketts's divisions of the First Corps, as Meade had reported to Sumner at their earlier meeting, were still in the process of reforming on a ridge in the vicinity of the Middlekauf farm, about a thousand yards north of the North Woods.⁶

Although Sumner could not have known it at the time, there was also a strong body of Federal troops still in the West Woods. These were the two brigades of Greene's division which Sumner had originally planned to use as support for the advance of the Second Army Corps to the south. After rescuing Tompkins's battery from the Confederate column that advanced on it from the West Woods south of the Dunker Church, Greene had led these two brigades in pursuit until they were holding an advanced position deep inside the southern end of the West Woods, two hundred yards beyond the Dunker Church. Realizing that he was once again at the front of the Federal advance, Greene sent staff officers to find whatever additional troops they could to reinforce the division. This

⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 270.

call was answered by the arrival of the Purnell Legion, separated from Goodrich's brigade of Williams's division during the morning's fighting, and the 13th New Jersey, which was sent by Gordon from the East Woods. Also coming to Greene's assistance from the vicinity of the East Woods was a section of Knap's battery under the command of Lieutenant James D. McGill. While Greene readily enough recognized that his position in the West Woods was vulnerable, he did not realize that Sedgwick's division, which he had earlier observed going into the woods, had since been driven from those woods, and that his two brigades were now alone in their advanced position.⁷

In this situation, Sumner established his headquarters in the pasture field just to the east of the Joseph Poffenberger farmstead, and as the senior ranking officer made it known that he now commanded all Federal forces on the field. Given all that he had been told by army headquarters up to this point, and what had happened to Sedgwick's division in the West Woods, Sumner's first concern was the security of the Federal right, and strengthening it against the possibility of a renewed Confederate assault.⁸

⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 477, 482, 496, 499, 502, 505, 515. In his report, Greene says that the 27th Indiana of Gordon's brigade was also sent to his support at this time, but retired due to a lack of ammunition. However, neither Gordon nor Colonel Silas Colgrove, commanding the 27th, mention this advance in their reports. The 27th Indiana was in the lead of the advance of Gordon's brigade to the Hagerstown pike to check the Confederate pursuit of Sedgwick (see chapter 4). Greene's advance into the West Woods and Gordon's to the Hagerstown pike occurred at approximately the same time, Greene's advance being only slightly ahead of Gordon's in time.

⁸ George W. Smalley, "New York Tribune Narrative," in *The Rebellion Record*, vol. 5 (New York: Putnam, 1863; reprint, New York: Arno Press, 1977), 470; OR 19, pt. 1, 226; Marsena R. Patrick, *Inside Lincoln's Army, The Diary of Marsena Rudolph Patrick*,

In developing his plan of battle, McClellan had noted that there was no position on the Federal side of the field from which the area beyond the height of land down to the Potomac could be effectively observed, and this, he believed, was where the masses of the enemy's troops might be concealed. McClellan's foremost concern in the execution of his plan of battle was the danger of an undetected, massive Confederate assault directed against the right as it moved forward. Accordingly, McClellan had been cautious in developing the attack on the right, at first sending only Hooker's corps across Antietam Creek on the sixteenth in what amounted to a reconnaissance in force. Only when the situation seemed secure on the right did McClellan send over Mansfield's corps on the evening of the sixteenth, and only when he felt that Hooker's assault on the morning of the seventeenth was successful did he decide to send over Sumner's corps to weight the attack. Moreover, the entire plan of battle depended on what happened on the right. It would be only after "matters looked favorable" there that McClellan planned to commit Burnside on the left and whatever additional forces might be available to an attack on the enemy's center.⁹

This concern for the right was both passively and actively communicated to Sumner during the afternoon of the sixteenth, and throughout the morning of the seventeenth up to the time that he established his headquarters on the Poffenberger farm. Old soldier that

Provost Marshal General, Army of the Potomac, ed. David S. Sparks (New York, Thomas Yoseloff, 1964), 150.

⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 54-5; George B. McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story* (New York: Charles & Company, 1887), 587-8, 590.

he was, Sumner could readily sense McClellan's concern in the cautious way that Hooker's, Mansfield's and his own Second Corps were committed piecemeal to the attack. In the order Sumner was given that morning to take his corps to the front, he was directed to "ascertain if Genl. Hooker wants assistance" before moving up from the creek. McClellan's concern for the right was again expressed in the notes sent from headquarters to Sumner and Hooker at 8:30 a.m.—both of which the reader will recall were received by Sumner. These notes told the two corps commanders that Sumner was to push on toward Sharpsburg, but only if Hooker required no assistance on the right. Forty minutes later yet another note was sent to Sumner telling him that McClellan feared that the right was suffering and Sumner should be careful how he advanced. Due to the fiasco in the West Woods, this last note was probably just now coming to Sumner's hand.¹⁰

To Sumner, Sedgwick's fate in the West Woods indicated that there was every reason to credit McClellan's fear of a massive assault against the Federal right, and that it might indeed still be in the offing. Sumner had been unable to see exactly where the enemy force that assaulted Sedgwick in the West Woods had come from, nor had he the opportunity in the withdrawal to the North Woods to gauge its strength except in the results of the attack on Sedgwick. The counterattack of Gordon's brigade against the flank of the Confederate assault in the vicinity of the West Woods had not been able to

¹⁰ War Department, Albert V. Colburn to Edwin V. Sumner, 17 September 1862, and Albert V. Colburn to Joseph Hooker, 17 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives; OR 51, pt. 1, 842.

advance beyond the Hagerstown pike because of the fire coming from Confederate forces in the West Woods, and Hofmann had just withdrawn his brigade to the north because of a threat to his right. Both of these recent developments indicated clearly that Sumner needed to be prepared to meet an renewed assault in strength on the Federal right.

Sumner's major asset in this situation was artillery, since most of the batteries of the First, Second, and Twelfth Corps were still present on that part of the field. Getting the available batteries into position became Sumner's first priority. Accordingly, he directed Meade to collect the batteries of the First Corps that were still fit for service and have them mass on the high ground just north of the Poffenberger farmstead to cover the Hagerstown pike and the area to the west of it. Meade—possibly following Sumner's direction—gave the responsibility for assembling and commanding this super battery to Doubleday, and very quickly Doubleday got some thirty guns into position facing to the west, backed up by the infantry of his own division.¹¹

At the same time, Major Clarke, Sumner's Chief of Artillery, was working to get the remaining available batteries of the Second Corps into position in the vicinity of the East Woods and to the south of it, where the situation was growing more critical with each passing minute (see figure 41). John F. Leech, an orderly from Tompkins's battery, braved "the hottest fire, regardless of his personal safety," in order to find Clarke and inform him that Tompkins was nearly out of ammunition after having expended over one

¹¹ OR 19, pt. 1, 226; Abner Doubleday to Antietam Battlefield Board, 13 November 1892, Ezra Carmen Papers, Copy at Antietam National Battlefield.

thousand rounds. Tompkins needed to be replaced immediately. Clarke sent Leech off with an order for Captain Charles Owen, whose battery was still parked in the pasture north of the Mumma orchard, to take Tompkins's place. Owen went immediately, but on reaching Tompkins's position found that a Confederate battery about a mile off "was then pouring in a heavy fire upon us." Theodore Reichardt, a member of Tompkins's battery, remembered that fire and recorded in his diary that the battery "left the field under a heavy fire of the enemy's batteries, leaving our dead and wounded behind." The fire of the enemy's batteries notwithstanding, Owen reported, "I got quickly into position and opened with shells at $4\frac{1}{4}^{\circ}$ elevation and 8-second fuses with good effect,

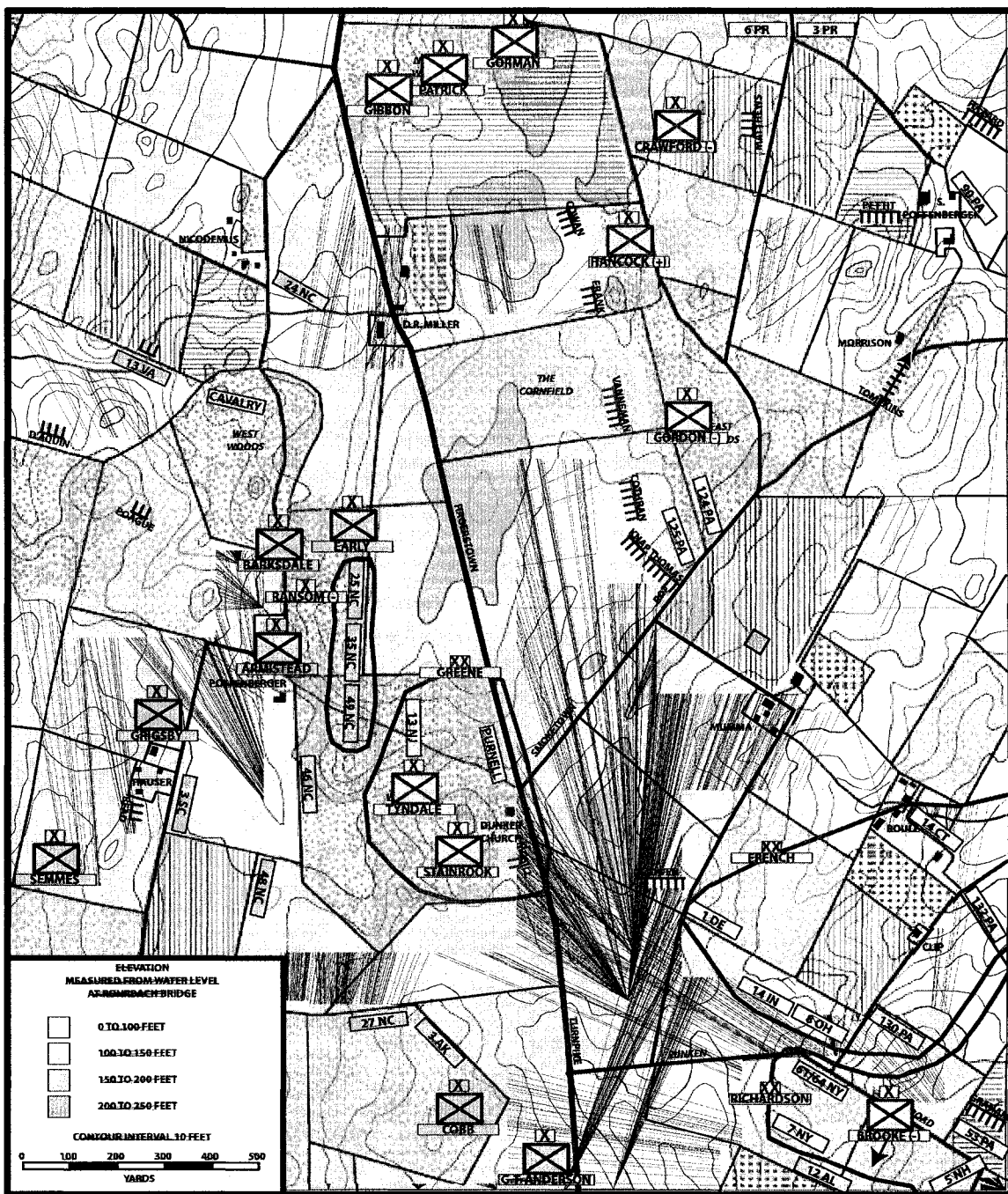


Figure 41. Situation on the Federal Right, 12:00 Noon, 17 September 1862.

as far as we could judge, and the battery that engaged us ceased firing in about twenty minutes after we commenced.”¹²

Another Second Corps battery that was in dire need of relief was Woodruff's. One of the first Second Corps batteries to go into action that morning, it had twice been called on to repulse enemy advances from the West Woods. Woodruff reported that the “immediate danger being now over, Maj. Clarke directed me to retire and replace the ammunition we had expended, relieving us with a battery not before engaged.” The battery that Clarke sent to replace Woodruff's was Lieutenant Evan Thomas's, Battery A, 4th US Artillery. This was another one of the six Second Corps batteries that had crossed the Antietam the night before, and that had been brought forward to the vicinity of the East Woods early in the morning by Clarke and Major Kip. Up to this point in the battle, however, Thomas had remained in the East Woods waiting to be called to the front. When the order from Clarke came, Thomas sent the right section out first, and then followed with the rest of the battery. At the same time that Thomas was taking position, the remaining four guns of Knap's battery of the Twelfth Corps were also displacing forward from their position farther to the right in front of the East Woods. These guns went into position immediately on the right of Thomas.¹³

¹² OR 19, pt. 1, 309, 325-6; Theodore Reichardt, *Diary of Battery A, First Regiment, Rhode Island Light Artillery* (Providence: N. Bangs Williams, Publisher, 1865), 65-6; Thomas M. Aldrich, *The History of Battery A, First Regiment Rhode Island Light Artillery in the War to Preserve the Union 1861-1865* (Providence: Snow & Farnham, Printers, 1904), 142.

¹³ OR 19, pt. 1, 284, 310.

Clarke also ordered into position Captain John D. Frank's Battery G, 1st New York Light Artillery, which, like Thomas, had been waiting for orders in the vicinity of the East Woods. Frank now took his battery through to the west side of the woods and positioned it on a small knoll at the northern edge of the cornfield about three hundred yards north of Cothran's battery. Because of the repositioning of Knap's battery to the south end of the woods, and the recent withdrawal of Bruen's and Reynolds's batteries, along with the section of Campbell's battery under Lieutenant Stewart, Frank's was now the only battery filling the gap between Cothran and the North Woods, a distance of seven hundred yards. To make matters worse, there was no infantry available to help fill this gap or support Frank's battery. In spite of this situation, or perhaps because of it, the Second Corps' last two batteries, Pettit's Battery B, 1st New York Light Artillery and Hazard's Battery B, 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery, were held in reserve behind the line a quarter of a mile northeast of the East Woods in the vicinity of the S. Poffenberger and M. Miller farms respectively.¹⁴

While Sumner and Clarke were busy with the artillery, the senior officers of Sedgwick's division who remained on the field were working to ready the division for a resumption of the battle. Howard now commanded the division in place of Sedgwick

¹⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 325; Nelson Ames, *History of Battery G, First Regiment, New York Light Artillery* (Marshalltown, IA: Marshall Printing, Co., 1900), 40; John H. Rhodes, *The History of Battery B, First Regiment Rhode Island Light Artillery in the War to Preserve the Union, 1861-1865* (Providence: Snow & Farnham, Printers, 1894), 121-2, 123.

who had finally left the field, and in his official report he commended the officers of the division for their promptness in rallying their commands.¹⁵

Thanks to the good order in which his regimental commanders brought their units out of the West Woods, Gorman was able to regain control of the regiments of his brigade as they drew up in the fields across the Hagerstown pike from the Miller farm . The only regiment missing at that point was the 34th New York, which was still a mile away in the vicinity of the East Woods. Sumner found Gorman with his brigade, and ordered him to hold the North Woods. Once Gorman got the brigade positioned in the woods, he was able to search for the 34th New York. Finding what was left of that regiment—he would report it as “having lost nearly one half of the entire regiment in killed and wounded”—still in support of the battery that Sedgwick had assigned them to protect, Gorman brought it back to the North Woods and reformed it on the left of the brigade.¹⁶

Although wounded by a musket ball in the West Woods, Dana had managed to stay with the 7th Michigan until it reached the North Woods and was stopped in front of Gibbon’s brigade. No longer able to stay on the field, Dana told the regimental commander, Colonel Norman J. Hall, to assume command of those elements of the brigade that were present until such time as he [Hall] could rejoin the brigade and turn command over to the senior colonel. At the insistence of Gibbon, Hall kept the 7th in line on the southern edge of the woods until he received orders—Hall did not say who the

¹⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 307.

¹⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 311-2.

orders came from—to move his command to the open ground north of the woods where the rest of the division was assembling. Here he found Colonel William R. Lee and the 20th Massachusetts “in perfectly good order and with very full ranks.” Hall informed Lee that as senior colonel of the brigade he was now in command. Lee, however, refused to accept that responsibility and told Hall that he would obey whatever orders Hall gave him. Hall reported this situation to Howard, who “directed me to continue in command.” With the assistance of Captain William B. Leach, the brigade assistant adjutant-general, and Lieutenant Edward N. Hallowell, one of Dana’s aides-de-camp, Hall managed to locate most of the 19th Massachusetts and the 59th New York, and so began the process of reforming the brigade. The 42nd New York was also located, but it was in position well the rear and under orders to remain there “to stop fugitives from the battle.”¹⁷

In Howard’s own brigade, command should have devolved to Colonel De Witt C. Baxter of the 72nd Pennsylvania. However, the 72nd, had taken the brunt of the initial Confederate assault in the West Woods and was driven considerably more to the northeast than the other three regiments of the brigade. As a consequence, the 72nd had not yet reformed and Baxter was not present. Howard, therefore, turned command of his brigade over to Colonel Joshua T. Owen of the 69th Pennsylvania, who “as speedily as possible . . . restored the brigade to order.”¹⁸

¹⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 320; 321-2.

¹⁸ OR 19, pt. 1, 307; 318.

The effort to get the infantry brigades and the artillery batteries positioned in a cohesive defensive line was given particular urgency by the continuing movements and actions of the enemy. In addition to the artillery fire directed against Owen's battery south of the East Woods, enemy infantry was in possession of the D.R. Miller farmstead, and skirmishers were working their way toward Frank's battery, which was still unsupported, threatening to drive Frank from his position and open a dangerous gap in the Federal line at the East Woods.¹⁹

It was at this point that the lead elements of Franklin's Sixth Army Corps began to appear in the rear of the Federal right. On arriving in the vicinity of Keedysville between 9:00 and 10:00 a.m., Franklin had received orders from army headquarters to place his two divisions in position near the Upper Bridge. Accordingly, Smith's division was ordered to deploy to the left of the bridge, while the division of Major General Henry W. Slocum was to deploy to the right. This deployment had hardly even begun when a call to support the right came, and Franklin ordered Smith "to go to the assistance of Gen. Sumner."²⁰

When Smith arrived in the rear of the defensive line, Sumner ordered Smith to place his division in support of the First Corps batteries that Doubleday was assembling on the ridge north of the Joseph Poffenberger farm, the extreme right of the Federal army.

¹⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 325, 376-7, 482-3.

²⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 376; Congress, Senate, Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 3 pts., 37th Cong., 3rd sess., 1863, Rep. Com. 108, pt. 1, 626.

Smith was in the process of complying with these orders, when Lieutenant Colonel Taylor, Sumner's adjutant-general, arrived and informed Smith that there was a battery of artillery—Frank's—near the East Woods that was in dire need of infantry support. Smith immediately ordered two regiments of his First Brigade, commanded by Brigadier General Winfield Scott Hancock, to go to Frank's support. Smith then rode to the vicinity of the East Woods himself, and finding the situation there to be critical "ordered the remaining regiments [of Hancock's brigade] and two batteries forward to the threatened point." The batteries were those of Lieutenant Theodore J. Vanneman, Battery B, Maryland Light Artillery, which took position on Frank's left filling the gap between him and Cothran, and Captain Andrew Cowan, 1st Battery, New York Light Artillery, which set up on Frank's right. Hancock dispersed his six infantry regiments among the four batteries and directed that skirmishers be "immediately thrown forward, who met those of the enemy advancing through the corn-field separating us. The houses and inclosures [Miller's farmstead] in front of our position were occupied by detached companies from my command."²¹

But even this action by Smith and Hancock did not remove the enemy threat to the line in front of the East Woods. Hancock reported that "very soon the enemy placed two batteries in front of the [West] woods, their infantry in the edge of it in support, and opened a heavy fire with shell, round shot, shrapnel, and grape." Feeling as though he

²¹ OR 19, pt. 1, 402, 406-7. In his report, Hancock does not mention Vanneman's battery which may have arrived and gone into position just shortly after the deployment of Hancock's regiments.

required additional infantry support, Hancock “applied to Gen. Sumner for another regiment to place in the woods on my extreme right.” In response, Sumner directed Howard to send one of his regiments, and Howard selected and personally positioned the 20th Massachusetts in support of Hancock’s brigade.²²

Under the general direction of Major Clarke, the batteries in front of the East Woods, with the exception of Thomas’s and possibly Knap’s, opened in reply to the Confederate batteries in the vicinity of the West Woods. Cowan recalled that “a battery of the enemy opened on me as soon as I came into battery,” while a second battery farther to the left proved to be “quite troublesome, having brought a partial cross-fire upon me.” As Cowan remembered it, the engagement lasted for two hours before the enemy batteries were forced to retire. Frank also remembered “a very destructive flank fire on my pieces,” which compelled him to change “front forward on my left piece,” and fire some forty or fifty solid shot and shell before compelling his foe to retire. Vanneman reported that his guns “fired at from 2 1/2⁰ to 3⁰ elevation, using from 3 1/2 to 4 second fuses, and expended during the engagement about 300 rounds of ammunition.”²³

II

At this point, a new and even more serious threat to the Federal right emerged from the south end of the West Woods and the area beyond. From the vicinity of the Dunker

²² OR 19, pt. 1, 407.

²³ OR 19, pt. 1, 284, 325, 404-5, 407, 483.

Church, there suddenly burst forth a mass of Federal infantry in an uncontrolled rush across the open area for the supposed safety of the East Woods. These were the troops belonging to the two brigades of Greene's division.

As mentioned previously, when Greene led his division into the West Woods, he did not realize that Sedgwick was no longer to his right. Therefore, he felt that his right was secure, and he secured his left by turning it back all the way to the Hagerstown pike, putting the division in a right angle formation. On the extreme right flank of the division was the 13th New Jersey, the regiment sent by Gordon based on Greene's appeal for reinforcements. Shortly after the arrival of the 13th, its commander, Colonel Ezra A. Carman, who knew the woods to be full of Confederate infantry, sent a message to Greene informing him that his right flank was in the air. But Greene confidently replied that Carman should not be concerned because "the whole of Sedgwick's Division is in the woods on his right." Continuing to observe the movements of the enemy in the woods to the right, Carman sent a second message to Greene, this time carried by the regimental adjutant, Charles A. Hopkins. This second message brought Greene to the right of the division where he made a hurried reconnaissance. But, even after making this inspection, Greene still "insisted that Sedgwick was on the right," and left Carman with strict orders "that the men should under no circumstances be permitted to fire to the right." It was not until some time after that, when a corps staff officer informed Greene that Sedgwick was no longer in the woods, that Greene realized his predicament. Too late, though, because just at that point two separate columns of enemy infantry struck his flanks

simultaneously, and the division was driven precipitously from the woods closely pursued by the enemy (see figure 42).²⁴

These were the same two enemy columns that once clear of the West Woods would threaten the flank and rear of French's and Richardson's divisions at the sunken road causing the reaction on their part that has already been described. In addition to this threat, the advance of these columns also threatened the left and rear of the defensive line being established by Sumner in the vicinity of the East and North Woods. For a time, as the Confederates advanced successfully across the height of land toward the Mumma and

²⁴ Ezra Ayers Carman, "The Maryland Campaign of 1862," chapter 19, pp. 8-10, Carman Papers, Library of Congress, Washington; OR 19, pt. 1, 501-2.

Roulette farms, it appeared that the attack would separate French and Richardson from the rest of the Federal right, isolating the troops on the extreme right and making them vulnerable to defeat in detail. From Sumner's point of view, watching Greene's division stream from the West Woods, this would appear to be the beginning of the attack on the right that McClellan so feared.

As Sumner watched the advance of the enemy columns, the Federal line on the Mumma farm began to collapse creating a gap between the right and the troops in the vicinity of the sunken road west of the Roulette farm lane. The first to go after Greene's division was Owen's battery. Owen, unfortunately, was directly in the path of the Confederate assault, and, like Tompkins before him, below the height of land which separated him from the West Woods so that he did not see the initial commotion in the vicinity of the church and had little time to react. Owen remembered that just as the enemy battery that had been bombarding his position ceased firing, "A noise from my right attracted my attention, and I saw our infantry retreating in disorder toward me, and then about 150 yards off, closely followed by the rebels. I limbered up quickly and started on the trot into the road leading directly from the ruins [Mumma farm], and when the last caisson left the ground the enemy were close upon us." Also disappearing from sight, driven back by the Confederate advance, was the line formed by French's regiments on the crest of the high ground above the sunken road west of the Roulette farm lane. As already described, Kimball was endeavoring to reform these regiments in a line along the

Roulette farm lane to meet the Confederate advance head on, but this effort was not visible to anyone like Sumner who was in the vicinity of the North Woods or beyond.²⁵

Accordingly, Sumner's first action in this new crisis was to alert army headquarters as to what was happening and to ask for reinforcements. Sumner was fortunate in that near his headquarters on the Poffenberger farm, there was a signal station established by Lieutenants James B. Brooks, 4th Vermont, and William H. Hill, 99th Pennsylvania. This station was in direct communication with the signal station operated by Lieutenants Fountain Wilson, 5th Pennsylvania, and William F. Barrett, 27th Massachusetts, near McClellan's headquarters. Through this station Sumner sent an urgent message to headquarters reading, "Re-enforcements are badly wanted. Our troops are giving way. I am hunting for French's and Slocum's divisions. If you know where they are, send them immediately."²⁶

Although Slocum was already on the way with his division from the Upper Bridge, of more immediate consequence for Sumner were the artillery batteries that Clarke had positioned in front of the East Woods and the remaining two brigades of Smith's division which were just arriving in the vicinity of the North and East Woods. With the departure

²⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 326.

²⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 123-5, 129, 134. In his report, Major Albert J. Myer, the Army of the Potomac's Chief Signal Officer, credits Brooks and Hill with sending Sumner's message, although he twice mentions that Lieutenant E. C. Pierce, 3rd Maine, and Barrett also had a signal station established near Sumner's and Smith's headquarters. Captain B. F. Fisher, commander of the army's signal detachment, says in his report that Brooks and Hill were near Sumner's headquarters and that Pierce and Barrett were not sent across the Antietam to establish their station until the afternoon of the seventeenth.

of Owen's battery, Thomas's battery along the Smoketown road just outside of the East Woods was now threatened by the Confederate advance. Thomas, however, was more fortunate than Owen in that his battery was on the left flank of the oncoming Confederate column rather than directly in its path. Thomas reported that up until this time he had not fired a shot, but as the infantry of Greene's division passed to the rear and cleared the front of the battery, he "changed front to fire to the left, and opened on the advancing enemy with spherical case, and then, as they approached nearer, with canister."²⁷

Smith observed the enemy advance threatening the area south of the woods, in particular, the predicament of Thomas's battery. He reported, "I ordered forward the Third Brigade (Colonel Irwin's), who, passing through the regular battery, then commanded by Lieutenant Thomas (Fourth Artillery), charged upon the enemy, and drove them gallantly until abreast the little church at the point of woods, the possession of which had been so fiercely contested." Thomas, whose battery was still firing canister, was watching anxiously as the enemy column continued to approach his guns. "They came on," he reported, "and I would undoubtedly have lost my battery had not Franklin's column come up at that time." As Smith reported, Irwin's regiments continued to drive the enemy back until the brigade was almost at the Dunker Church. Irwin remembered, however, that as his brigade approached the West Woods a "severe and unexpected volley from the woods on our right struck full on the Seventy-seventh and Thirty-third New York, which staggered them for a moment." The brigade recovered from this blow and

²⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 284.

responded by unleashing “a close and scorching fire, driving back and scattering the enemy at this point,” but the advance of the brigade toward the West Woods was effectively halted. Irwin then reformed his line and drew back far enough from the woods that the brigade was protected by the same crest of the height of land that had previously sheltered Greene’s division.²⁸

The last of Smith’s brigades, Brooks’s, which had come up immediately behind Howard’s, was, along with the rest of Smith’s division, initially ordered by Sumner to take position on the extreme right. Now, however, based on a message from French that he was out of ammunition, Brooks was ordered by Sumner or one of Sumner’s staff to take his brigade and go to the support of French’s collapsing right. Accordingly, Brooks brought his brigade around east of the East Woods and the burned Mumma farmstead and then south into the Mumma cornfield, reaching it just in time to cooperate with the repositioned regiments of French’s and Richardson’s divisions in driving back what remained of the Confederate assaulting columns.²⁹

The attack by Irwin’s and Brooks’s brigades not only helped to repel the Confederate attack, it also served to reestablish and strengthen the Federal defensive position on the right. Richardson would shortly conclude the fighting in the vicinity of the sunken road

²⁸ OR 19, pt. 1, 284, 402, 409.

²⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 377, 402-3; *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 626. That Sumner or a member of his staff gave Brooks the order to go to the assistance of French is evident from Smith’s official report where he complains that this was not the first time “that my command has been dispersed by orders from an officer superior in rank to the general commanding this corps.”

and consolidate his division along the crests above that road east of the Roulette farm lane. Brooks would be on Richardson's right, effectively taking the place of French's division which was withdrawn to the vicinity of the Roulette farm for reorganization and resupply. Irwin would maintain his position on Brooks's right, filling the gap between Federal forces in the vicinity of the sunken road and the batteries and troops in the vicinity of the East Woods.

In Sumner's mind, however, the repulse of this latest Confederate advance did not eliminate the threat to the Federal right. If anything, this bold sortie only served to demonstrate that the threat was indeed real, and that the Confederates still had enough strength in and beyond the West Woods to turn the day against the Army of the Potomac. On approaching the West Woods, the advance of Irwin's brigade had been stopped by a concentration of infantry fire coming from the woods, and now enemy batteries both in and beyond the woods were firing on that brigade and against the batteries in the vicinity of the East Woods. Irwin reported that "shell, grape, and canister swept from left to right. The practice of the enemy was rapid and very accurate, and in a short time our loss was very heavy, and the dead and wounded encumbered our ranks." Thomas recalled that as soon as Irwin's brigade passed his battery, he was compelled to change once again to his original front and open "with solid shot on a battery to my right, in the opposite woods, which was soon silenced." But no sooner had Thomas silenced this battery when "another battery opened on me, which I saw was out of my range." The batteries north of Thomas's also continued to receive fire. Cothran would report that "during the whole

time we occupied our position we were subjected to a galling fire from the enemy's infantry and artillery."³⁰

Accordingly, Sumner's priority remained the strengthening of the right of the Army of the Potomac to resist any further assaults by Confederate forces. All available infantry brigades and divisions had already been assigned positions in the defensive line that now stretched from the Middlekauf farm north of the North Woods, where Meade was working to reassemble the divisions of the First Army Corps, to the eastern end of the sunken road where Richardson was consolidating the brigades of his division. What remained to be done was to get the troops scattered by the morning's fighting back with their regiments, and commanders and staffs at all levels continued to be employed doing just that.

Since the line was a defensive one, the core of its strength remained the artillery batteries which were massed along its front. The greatest concentration of artillery continued to be in the north, where Doubleday oversaw the assembly of over thirty guns. Six batteries were still in place in front of the East Woods, but since they continued to be engaged by enemy batteries and threatened by infantry, several were now in dire need of being replaced (see figure 43). Both Cothran and Knap were nearly out of ammunition and were replaced by the newly arrived Sixth Corps battery of Captain John W. Wolcott, Battery A, 1st Maryland Light Artillery. Two other Sixth Corps batteries, Captain William Hexamer's Battery A, New Jersey Light Artillery and Lieutenant Leonard

³⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 284, 410, 483.

Martin's Battery F, 5th US Artillery, were sent into position on the left of Thomas extending the artillery line southeast of the Smoketown road along the Mumma farm lane. In addition, Owen's battery, which by now had replenished its ammunition, was ordered by Sumner to return to the line in support of Brooks's brigade. Owen reported to Brooks as ordered, but both officers agreed that Brooks's advanced position was not the place for an artillery battery, and Owen was eventually placed by French in position between the Mumma and Roulette farmsteads, about three hundred yards to the rear of Brooks. East of that point, however, Graham's battery near the east end of the sunken road continued to be the only artillery in support of Richardson's division.³¹

III

Despite the fact that his first priority was stabilizing the Federal right to defend against the threat of a new Confederate assault, Sumner continued to consider the possibility of continuing the Federal attack on the right as intended by McClellan in his

³¹ OR 19, pt. 1, 326, 483.

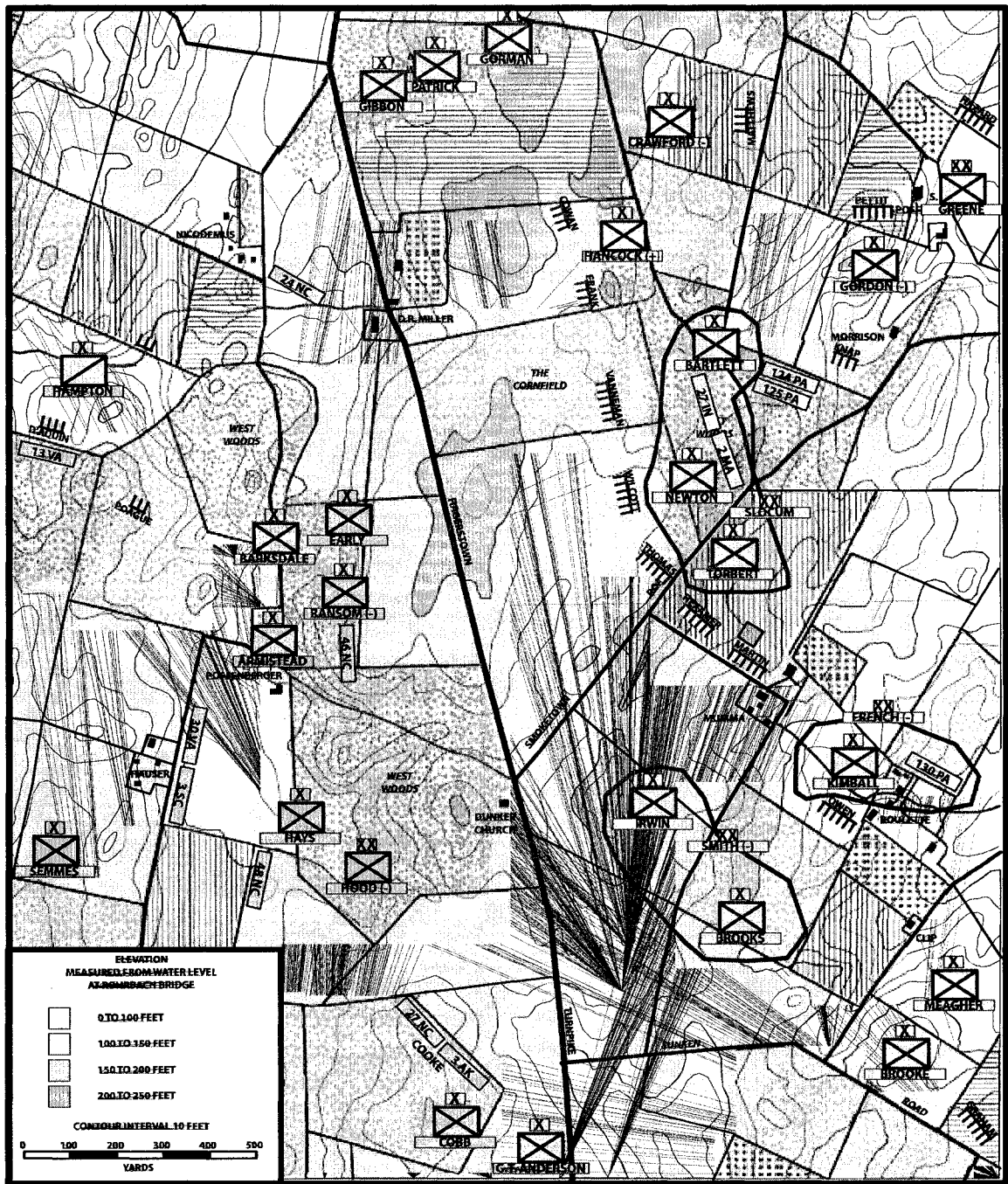


Figure 43. Situation on the Federal Right, 1:00 p.m., 17 September 1862.

original plan of battle. The continuing threat to the Federal right notwithstanding, the action of Hooker's, Williams's, and Sumner's corps throughout the morning and into the early afternoon had driven back and done substantial damage to the enemy's left. Even if it was not all that had been hoped, this success might well have been enough to allow McClellan to proceed with the commitment of Burnside's and Porter's corps against the enemy's right and center. Indeed, if the enemy was still strong on the left of his line, it might be at the cost of having weakened his right and center. Such a situation would pave the way for a successful attack by Burnside and Porter into the enemy's rear, driving him back against the Potomac. Moreover, an attack by Burnside and Porter might require a renewed offensive by all of the available troops on the right, no matter what their condition, to fix the enemy in position and prevent him from maneuvering to meet a new assault on his right.

There is evidence to suggest that Sumner was thinking along just such lines. In a signal message sent to McClellan at about this time, Sumner queried McClellan concerning the use of Slocum's division, which Sumner said he would need on the right should he undertake a new advance. Howard in a series of articles for the *National Tribune* in 1884 and again in his *Autobiography* published in 1907, recalled that Sumner at this point in the battle was planning a general advance. "His adjutant general and aids [sic] had distributed the order to four corps, what were left of them, and had cavalry ready to help. All were to start simultaneously at a given signal." The order and the signal that Howard was referring to are the same that Richardson mentioned to battery commander

Graham when he told Graham that he (Richardson) “wished me to save the battery as much as possible, in order that it might advance with his division at a signal then expected from Major-General Sumner.” It was just after telling this to Graham that Richardson received his wound and was carried from the field. In addition, Meade in his official report of the battle mentioned that by 2:00 p.m. the Third Division of the First Corps, Meade’s own now under the command of Brigadier General Truman Seymour, was again ready for action, “supplied with ammunition, and held in readiness to repel an attack if the enemy should attempt one on our right flank, and assist in any advance we might make.”³²

While Sumner continued to oversee the placing of troops and batteries reinforcements in the form of Slocum’s division of Franklin’s corps began to arrive on the field. Franklin took the first two brigades of this division to come up, the First Brigade under Colonel Alfred T.A. Torbert and the Third Brigade under Brigadier General John Newton, and led them south through the East Woods, forming them in columns of attack behind the artillery batteries. It was Franklin’s intention to send these two brigades forward along the Smoketown road to make an attack into the West Woods in the vicinity of the Dunker Church just as soon as Slocum’s Second Brigade, Colonel Joseph J.

³² OR 19, pt. 1, 134, 343-4; Oliver Otis Howard, *Autobiography of Oliver Otis Howard, Major General United States Army*, 2 vols. (New York: Baker & Taylor Company, 1907; reprint, Harrisburg, PA: Archive Society, 1997), 1:301; Oliver O. Howard, "Personal Reminiscences of the War of the Rebellion," *National Tribune*, 3 April 1884, p. 1.

Bartlett's, arrived and was positioned behind the two attacking brigades to act as a reserve.³³

When Bartlett's brigade did not arrive as expected, Franklin sent to find what had happened to it, only to learn that it had been detained by Sumner near his headquarters where it would be used to support the right. Franklin then sent orders to Bartlett countermanding the orders that Bartlett had been given by Sumner. Bartlett's brigade was soon in the East Woods taking position behind Torbert's and Newton's brigades, but along with it came Sumner who was no doubt none to happy at having his orders to Bartlett reversed. Franklin explained to Sumner what he intended to do with these three brigades. According to Franklin, Sumner then "advised me not to make the attack, for if it failed the right would be entirely destroyed, as there were no troops there that could be depended upon." Franklin insisted that the attack was "a very necessary thing to do," and told Sumner that he intended to proceed with the attack unless Sumner "assumed the responsibility for forbidding it." According to Franklin, Sumner then "assumed the responsibility, and ordered me not to make it."³⁴

As the senior officer on the field, Sumner had every right, indeed the responsibility, to order Franklin not to make the attack that he was planning into the West Woods. Given

³³ OR 19, pt. 1, 377; *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 626; William B. Franklin, "Notes on Crampton's Gap and Antietam," *North to Antietam*, vol. 2, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (New York: Century, 1887-1888; reprint, New York: Castle Books, 1956), 597.

³⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 377; *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 626; Franklin, 597.

the level of enemy activity and strength that Sumner had been able to observe since his arrival on field, he also had to believe that an attack into the West Woods at this point with only three brigades did not hold any chance of success, and might only serve to precipitate a counterattack by the enemy against the right with what might be greatly superior forces. Sumner well knew that if the offensive was to be resumed on the Federal right it would have to be with all of the strength that could be mustered, and it would only be successful if made as a secondary attack in conjunction with new Federal assaults on the enemy's right and rear by the corps of Porter and Burnside.

However much of this rationale Sumner explained to Franklin, Franklin remained dissatisfied with the decision and wanted to continue with the attack even though he noted that "the enemy at once proceeded to fill the wood with infantry, and planted a battery there, which opened a severe fire upon us." Franklin then happen to see that Major Hammerstein of McClellan's staff was nearby, and "requested him to inform General McClellan of the state of affairs, and that I thought the attack ought to be made." Hammerstein rode off at once toward army headquarters at the Pry house while Sumner and Franklin rode off toward Sumner's headquarters just above the North Woods.³⁵

Once back at his headquarters, Sumner continued to confer with his staff and the other general officers then on the field concerning the condition of the troops and their readiness to continue the action whether it was to be holding the ground they had gained

³⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 377; *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 626; Franklin, 597.

or restarting the offensive. Presently, another of McClellan's young staff officers, Lieutenant James H. Wilson, rode up with an order for Sumner from McClellan. Wilson told Sumner that McClellan wanted him "to get up his men and hold his position at all hazards, as Burnside had crossed and was advancing finely." For Sumner, though, this order presented a dilemma. It told him to remain on the defensive while the exact condition which he had surmised would require a resumption of the offensive on the right—to fix the enemy in position while Burnside and Porter advanced against the enemy's rear—was now a reality. Yet, McClellan's order said nothing about renewing the offensive, only that Sumner should hold his present position. Perhaps McClellan did not fully understand the situation on the right, the condition of the troops there, the strength of the enemy beyond the right, or that a renewed offensive was possible on the right, even if at great risk. Sumner, therefore, instructed Wilson, "Go back, young man, and ask General McClellan if I shall make a simultaneous advance with my whole line at the risk of not being able to rally a man on this side of the creek if I am driven back." Wilson, who did not comprehend what Sumner was asking, attempted to advise the old soldier concerning the order Wilson had brought, saying, "General, from the tenor of the order I have just delivered, I will assume to say that General McClellan simply desires and expects you to hold your position for the present." Sumner, however, was in no mood for any advice, counsel, or back talk from a fledgling lieutenant, and sharply told Wilson, "Go back, young man, and bring an answer to my question." Wilson, with

nothing more to say, was instantly back in the saddle of his “slashing gray” and on his way to army headquarters to get an answer.³⁶

At headquarters, Wilson quickly enough found McClellan and delivered Sumner’s message. According to Wilson, McClellan reacted at first with some irritation and with apparently little comprehension concerning what Sumner was asking, in effect suggesting. McClellan told Wilson, “Tell General Sumner to risk nothing. I expect him to hold his present position at every cost. This is the great battle of the war and every man must do his duty.” But then, McClellan seemed to realize what Sumner was really asking, and added, “Tell the general to crowd every man and gun into the ranks, and, if he thinks it practicable, he may advance Franklin to carry the woods in front, holding the rest of the line with his own command, assisted by those of Banks and Hooker.”³⁷

Back again at Sumner’s headquarters, Wilson repeated McClellan’s message “with emphasis in the exact terms it had been given to me.” But for Sumner the revised order was equivocal. He could, if he thought it practicable, continue the offensive using Franklin’s corps, the only troops on the right who had not been heavily engaged. But at the same time, he was to hold his present position using what remained of the First, Second, and Twelfth Corps. In his confrontation with Franklin earlier, Sumner had already rejected the idea of an advance toward the West Woods with Slocum’s division of

³⁶ James H. Wilson, *Under the Old Flag: Recollections of Military Operations in the War for the Union, The Spanish War, The Boxer Rebellion, Etc.*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton, 1912), 1:112-3.

³⁷ Wilson, 1:113.

Franklin's command. Adding Smith's division would strengthen the attack, but at the same time weaken the defensive line, perhaps fatally. Smith's brigades had already been committed to strengthening the defensive line at some of its most critical points, and were now the nucleus of that line. If Franklin went forward alone, as the First, Second, and Twelfth Corps had already done, and was driven back, as the First, Second, and Twelfth Corps had already been driven back, the entire right of the Army of the Potomac might collapse allowing the Confederates to concentrate against Burnside's advance, or worse, drive the entire Federal right back across the Antietam. McClellan needed to understand that whichever course of action was adopted, renew the offensive or stand on the defensive, it must be undertaken by all of the troops available to Sumner on the right. What was left of the command should not, could not, be divided in effort. That was the error of the battle to this point. Consequently, Sumner told Wilson, "Go back, young man, and tell General McClellan I have no command. Tell him my command, Banks's command and Hooker's command are all cut up and demoralized. Tell him General Franklin has the only organized command on this part of the field!"³⁸

When Wilson got back to army headquarters with Sumner's second message, he found that McClellan was gone, and that, temporarily, Fitz-John Porter was in charge. McClellan's absence was due to the fact that after Wilson had left the headquarters with the second message to Sumner, McClellan decided to go and see for himself the situation on the right. The decision to undertake this visit to the front, McClellan's first that day,

³⁸ Wilson, 1:113-4.

was precipitated by the arrival at army headquarters of Major Hammerstein with Franklin's request that the commander overrule Sumner's decision preventing Franklin from undertaking an attack into the West Woods with two brigades of Slocum's division. For some time now, since the earliest reports of Hooker's corps being driven back, information coming in from the right indicated that the situation was tenuous at best, that the right had suffered severely and was only barely holding on. Then came the message from Sumner through Wilson about renewing the offensive, though at grave risk, and the request from Franklin through Hammerstein about using Slocum's division in an attack on the West Woods. McClellan finally decided that he would have to see for himself.

Years later, Henry J. Hunt, McClellan's artillery commander, would recall that McClellan said as he crossed Antietam Creek, that he "would go to the right to conduct the attack in person." Approaching the East Woods, McClellan came across his former West Point classmate, George H. Gordon, whose brigade was still in the vicinity of the woods though relieved from the front line by the brigades of Slocum's division. McClellan asked Gordon, "How are your troops," and Gordon replied, "They have done well, but suffered severely and are somewhat scattered." McClellan then told Gordon, "Collect them at once, 15,000 fresh troops have already come up; more will arrive during the night. Tell your men that! We must fight tonight and to-morrow. If we cannot whip the enemy now, we may as well die upon the field. If we succeed we end the war."³⁹

³⁹ Henry J. Hunt to George B. McClellan, 12 January 1876, *Papers of George B. McClellan*, Series I, Volume 96, Item 19335, Library of Congress; *New York Tribune*, 29 September 1862, 1; Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan, The Young Napoleon* (New

As McClellan continued on toward Sumner's headquarters, however, he began to see for himself that what was being reported by Sumner and others concerning the condition of the troops on the right was correct, and his optimism regarding a renewal of the offensive there quickly began to wane. McClellan reported finding "that Sumner's, Hooker's, and Mansfield's corps had met with serious losses. Several general officers had been carried from the field severely wounded, and the aspects of affairs was anything but promising." In his memoir, McClellan recalled, "Even Sedgwick's division commenced giving way under a few shots from a battery that suddenly commenced firing from an unexpected position. I had to ride in and rally them myself." The incident must have unnerved him, for McClellan, "At the risk of greatly exposing our center," immediately "ordered two brigades from Porter's corps, the only available troops, to reinforce the right."⁴⁰

Arriving at Sumner's headquarters, McClellan was able to confer with Sumner, Franklin, and several other general officers who were present. Franklin made his case for using the Sixth Army Corps to attack the West Woods, but Sumner remained adamant expressing "the most decided opinion against another attempt during that day to assault the enemy's position in front, as portions of our troops were so much scattered and demoralized." Having seen the condition of the troops for himself, McClellan sided with Sumner and, after directing some minor changes of position, issued orders that all

York: Ticknor & Fields, 1988), 315; OR 19, pt. 1, 62. Sears identifies the officer that McClellan spoke to on the way to Sumner's headquarters as Gordon.

commanders should hold their present positions. Satisfied, though, that the right could be held “without the assistance of the two brigades from the center,” McClellan countermanded that order. In his testimony before Congress, and later in his article for *Century Magazine*, Franklin stated that the reason McClellan gave for not renewing the offensive was “that things had gone so well on all the other parts of the field that he was afraid to risk the day by an attack there on the right at that time.”⁴¹

While Franklin readily enough accepted McClellan’s reason for his decision to stand on the defensive, McClellan himself was not revealing in this statement everything that he then knew concerning the left of his line. What had animated Sumner to ask the commander about renewing the offensive at great risk was the statement by Lieutenant Wilson that Burnside was across Antietam Creek and making progress on the enemy’s right and rear (see figure 44). In McClellan’s original plan of battle, this was not to occur until the attack on the right was sufficiently successful. So if Burnside was making progress, then the attacks on the right throughout the morning must have been successful, and if continued, even at risk, could bring about the victory that all on the Federal side were seeking. But McClellan knew well enough that at this point that Burnside was not making the progress against the enemy’s rear that would justify risking a renewed offensive on the right.⁴²

⁴⁰OR 19, pt. 1, 62; McClellan, *McClellan’s Own Story*, 606.

⁴¹OR 19, pt. 1, 62; *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 626-7; Franklin, 597.

⁴²OR 19, pt. 1, 30.

Early on the morning of the seventeenth, Burnside had been sent orders by McClellan to make all preparations for carrying the Rohrbach Bridge across Antietam Creek. In those initial set of orders, however, he was told that he was “to await further orders before making the attack.” In response, Burnside had Cox, who he still considered to be in direct command of the Ninth Corps, move his own division of two brigades, now under Colonel Eliakim P. Scammon, into position directly opposite the east end of the bridge. To the left of Scammon, the division of Brigadier General Samuel D. Sturgis went into position on the high ground southeast of the bridge. The division of Brigadier General Orlando B. Wilcox was placed in reserve directly behind Scammon and Sturgis, while Brigadier General Isaac P. Rodman’s division was started downstream in preparation for crossing at a ford well below the enemy’s right flank. The order for Burnside to open his attack was finally sent out from army headquarters at 9:10 a.m., precipitated by

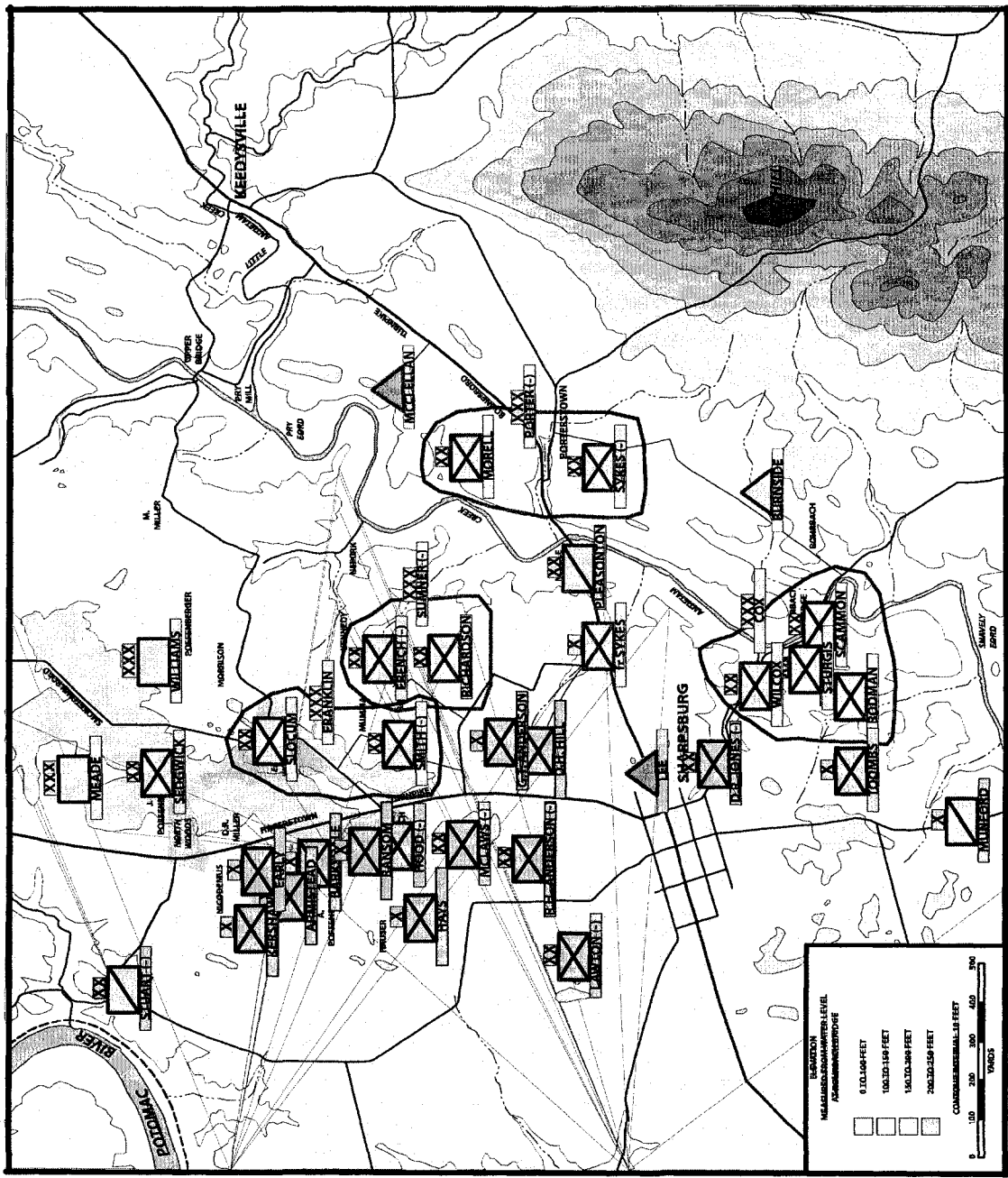


Figure 44. Position of water level markers in Sharpsburg, Maryland, on September 18, 1962.

McClellan's learning that Franklin and his corps were within a mile and a half of the battlefield. In that order, Burnside was told, "As soon as you shall have uncovered the upper stone bridge you will be supported, and if necessary, on your own line of attack. So far all is going well." The upper stone bridge referred to in the order was the Middle Bridge, which once its Confederate defenders were threatened and driven off by Burnside's advance would permit the crossing of Porter's corps, or possibly Franklin's, to join with Burnside in the attack toward the enemy's center and rear. All of this was in accordance with McClellan's original plan of battle.⁴³

Burnside's attack on the bridge, however, was poorly conducted. Carrying the bridge required four separate assaults by elements of Scammon's and Sturgis's divisions with never more than two regiments making the attack at any one time. It was not until 1:00 p.m. that the bridge was carried and the Ninth Corps could finally begin to cross. But even then, Burnside did not manage to get the entire corps across and formed for a continuation of the advance toward Sharpsburg until 3:00 p.m.⁴⁴

McClellan at army headquarters was well aware of just how slowly Burnside's advance was going. Some time after sending Burnside the 9:10 a.m. order for

⁴³ OR 19, pt. 1, 63, 419; 51, pt. 1, 844; McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 603; *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 640. In both his official report and in his memoir, McClellan states that the order for Burnside to attack was sent at 8:00 a.m. The order as found in the Official Records is marked 9:10 a.m. Burnside in his official report and in his testimony to the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War says the order was received at 10:00 a.m.

⁴⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 63, 419-20.

commencing the attack and then not hearing from him, McClellan “dispatched an aide to ascertain what had been done.” When the aide returned to headquarters, he reported Burnside’s slow progress in making the attack at the bridge. McClellan responded to this intelligence by immediately sending the aide “back with an order to Gen. Burnside to assault the bridge at once, and carry it at all hazards.” When the aide returned a second time and reported that the bridge still had not been carried, McClellan “directed Colonel Sacket, Inspector-General, to deliver to General Burnside my positive order to push forward his troops without a moment’s delay, and, if necessary, to carry the bridge at the point of the bayonet, and I ordered Colonel Sacket to remain with General Burnside and see that the order was executed promptly.”⁴⁵

As has already been mentioned, Burnside finally did carry the bridge about 1:00 p.m., but then halted the advance to resupply and reform his divisions before continuing the attack toward Sharpsburg. When McClellan heard that the bridge had finally been carried, but that the attack was not being immediately pressed, he sent another of his aides, Colonel Thomas M. Key, “to inform General Burnside that I desired him to push forward his troops with the utmost vigor, and carry the enemy’s position on the heights; that the movement was vital to our success.” Burnside replied to this imperative by telling McClellan “that he would soon advance, and would go up the hill as far as a battery of the enemy on the left would permit.” McClellan sent Colonel Key back to

⁴⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 63; William F. Biddle, “Recollections of McClellan,” *The United Service Magazine* 11, no. 5 (May 1894): 467-8.

Burnside once again to tell him “to advance at once, if possible, to flank the battery or storm it, and carry the heights.”⁴⁶

At the point in time, therefore, that McClellan was telling Franklin “that things had gone so well on all the other parts of the field that he was afraid to risk the day by an attack there on the right,” he well knew that Burnside was only just beginning to move up from Antietam Creek and was not yet threatening the right and rear of the enemy’s position. Given Burnside’s lack of vigor so far, it was doubtful that he would achieve a position that day which would seriously threaten the enemy’s left and rear. The time to risk a continuation of the offensive on the right, therefore, had not yet arrived. It would not have benefited Burnside’s attack. There would have been no point to renewing the offensive on the right unless McClellan believed that the troops there were capable of driving back the enemy’s left on their own without support, and this he, and Sumner, clearly did not believe was a reasonable possibility. In his final official report of the battle, McClellan would lament Burnside’s lack of initiative by saying, “If this important movement had been consummated two hours earlier, a position would have been secured upon the heights from which our batteries might have enfiladed the greater part of the enemy’s line, and turned their right and rear. Our victory might thus have been much more decisive.”⁴⁷

⁴⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 63-4; Biddle, 468.

⁴⁷ Franklin, 597.

Before leaving Sumner's headquarters to return to his own, McClellan attended to one additional task. It was well known by this time that General Richardson was seriously wounded and had been carried from the field, and that his division's senior brigade commander, General Meagher, was also incapacitated and out of action. Under these circumstances, McClellan made the decision, apparently without any objection from either Sumner or Franklin, to place General Hancock of Franklin's corps in command of Richardson's division.⁴⁸

IV

After McClellan's departure from the front, there was no more consideration of restarting the offensive on the right of the Federal line with the troops under Sumner's command. But the effort to strengthen the right against a possible renewed enemy offensive continued throughout the remainder of the afternoon.

North of the North Woods, Meade, Doubleday, Ricketts, and Seymour continued the process of consolidating, reorganizing, and resupplying what remained of the First Army Corps. Gibbon's and Patrick's brigades were withdrawn from the North Woods at this time, and rejoined Doubleday's division which was in direct support of the massed batteries of the corps on the high ground directly north of the Joseph Poffenberger farm. Ricketts's and Seymour's divisions continued their reordering a few hundred yards farther

⁴⁸ Alfred Pleasonton to Randolph B. Marcy, 17 September 1862, *Papers of George B. McClellan*, Series I, Volume 80, Item 16266, Library of Congress; OR 19, pt. 1, 407; pt. 2, 316; McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, 606.

north along the Hagerstown Turnpike. Eventually, Sumner would oversee a rearrangement of the First Corps' divisions into three lines of battle to resist any attack by the enemy from the west against the extreme right of the Federal line.⁴⁹

Consolidation, reorganization, and resupply also remained the principal activities within the brigades of Sedgwick's division, which continued to reform in the vicinity of the North Woods, generally to the left and left rear of the First Corps. In Gorman's brigade, which was just north of the North Woods on the left of Doubleday's massed battery, Private Bowen of the 15th Massachusetts recalled that throughout the afternoon of the seventeenth the missing continued to show up to take their place in the regimental line, but the regiment itself "had nothing more to do with the battle." The historian of the 1st Minnesota also noted the break in the fighting, remembering that his regiment, which was positioned on the Joseph Poffenberger farm, "rested comfortably behind a snug fence during the afternoon and evening of the 17th."⁵⁰

The three regiments of Dana's brigade—19th Massachusetts, 7th Michigan, and 59th New York—that were still in position some five hundred yards east of the Poffenberger farm under Colonel Hall of the 7th, were now ordered by General Smith of the Sixth Corps to move south toward the East Woods to support some of his batteries. Smith sent

⁴⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 237; 241, 270.

⁵⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 313; Roland E. Bowen, *From Ball's Bluff to Gettysburg . . . And Beyond: The Civil War Letters of Private Roland E. Bowen, 15th Massachusetts Infantry, 1861-1864*, ed. Gregory A. Coco (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 1994), 135; *History of the First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1864* (Stillwater, MN: Easton & Masterman, Printers, 1916), 219.

the 59th New York off to join the 20th Massachusetts, while Hall continued on with the remaining two regiments. Smith ultimately ordered Hall to take position in the interval between Smith's and Slocum's divisions. In this position, Hall was joined by the 106th Pennsylvania of Howard's brigade, and later the 42nd New York of his own brigade. He reported that all four regiments "were subjected to an annoying fire from the enemy's artillery for several hours during the afternoon . . . during which their conduct was unexceptionable."⁵¹

The last of Sedgwick's brigades, Howard's own, was kept in position near the Poffenberger house "with instructions to hold this point at all hazards." Howard reported, "This portion of the general line was now very quiet, except [for] an occasional attempt of the enemy to locate a battery on a high point beyond the turnpike, near a cornfield." George Washington Beidelman, a member of the 71st Pennsylvania, noted in a letter to his father that the regiment was near "a nice house and barn." "The citizens," he continued, "have all deserted their homes, but the male portion are doing good service in carrying off the wounded with their spring wagons."⁵²

In front of the East Woods, the effort to strengthen the artillery line continued. The battery of Captain John G. Hazard, Battery B, 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery, the only

⁵¹ OR 19, pt. 1, 306, 322.

⁵² OR 19, pt. 1, 306; George W. Beidelman, *The Civil War Letters of George Washington Beidelman*, ed. Catherine H. Vanderslice (New York: Vantage Press, 1978), 102.

Second Corps battery not to have taken a direct part in the battle so far, was now brought up and put into position in the plowed field north of the East Woods approximately two hundred yards to the rear of Cowan's battery. The battery's historian, John H. Rhodes, remembered, "This situation was anything but desirable, as the odor from the dead horses lying around was nearly suffocating." Two additional Sixth Corps batteries from Slocum's division were also put into position, Captain Josiah Porter's Battery A, 1st Massachusetts Light Artillery, and Lieutenant Edward B. Williston's Battery D, 2nd US Artillery. These two went into position near the south end of the woods along the Smoketown road, replacing Thomas's and Hexamer's batteries.⁵³

Supporting this battery line in front of the East Woods, in addition to the regiments of Dana's brigade as mentioned above, was the infantry of the Sixth Corps. Hancock's brigade of Smith's division, now under Colonel Amasa Cobb of the 5th Wisconsin, was in the north end of the woods, while Bartlett's, Newton's, and Torbert's brigades of Slocum's division formed in that order on Hancock's left. Behind the line formed by these troops were the regiments of Crawford's and Gordon's brigades of the Twelfth Corps. South of the East Woods and the Smoketown road, five hundred yards ahead of the artillery line, were Irwin's and Brooks's brigades of Smith's division. These last two brigades were facing more south than west, bringing the line around to the east and connecting it to the line along the sunken road formed by Richardson's division.

⁵³ Rhodes, 122.

It was just at this point that Hancock arrived to take command of Richardson's division. In the report that he filed after the battle as Richardson's replacement, Hancock remarked that the division was "occupying one line of battle in close proximity to the enemy, who was then again in position behind Piper's house." He estimated the remaining strength of his new command to be about two thousand, one hundred men (see figure 45). Brooke's brigade was on the right of the division about a hundred yards north of the sunken road, just under the crest of the ridge above the road with its right on the Roulette farm lane. Meagher's brigade, now under Colonel John Burke of the 63rd New York, was to the left and slightly to the rear of Brooke, also sheltered behind the crest of the ridge. To the left of Meagher's brigade, Hancock found "a considerable interval at a dangerous point," between Meagher's and Caldwell's brigades. Caldwell was two hundred yards north of the point where the sunken road made its right angle turn to the south. To fill this gap, Hancock ordered forward Morris's 14th Connecticut. The

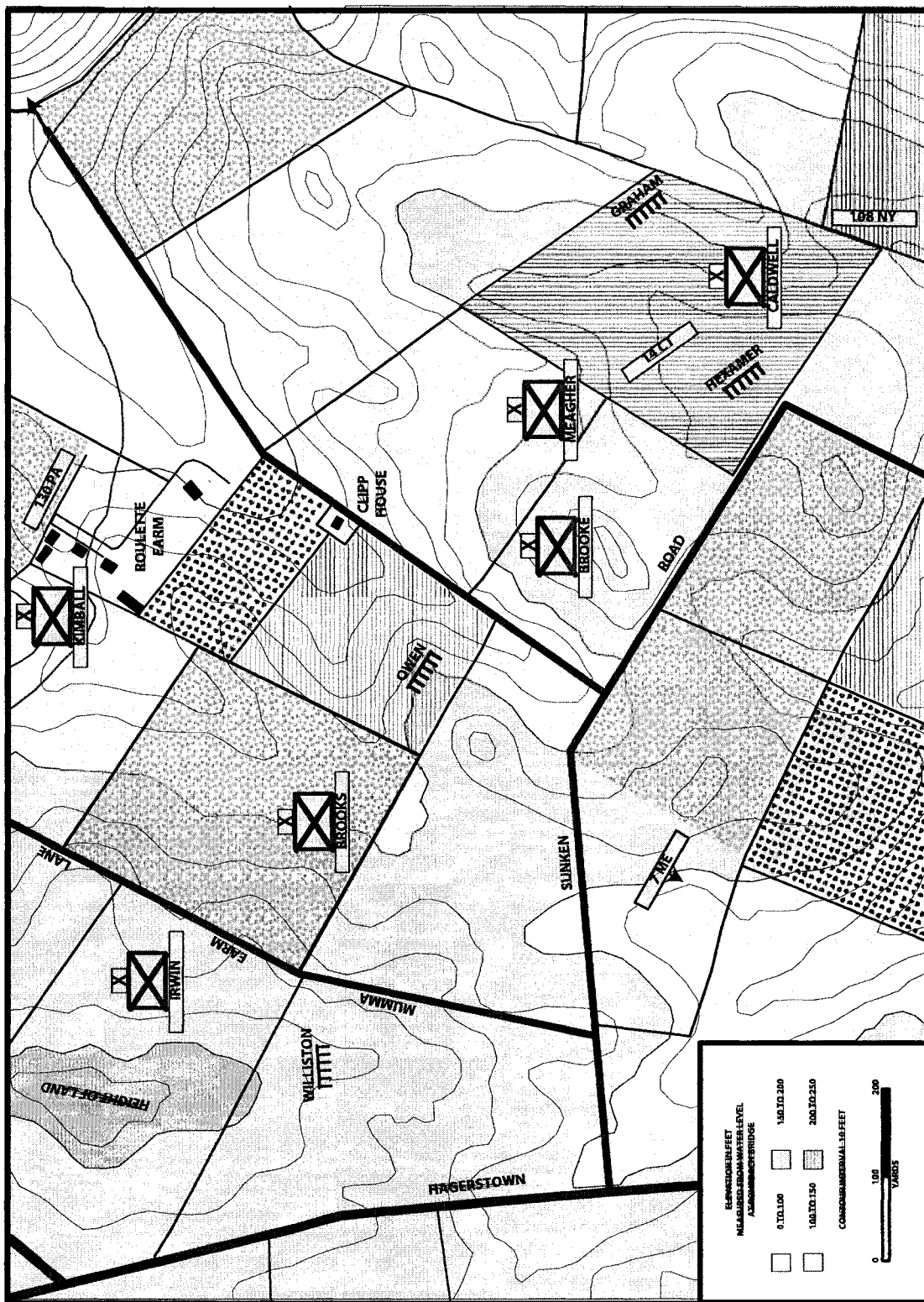


Figure 45 The Sunken Road at the Sunken Road 17 September 1862.

detachment of the 108th New York that was with the 14th he sent off to take position on Caldwell's left.⁵⁴

Hancock's orders, coming from both McClellan and Sumner, were to hold this position, a position which Hancock thought precarious at best, not because of the ground but because of the situation. Having ordered the 14th Connecticut and 108th New York into line, he now had no reserves. The troops were "suffering severely from the shells of the enemy," largely because "the line was already enfiladed from its forward position by the enemy's artillery in front of our right wing, which was screened from the fire of our artillery on the right by a belt of woods [West Woods], which was yet in possession of the enemy." The principal deficiency, though, was that he had no artillery. Graham's battery, the only battery up to this time to support the division, had withdrawn to a position some two hundred yards in rear of the division line after suffering a considerable loss of horses and some men. Because of the number of horses killed, Graham had had to leave behind two caissons which he was just now in the process of recovering. The battery was also low on ammunition, and Graham was sending two caissons back to the ammunition supply train which was located in the woods east of McClellan's headquarters, almost two miles away by the route that the caissons would have to follow. Hancock, therefore, sought batteries from two different commanders who were "within reach," and from the chief of artillery, only to find that "none could be spared at that time." Nevertheless, he reported that he would be able to hold the position by relying upon the "good qualities of

⁵⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 279, 333, 335.

the troops.” He did, however, believe that the division “was too weak to make an attack, unless an advance was made on the right.”⁵⁵

Behind Richardson’s division in the vicinity of the Roulette and Mumma farms was what was left of French’s division. According to French in his official report of the battle, his division by this time had been resupplied with ammunition and was “ready to continue the action.” French’s assessment, however, was more aspiration than reality. As has already been discussed, Colonel John Andrews of the 1st Delaware, who was officially in command of Weber’s brigade, was unable to reassemble the regiments of that brigade, most of which had gone well to the rear. With the 14th Connecticut and 108th New York sent away to support Richardson’s division, and the 130th Pennsylvania under the control of Kimball, Morris’s brigade had also ceased to exist as a brigade. Kimball’s brigade with its core of veteran regiments, therefore, was all that remained of French’s division. These then were the troops assembled in the vicinity of the Roulette and Mumma farms as Colonel Harrow of the 14th Indiana recalled “under a hot fire of shot and shell from the enemy’s batteries.”⁵⁶

With the exception of the occasional to incessant artillery probes and exchanges made by both sides, the situation on the right of the Federal line remained relatively quite until

⁵⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 279, 344; War Department, Headquarters, Army of the Potomac Circular, 17 September 1862, Telegrams Received, 1862-1865, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives. Graham would report his losses as “4 men killed, 5 severely wounded, 17 horses killed, and 6 horses wounded severely, some of which will probably die of the effects of their wounds.”

⁵⁶ OR 19, pt. 1, 324, 329, 330.

late afternoon. At about 4:00 p.m., however, Hancock espied a column of enemy infantry at some distance from his left front “advancing in a direction parallel to our front, and toward a command of ours situated to the front of my left, whose line was formed nearly at right angles with mine.” Hancock again made an urgent appeal for artillery, which this time was answered positively. Before long, Hexamer’s battery of 3-inch Ordnance rifles, which had just been relieved from its position in front of the East Woods, arrived and took position on the high ground at the eastern end of the sunken lane directly in front of the 14th Connecticut and Caldwell’s brigade. Hexamer quickly made the enemy column his target, and Hancock was able to report, “The enemy, after a short cannonading, was forced to retire.”⁵⁷

At about 5:00 p.m., there was a more general resumption of activity all along the enemy’s line in front of the Federal right. At this time, several enemy batteries appeared on a high ridge some one thousand yards west of the Poffenberger farmstead on the farm of Jacob Nicodemus—a ridge since known as Nicodemus Heights—which opened on the Federal line in the vicinity of the North and East Woods with some determination. Howard found that his line on the Poffenberger farm—that formed by his own and

⁵⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 279-80; Johnson, 117. The Federal command referred to by Hancock as being situated in front of the left of his line was actually a line of skirmishers belonging to the 4th US of Porter’s Fifth Army Corps. At the time, this line was cautiously probing toward Sharpsburg along the Boonsboro pike. The portion of the skirmish line that Hancock could see from his position was crossing a ridge line, eight hundred yards south of the sunken lane and five hundred yards southeast of the Piper farm stead. The enemy column that Hancock saw was a body of enemy infantry on the Piper farm sent to met the advancing Federal line.

Gorman's brigades—was enfiladed by this fire, but he quickly received orders directly from Sumner to change front and reform the line facing west in support of the massed guns of the First Corps. In the 71st Pennsylvania, George Beidelman thought the repositioning of his regiment at this time was because the fire of the enemy was so terrific “that we could not stand it, and had to fall back a few hundred yards.” Doubleday reported that in conjunction with the opening of the enemy's artillery there was also a massing of his infantry as if to make an assault on the right. Sumner, apparently, thought the same thing for he was also among the units of the First Corps getting them ready to meet the advance. Hofmann reported that his brigade was still at rest toward the rear when the artillery opened, and that “by order of General Sumner, I placed the brigade in [the] front line of battle—one of three lines then being formed. Our position was just below the crest of a hill, and immediately in rear of a long line of artillery.” This long line of artillery was, of course, Doubleday's massed battery, which according to Doubleday replied to the Confederate threat “with such vigor and effect that the columns of attack melted away and the rebels gave up the attempt.” Although this affair was certainly unnerving for the men of the 71st Pennsylvania, even if minor given the intensity of the day's earlier combat, it produced an unintended but beneficial effect. Beidelman would be able to write his father that night that, “Some fine cattle were killed, which gave the boys a chance to get some fresh meat.”⁵⁸

⁵⁸ OR 19, pt. 1, 226, 228, 230, 237, 306; Beidelman, 102.

Farther south, Irwin noticed a massing of the enemy's infantry in front of his brigade "with the evident design of throwing a powerful column against my left." Irwin immediately requested a battery from Captain Emory Upton, the Chief of Artillery of Slocum's division, and he sent forward four rifled guns from Wolcott's battery. As Upton watched the deployment of these pieces, the enemy infantry column approached to within seven hundred yards of their position, but Wolcott maintained "a steady and effective fire" upon them until he was relieved by the six twelve-pounder Napoleons of Williston's battery which drove off the enemy column using spherical case shot.⁵⁹

Although the main column of the enemy was driven off by Williston's battery, enemy sharpshooters remained lodged in the Piper orchard, five hundred yards to the left front of the battery and Irwin's brigade. Irwin decided that for the protection of the battery, it would be necessary to send some infantry to clear the orchard, so he ordered Major Thomas W. Hyde, commanding the 7th Maine, to take care of the problem. Hyde determined on sending one company, but when Irwin learned what Hyde was doing he ordered Hyde to make a charge with the entire regiment. From his position at the east end of the sunken lane, Hancock—who would report his line was also much annoyed the by enemy sharpshooters—noticed the movement of the 7th Maine "without concert of action with other troops." Hancock also noticed that the enemy appeared to be making preparations to meet the advance, and he ordered Hexamer's battery to open in support of

⁵⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 410; Johnson, 117. While Upton says in his report that Wolcott brought forward four guns, Irwin says that he brought forward only three guns.

the 7th Maine. Eventually, the Maine men drove all the way to the Piper farmstead before they were forced by a fire from three sides to withdraw to their original position “shielded some by the trees of the orchard.” Despite the cover that the orchard provided for the withdrawal of the regiment, it suffered very heavy casualties. The support that Hexamer gave to the advance of the 7th Maine exhausted what ammunition he had remaining, and his battery was now replaced by Woodruff’s which had been off of the line since noon and thus had had an opportunity to refit and resupply.⁶⁰

The charge of the 7th Maine at about 5:30 p.m., just one half hour before sunset, marked the last action of the day on the Federal right. As soon as it was dark enough and quiet enough, the regiments along the front line cautiously pushed forward skirmishers as far as they dared, which Hancock reported was “a very short distance.”⁶¹

⁶⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 280, 410, 412-3.

⁶¹ OR 19, pt. 1, 280, 306.

V

While the action on the right of the line was drawing to an indecisive conclusion on the afternoon of the seventeenth, the battle on the left was coming to a more dramatic end. In response to the continual prodding of McClellan, Burnside finally got the Ninth Corps started toward the height of land south of Sharpsburg at about 3:30 p.m. Strother, who was with McClellan on the heights east of Antietam Creek, recalled that the “advance was distinctly visible from our position and the movement of the dark columns, with arms and banners glittering in the sun, following the double line of skirmishers, dashing forward at a trot, loading and firing alternately as they moved, was one of the most brilliant and exciting exhibitions of the day.” By 4:30 p.m., the leading brigades of the corps were on the high ground just five hundred yards south of the town, and were threatening to cut the vital roads leading to Boteler’s Ford, the enemy’s only exit from the battlefield.⁶²

For a while it seemed that nothing could stop Burnside, but then a strong Confederate force, apparently just arriving on the battlefield, struck the Ninth Corps squarely on its left flank, driving it pell-mell from the heights and back toward the bridge, threatening for a time to turn the left of the Federal line (see figure 46). George Smalley, the *New York Tribune* reporter, was with McClellan and his entourage at the time and recorded the

⁶² David Hunter Strother, “Personal Recollections of the War,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 36 (February 1868): 284; OR 19, pt. 1, 63, 421.

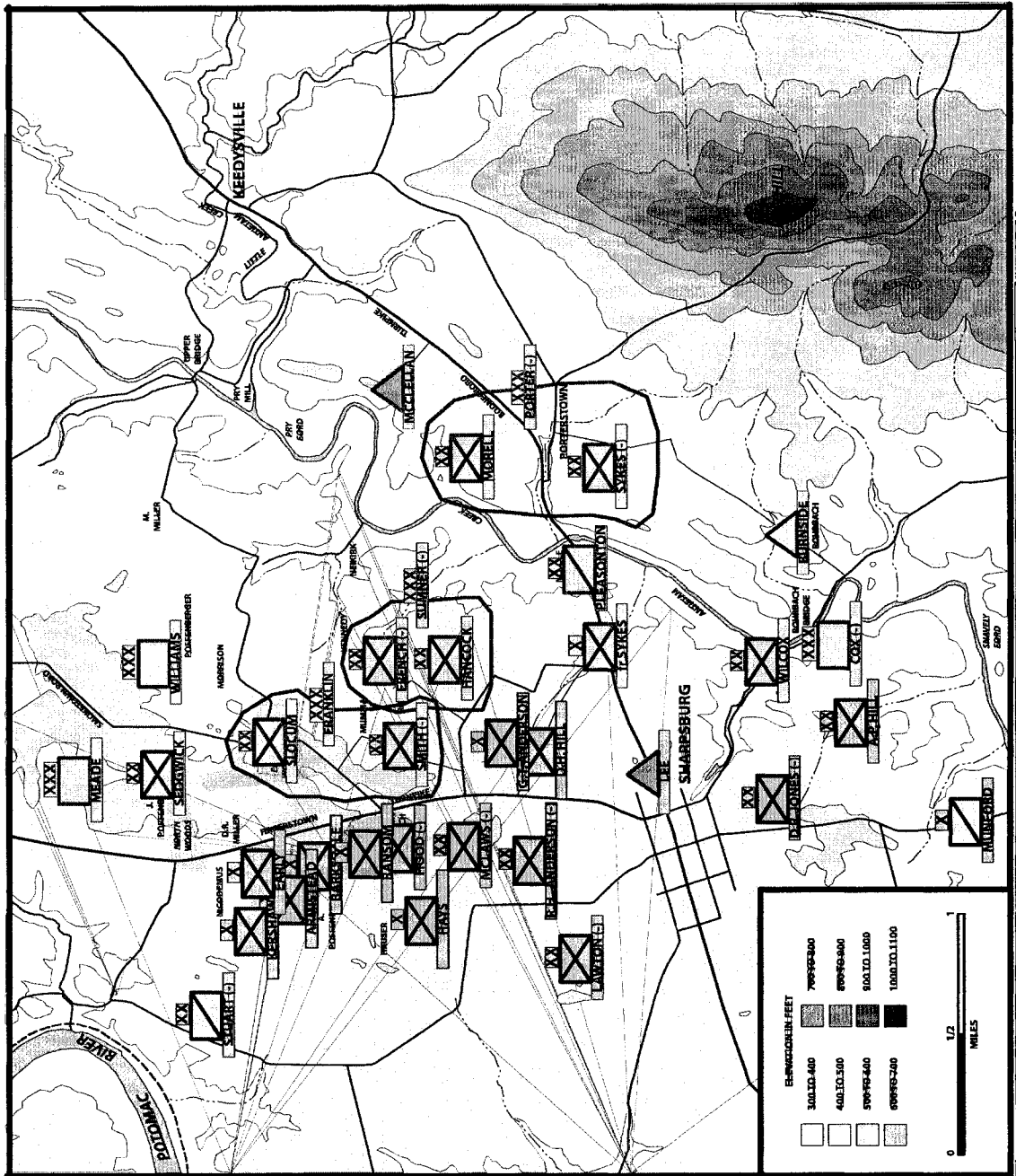


FIGURE 40. POSITIONS OF THE ARMY OF THE POTOMAC, 7 SEPTEMBER 1862.

general's response. "He sees clearly enough that Burnside is pressed—needs no messenger to tell him that. His face grows darker with anxious thought. Looking down into the valley where fifteen thousand troops are lying, he turns a half-questioning look on Fitz-John Porter, who stands by his side, gravely scanning the field. They are Porter's troops below, are fresh and only impatient to share in this fight. But Porter slowly shakes his head, and one may believe that the same thought is passing through the minds of both generals. 'They are the only reserves of the army; they cannot be spared.'"⁶³

Both McClellan and Porter at this point mounted and started off for the left followed by their staffs and Smalley. Along the way, they were overtaken by a courier with a message from Burnside requesting reinforcements. In the message, Burnside warned that if reinforcements were not sent immediately "I cannot hold my position half an hour." According to Smalley, McClellan glanced toward the west at the setting sun and then told the messenger, "Tell Gen. Burnside this is the battle of the war. He must hold his ground till dark at any cost. I will send him Miller's battery. I can do nothing more. I have no infantry." The courier started off smartly, but McClellan quickly called him back and added to the message. "Tell him if he *cannot* hold his ground, then the bridge, to the last man!—always the bridge! If the bridge is lost, all is lost." With this final pronouncement, McClellan turned his horse around, and in the rapidly gathering darkness led his staff back to the army's main headquarters in Keedysville.⁶⁴

⁶³ Smalley, "*Tribune* Narrative," 472.

⁶⁴ Smalley, "*Tribune* Narrative," 472; Strother, "Personal Recollections," 284.

Once back at headquarters, Strother recalled that he was able to forget the events of the day, get a hearty supper, and settle down into a profound sleep. Not so McClellan, though, who reported that the night “brought with it grave responsibilities. Whether to renew the attack on the 18th or to defer it, even with the risk of the enemy’s retirement, was the question before me.” In this regard, a message was received at headquarters at about sunset from the signal station on Red Hill reporting that enemy forces appeared to be disordered and in retreat. In response, McClellan had Marcy send a copy of the message to Burnside and instruct Burnside that if there was any truth in the report, he was “to push the enemy vigorously” and report the matter to headquarters so that the center might be ordered to advance. Apparently, there was no truth in the report for no additional action was taken, and by 8:20 p.m. instructions were issued, to some commands at least, to go into camp for the night. After this McClellan retired to his tent, and continued to ponder the question of whether or not to renew the attack at first light.⁶⁵

Over on the battlefield, the officers and soldiers of the Second Army Corps lay down with their arms for the fourth night in a row, a night many would never be able to forget. Along the sunken farm lane, the regiments of Richardson’s division found that they would have to spend the night in close proximity to the enemy. William Osborne, the historian of the 29th Massachusetts, remembered that he and his comrades had to remain on the skirmish line in the cornfield just north of the lane “under such a constant fire from

the enemy, that it was impossible to relieve them.” As if this was not enough, the soldiers would have to lay on the open ground all night “listening to the piteous moans and cries for help of the wounded soldiers of the enemy, who were lying about the field between the two lines, and could not be removed nor reached with safety. These sad sounds were occasionally drowned by the crash of musketry and the dismal hissing of bullets.”⁶⁶

To the right of the 29th in Brooke’s brigade, Lieutenant Favill of the 57th New York recorded in his diary that the night grew cold “and to keep off the wind we piled up a rampart of dead men and so spent a wretched night.” The men of the 57th were also tormented by the cries of the wounded lying between the lines, and when they could took it upon themselves to rescue some of those most in need. “Several times,” Favill wrote, “our men hailed the rebel pickets, asking them not to shoot, when the piteous cries of some poor wounded fellow attracted especial notice, and in many cases the friendly Johnnies held their fire, and the victims were brought in.”⁶⁷

Farther north, the regiments of Sedgwick’s division were more fortunate in that they were not in direct contact with the enemy. Still, the historian of the 1st Minnesota would

⁶⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 65; 51, pt. 1, 844; Sears, *McClellan*, 317; Alfred Pleasonton to Randolph B. Marcy, 17 September 1862, Papers of George B. McClellan, Series I, Volume 80, Item 16267, Library of Congress.

⁶⁶ William A. Osborne, *The History of the Twenty-Ninth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Late War of the Rebellion* (Boston: Albert J. Wright, Printer, 1877), 190.

⁶⁷ Josiah Marshall Favill, *The Diary of a Younger Officer Serving with the Armies of the United States During the War of the Rebellion* (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1909), 188-9.

write, "The night after the battle was not a restful one. Each army had out a strong picket line and the pickets were spitting at one another all night." The Minnesotans were also fortunate in that being farther to the rear and removed from the ground where they had fought during the day, they did not have to listen to the supplications of the wounded. What tormented them, though, was the realization that they could do nothing to help "their dead and wounded comrades, who were now either within the Confederate lines or between the two hostile forces."⁶⁸

The worst experiences of the night, undoubtedly, were those of the soldiers who found themselves in the vicinity of or assisting at the makeshift hospitals established only a few hundred yards behind the lines. After becoming separated from the 130th Pennsylvania in the withdrawal from the sunken farm lane, Private Edward Spangler wandered for hours until he at last came across some of the regiment's wounded at a field hospital. "The house, barn and adjacent lawns," he remembered, "were covered with wounded." The scene was one he would never be able to forget:

The sight of hundreds of prostrate men with serious wounds of every description was appalling. Many to relieve their suffering, were impatient for their turn upon the amputation tables, around which were pyramids of severed legs and arms. Others screamed with excruciating pains. A few under the influence of anæsthetics, ripped out a succession of oaths that must have required years of sedulous preparation. Many prayed aloud, while others shrieked in the agony and throes of death. No one can adequately depict this horrible spectacle and pandemonium of distressing and heartrending sounds.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ *History of the First Regiment Minnesota Volunteer Infantry*, 219.

⁶⁹ Edward W. Spangler, *My Little War Experience, with Historical Sketches and Memorabilia* (York, PA: York Daily Publishing Company, 1904), 38-9.

After helping to evacuate some wounded members of their regiment, the 108th New York, back to the Roulette farm where regimental surgeons J.F. Whitbeck and W.S. Ely were operating, George Washburn and his comrade Jim Brodie stayed to help. They found the surgeons “overwhelmed with wounded to care for, not only of the 108th, but of many other regiments.” The most pressing need, at least the need that the two soldiers could help with, was for water. Washburn recalled, “Men wounded in battle become excessively thirsty from excitement and loss of blood. We have given wounded parties a full canteen of water, which they would quickly swallow and ask for more. In the barnyard of the 108th hospital was a large pump, we manned the huge handle thereof vigorously two hours or more for water for the suffering.” It was well after midnight before Washburn and Brodie were able to succumb to their fatigue. They searched for a bit of straw on which to rest and finally found some, only to be told they would be lying down with a dead man whose body was under the straw. Washburn wrote, “We accepted the situation, and tumbled to it without any compunctions, resting as soldiers rest after such [an] extraordinary days work at the rate of a hundred knots a hour or more.”⁷⁰

Perhaps, though, the feelings of the officers and soldiers of the Second Army Corps, whatever their experiences had been that day or their situation that night, were best expressed by Private Ephraim C. Brown of Company C, 64th New York Infantry when he

⁷⁰ George H. Washburn, *A Complete Military History and Record of the 108th Regiment N.Y. Vols., From 1862 to 1894* (Rochester, NY: Press of E.R. Andrews, 1894), 25.

added at the very end of his diary entry for 17 September 1862, the words “the Lord have Mercy.”⁷¹

VI

The most critical command decision made on the afternoon of 17 September was the decision not to renew the offensive on the Federal right. The decision and the responsibility, of course, were entirely McClellan’s, but historians have always maligned Sumner for not renewing the offensive on his own authority, and for later recommending to McClellan that he not renew it. In criticizing Sumner, these historians have focused on his apparent demoralization and loss of courage after the repulse of Sedgwick from the West Woods as the reason for not allowing Franklin to renew the attack on the West Woods, and for convincing McClellan that Federal forces on the right were in no condition to renew the attack.

The account of Sumner’s demoralization stems from several witnesses who saw him on the afternoon of the seventeenth and remarked on his mental state. Franklin reported arriving on the battlefield to find Sumner “at the head of his troops, but much depressed.” Lieutenant Wilson wrote in his autobiography that Sumner’s reactions to the messages he brought from McClellan “indicated a demoralized state of mind, if not a demoralized state of affairs.” Major Nelson H. Davis, another of McClellan’s staff officers and one

⁷¹ Ephraim E. Brown, *The Civil War Diary of Ephraim E. Brown, 1862*, ed. Patricia A. Murphy (Lakeland, FL: By the Editor, 1999), 24.

who had served under Sumner in the old army, thought Sumner very much “affected from the condition of affairs.”⁷²

These accounts, and others, have since been seized on by historians to explain what they see as a lack of determination and action on the part of Sumner on the afternoon of the seventeenth. Palfrey thought Sumner “demoralized by the hard fighting, loss of life, stubborn defense, and dashing offensive action which he had witnessed.” Walker, the historian of the Second Corps, wrote that after the repulse of Sedgwick’s division Sumner lost courage, not physical courage he explains, but the moral courage that “enables the commander coolly to calculate the chances of success or failure.” Sears used the accounts of Franklin, Wilson, and Walker to conclude that Sumner had, perhaps, “seen too much in those terrible minutes in the West Woods,” and Greene described Sumner on the afternoon of the seventeenth as uncharacteristically timid.⁷³

There can be no question but that Sumner was adversely affected by Sedgwick’s repulse from the West Woods. He would have had to be more than human not to have been affected by what he had seen in the West Woods. But as shown in this account of

⁷² Franklin, 597; Wilson, 1:114; Nelson H. Davis to George B. McClellan, 31 January 1876, *Papers of George Brinton McClellan*, Series I, Volume 96, Item 19354-19378, Library of Congress.

⁷³ Francis Winthrop Palfrey, *The Antietam and Fredericksburg*, vol. 5, *Campaigns of the Civil War* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1882), 122; Francis A. Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1887; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Olde Soldier Books, n.d.), 117; Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1983), 272; A. Wilson Greene, “‘I Fought the Battle Splendidly’: George B. McClellan and the Maryland Campaign,” in *Antietam: Essays on the 1862 Maryland Campaign* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1989), 73.

the afternoon of the seventeenth, Sumner did not lapse into a demoralized state of mind that made him ineffective as the commander on the Federal right. To the contrary, Sumner was active, aware of the events going on around him, and in command.

The real question to be asked is whether Sumner made the right decision in not renewing the Federal offensive on the right. Again, historians have presupposed that the Confederate left was so badly damaged after the withdrawal from the sunken road that any renewed Federal effort on the right would have resulted in a decisive Federal victory. But, as shown in this chapter, the picture that was presented to Sumner on the afternoon of the seventeenth was one of continuing Confederate strength in the West Woods and beyond the Federal right. Sumner cannot, therefore, be faulted for making the security of the Federal right his first priority. At the very time that he was arranging Federal brigades and batteries to resist any further Confederate assault, Lee and Jackson were together behind the West Woods discussing the possibility of turning the Federal right, but abandoned the plan because the Federal right was “so strongly defended with artillery,” the very artillery that Sumner himself was ordering into position.⁷⁴

Whether or not a resumption of the offensive on the federal right would have succeeded will always remain problematic. Lee did move every available brigade to the vicinity of the West Woods after the repulse of Sedgwick, even risking the stability of his

⁷⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 151, 820, 956; Joseph L. Harsh, *Taken at the Flood: Robert E. Lee & Confederate Strategy in the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1999), 406-13. The plan for turning the Federal right is mentioned in

own right to do so. Just how strong this made the Confederate left remains a matter of conjecture. It should be noted, as Sumner noted, that the two Federal brigades that did approach the West Woods after the repulse of Sedgwick, Gordon's and Irwin's, were both forced to withdraw because of the volume of fire coming from the woods, and that Greene's two brigades were also driven out of the woods.

Another factor to consider is the ability of the remaining Federal troops to undertake a new offensive. Sumner was clear in that he did not think any renewed offensive could take place except at great risk. He was not the only Federal officer to make that assessment. Meade reported to McClellan on the morning of the eighteenth that he did not think the morale of the First Corps soldiers "as good for an offensive as a defensive movement," and Hancock's assessment of Richardson's division as "too weak to make an attack" has already been noted.⁷⁵

Last, it should be remembered that Sumner did not lose sight of the possibility of renewing the offensive, and took steps to be prepared to do just that should the opportunity present itself. He could not have known of conditions at the Federal center or left, but did know that McClellan's plan was to have the corps of Porter and Cox attack in conjunction with the corps on the right. If success in the center and on the left called for a renewal of the offensive on the right, Sumner was ready for it.

Lee's, Jackson's, and Stuart's official reports. Dr. Harsh provides a complete discussion of what Lee was attempting to do.

⁷⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 66, 279.

McClellan, as the army commander, was the one who had to make the decision as to whether the conditions at the center and on the right justified risking a resumption of the offensive on the right. McClellan, as the army commander, controlled those conditions. He could have, using Porter's and Cox's corps, developed conditions on the battlefield that would have justified renewing the offensive on the right to bring about a decisive Federal victory. This is McClellan's great failure as an army commander at Antietam. He set his army in motion but then allowed the battle to take its course, while he made little effort to control or direct it.

When McClellan finally visited the right of his line during the afternoon of the seventeenth, he might still have engineered a decisive victory by pressing Burnside and Cox to a renewed effort and committing Porter to a move across the Middle Bridge supported by a renewed offensive with all of the forces available on the right,. But in having not controlled the battle to this point, McClellan again declined to take charge of it. Historians of the battle have always made much of McClellan's decision not to commit Porter's corps at the end of the day to support the Ninth Corps as it was being driven back toward the Rohrbach Bridge. This decision, though, was probably correct. The Ninth Corps managed to hold its position without reinforcement, and the commitment of Porter at this time could not have affected the outcome of the battle. McClellan's real and final opportunity to win the battle on the seventeenth was lost when he decided not to create the conditions that would have justified a renewal of the offensive on the right.

CHAPTER 11

CONCLUSION OF THE CAMPAIGN

I

Without a doubt, every soldier and probably most of the officers of the Second Army Corps believed that the battle would recommence with all of the fury of the previous day at first light on the morning of 18 September 1862, and for a while it seemed that such would be the case. In every regiment, the men were gotten up well before dawn and formed in line of battle to be ready for a renewal of the fighting. Adjustments of position were made as necessary. In the 29th Massachusetts in Meagher's brigade, still on the open ground north of the sunken farm lane, this meant sending out Companies C and K to replace Company F on the skirmish line "where they had been terribly exposed" all night. William Osborne, the regimental historian, commented that, "Even in the darkness, the work of relieving the men at the front was attended with great risk. The two lines were less than one hundred yards apart; the enemy were intensely savage, and kept up a random but almost incessant firing." Osborne noted that most of the firing was coming from the orchard south of the farm lane where the 7th Maine had suffered so many casualties the afternoon before. The fire of the rebels from this position affected the whole Federal line north of the lane and gave Companies A and B of the 14th Connecticut a unique opportunity to use their Sharps Rifles which could be effectively loaded and fired from a prone position. As Chaplin Stevens recalled it, these two

companies “ensconced behind perfumed barricades of defunct horses having, as Dr. Jewett used to say, a ‘loud smell,’ did effective work, tumbling many a Johnny out of trees.”¹

Despite the apparent resumption of the fighting, however, the battle the soldiers expected did not erupt. Joseph R.C. Ward in the 106th Pennsylvania noted that there was no general movement of either army because “neither seemed anxious to renew the fight that had cost so much the day before.” Private Roland E. Bowen in the 15th Massachusetts had already come to the same conclusion. In a long letter home recounting his experiences during the campaign he told his uncle, “On the 18th both armies stood and made faces at each other, showing that both sides were used up about as much as they wished to be.” The first order of business, therefore, would be roll call and breakfast. A compatriot of Bowen’s was somewhat dismayed to learn that only 174 men were still with the regiment that morning. As Gilbert Frederick in the 57th New York remembered it, “Breakfast was simple, a cup of coffee, some pork and a few crackers.”²

¹ William A. Osborne, *The History of the Twenty-Ninth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Late War of the Rebellion* (Boston: Albert J. Wright, Printer, 1877), 190; Henry S. Stevens, *Souvenir of Excursion to Battlefields by the Society of the Fourteenth Connecticut Regiment and Reunion at Antietam, September 1891, With History and Reminiscences of Battles and Campaigns of the Regiment on the Fields Revisited* (Washington: Gibson Brothers, Printers, 1893), 62.

² Joseph R.C. Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Regiment, Pennsylvania Volunteers, 2d Brigade, 2d Division, 2d Corps, 1861-1865* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, Jr. & Co., 1906), 115; Roland E. Bowen, *From Ball’s Bluff to Gettysburg . . . And Beyond: The Civil War Letters of Private Roland E. Bowen, 15th Massachusetts Infantry, 1861-1864*, ed. Gregory A. Coco (Gettysburg, PA: Thomas Publications, 1994), 135; Andrew E. Ford, *The Story of the Fifteenth Regiment Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry in the Civil War, 1861-1864* (Clinton, MA: Press of W.J. Coulter, 1898), 59, 211; Gilbert Frederick, *The Story of a Regiment, Being a Record of the Military Services of the Fifty-*

Across Antietam Creek at army headquarters in Keedysville, George McClellan was also thinking in terms of renewing the battle. In his official report, McClellan would describe the night of 17-18 September as one of “anxious deliberation” as he attempted to decide whether or not “to renew the attack on the 18th or to defer it.” Some on McClellan’s staff, however, thought that there was no question as to what should happen in the morning. When David Strother went to bed after his hearty supper on the night of the seventeenth, he was “firmly convinced that we had thrashed Lee soundly, and that he would escape in the night; or, otherwise, we would open the attack at daylight and finish him.” Sometime during the night, however, Strother was awakened by messengers coming and going from McClellan’s tent. At one point, he heard McClellan tell one of the couriers, “They are to hold the ground they occupy, but are not to attack without further orders.” Strother went on to say that he “was so much annoyed and disappointed at hearing this order that I slept but little thereafter. Hesitation is always adverse to fighting, and I feared we would lose the fruits of a victory already achieved.” If Strother was annoyed by hesitation on the battlefield, then the eighteenth of September 1862 might well have been one of the most annoying days of his life.³

Seventh New York State Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865 (Chicago: C.H. Morgan Co., 1895), 98.

³ War Department, *War of the Rebellion: The Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 71 vols. (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1881-1901), series I, vol. 19, pt. 1, 65. Hereinafter cited as OR. All references are to Series I unless otherwise noted. David Hunter Strother, “Personal Recollections of the War,” *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine* 36 (February 1868): 284-5.

The lack of orders to the corps commanders to renew the offensive at first light certainly explains why the battle did not begin anew as the soldiers of the Second Army Corps expected. It was not until 6:00 a.m., six minutes after sunrise, and, therefore, almost a full hour after the eastern sky began to brighten, that any further orders were issued from headquarters. These went to Pleasonton and directed him to send out “small cavalry reconnaissances to the right, left, and front of the position now occupied by this army, and to communicate at once to these headquarters such information as may be obtained in relation to the strength, position, and movements of the enemy.” Clearly, McClellan had no intention of making any decision in haste.⁴

At about 7:15 a.m., as McClellan was just finishing breakfast, Brigadier General Andrew A. Humphreys was shown into McClellan’s tent. McClellan asked Humphreys to join him, and then questioned Humphreys concerning the condition of his division of approximately six thousand men which had just arrived in the vicinity of Keedysville after an all night march from Frederick where it had been the previous afternoon. Humphreys’s division was an entirely new division created hastily at Washington from new regiments on 12 September. It was to be the Third Division of Porter’s Fifth Army Corps and should have left Washington along with the First Division of that corps under Morell. However, when Humphreys, who had previously been on McClellan’s engineering staff, took command on the thirteenth, he found the division lacking rations, forage, equipment, and transportation, and carrying a large number of defective firearms. Accordingly, Humphreys delayed the departure of the division while he worked to

⁴ OR 51, pt. 1, 848-9.

correct these deficiencies. Consequently, the division was just now catching up with the army. During this meeting, Humphreys told McClellan that his men needed only a couple of hours rest and they would be “ready to do their part in the expected encounter.” McClellan, however, told Humphreys that he “had not yet decided whether to renew the battle that morning,” and that Humphreys’s men would get all the rest they needed once they were in position with the rest of Porter’s corps.⁵

As Humphreys departed to return to his division, McClellan sat down at his desk to compose a series of communications that included a telegram to Halleck in Washington, as well as a telegram and letter to his wife. To Halleck he reported that the army still held most of the ground that it had gained the day before, and that he expected the “battle will probably be renewed to-day,” but he gave absolutely no indication as to whether the renewal would result from an initiative on his part or that of the enemy’s. In the letter to his wife, McClellan speculated that in the fighting of the day before the “general result was in our favor, that is to say we gained a great deal of ground & held it. It was a success, but whether a decided victory depends upon what occurs today.” As with Halleck, he gave Mary Ellen no indication as to what he thought might, would, or should occur that day. In fact, he implied that the decision was no longer his to make: “I hope that God has given us a great success. It is all in his hands, where I am content to leave it.” Perhaps the praise, which he went on to mention he was receiving from those around him, was causing him to want to rest on the results of the day before, to not risk a reversal of what he believed he had already won. “Those in whose judgment I rely tell me that I

⁵ OR 19, pt. 1, 370-72; 51, pt. 1, 1005-1006.

fought the battle splendidly & that it was a masterpiece of art.” Moreover, further action on his part might even be something that was now well beyond him physically and emotionally: “I am well nigh tired out by anxiety & want of sleep.”⁶

Despite his wanting physical and emotional condition, or his penchant for leaving the outcome of affairs in the hands of the Almighty, by the time that he finished the letter to Mary Ellen, it was becoming clear that the enemy was not assenting to the judgment of McClellan’s staff concerning his performance of the day before, or to his supposed favorable result in the battle. Reports were now beginning to come in indicating that the enemy was making no attempt to leave Maryland, and that they might even be preparing to resume the offensive themselves. A signal message received from Sumner at about this time said that although all was still quiet “the enemy’s pickets are in front of me.” More ominously, Burnside was requesting an additional division just to hold his position, or to enable him to withdraw safely to the east side of Antietam Creek should he be attacked by superior forces. McClellan would later write that General Burnside “gave me the impression that if he were attacked again that morning, he would not be able to make a very vigorous resistance.”⁷

At this point, McClellan decided to leave army headquarters in order to confer with his corps commanders as to what should be done. Based on Burnside’s request for reinforcements, and also because the battle of the previous afternoon had ended there

⁶ OR 19, pt. 2, 322; George B. McClellan, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865*, ed. Stephen W. Sears (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 469.

⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 66, 134.

precariously, McClellan first rode to the left to visit Burnside at his headquarters.

This certainly gave Burnside the opportunity to again impress upon McClellan the dire circumstances of the divisions of the Ninth Corps on the west side of the stream and their need for reinforcement. Thinking defensively now, and not at all about any possibility of renewing the attack of the previous afternoon, McClellan decided to send Morell's division of the Fifth Corps to Burnside, since it could be replaced in the center by Humphreys's newly arrived division. Burnside, however, was restricted in how he could use this division. It was to be "placed on this side of the Antietam, in order that it might cover the retreat of his own corps from the other side of the Antietam should that become necessary, at the same time it was in position to re-enforce our center or right if that were needed."⁸

Having settled things with Burnside, at least for the time being, McClellan rode north past the Pry house, where his headquarters had been the day before, crossed Antietam Creek via Pry Ford, and then went west to Sumner's headquarters on the Joseph Poffenberger farm where he conferred with Sumner, Meade, and others. Sumner was opposed to a renewal of the offensive on the eighteenth, as he had been on the afternoon of the seventeenth. Later, in testimony before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, Sumner explained that the battle of the seventeenth "had been a very severe action— uncommonly severe. My own corps lost something over 5,000 men that day in killed and wounded, and some of the other corps lost nearly as much. Troops are not exactly prepared to make a rapid pursuit the next day after such a battle as that." Sumner also

⁸ OR 19, pt. 1, 66.

told the congressmen that McClellan was expecting to receive significant reinforcements during the day, while he knew that the enemy would not be reinforced. “Knowing that these re-enforcements [sic] were on the march from Washington, I thought it was prudent for the general [McClellan] to halt a little after that severe action until his re-enforcements came up.”⁹

Of the group meeting with McClellan on the Poffenberger farm that morning, Sumner was not alone in thinking that the army was not in condition to resume the offensive. The new commander of the First Army Corps, George G. Meade, told McClellan that he could count only 6,729 men present for duty, where the corps should have had over 13,000. Meade went on to tell McClellan that he did not believe this low number reflected just casualties from the day before, but that “a considerable number of men are still in the rear, some having dropped out on the march, and many dispersing and leaving yesterday during the fight.” Given some little time, these men would return to their places in the ranks. Meade did, however, stress that he thought the soldiers could and would defend their present position, but a resumption of the offensive would be questionable at best. “To resist an attack in our present strong position I think they may be depended on, and I hope they will perform [their] duty in case we make an attack, though I do not think their morale is as good for an offensive as a defensive movement.”¹⁰

⁹ Strother, “Personal Recollections,” 285; Congress, Senate, Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, 3 pts., 37th Cong., 3rd sess., 1863, Rep. Com. 108, pt. 1, 369.

¹⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 66

After a considerable amount of time spent conferring with this group, McClellan and his entourage remounted and rode over to the East Woods where they found Franklin, Smith, and Slocum. Franklin, whose Sixth Army Corps had not been as heavily involved in the battle of the seventeenth as the other corps, was more positive, especially since he was expecting the arrival of Couch's division from Pleasant Valley. At some point during the afternoon of the seventeenth, Franklin had pointed out to McClellan Nicodemus Heights which had been used by the Confederates at least twice on the seventeenth as an artillery position. This had helped convince McClellan, Sumner and others that there was a significant threat to the Federal right. Franklin recommended to McClellan that the hill be occupied and Federal batteries placed on it. From that position, he believed, the batteries could drive the Confederates from their stronghold in the West Woods and "uncover the whole left of the enemy." According to Franklin, McClellan had actually given him permission to make an attack on the hill on the morning of the eighteenth, but then had countermanded the orders during the night.¹¹

Franklin now told McClellan that the Confederates continued to occupy the West Woods in strength with both infantry and artillery, and that during the night they had brought up some two thousand reinforcements and a supply of ammunition. Nevertheless, Franklin still urged McClellan to allow him to mount an operation from the right to secure Nicodemus Heights and drive the Confederates from the woods.

¹¹ Strother, "Personal Recollections," 285; *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 627; William B. Franklin, "Notes on Crampton's Gap and Antietam," *North to Antietam*, vol. 2, *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel (New York: Century, 1887-1888; reprint, New York: Castle Books, 1956), 597.

McClellan, however, was non-committal and soon left Franklin to go back to his own headquarters at Keedysville without leaving any specific orders for his corps commanders other than to continue to hold and strengthen their present positions as best they could. McClellan had made his decision, there would be no resumption of the offensive on the eighteenth.¹²

In his final report on the campaign to the War Department, McClellan explained his decision by saying that after “a full and careful survey of the situation and condition of our army, the strength and position of the enemy, I concluded that the success of an attack on the 18th was not certain.” Among the factors that McClellan gave as the reason for his decision, foremost was that “the troops were greatly overcome by the fatigue and exhaustion attendant upon the long continued and severely contested battle of the 17th, together with the long day and night marches to which they had been subjected during the previous three days.” He cited the fact that all of the First Corps and Sedgwick’s division had “after fighting most valiantly for several hours, been overpowered by numbers, driven back in great disorder, and much scattered, so that they were for the time somewhat demoralized.” Even Sumner, he pointed out, did not believe Sedgwick’s division, perhaps the best in the army, “in proper condition to attack the enemy vigorously the next day.” In addition, the troops were hungry and without rations because the supply trains of the corps were still well to the rear, and it would take time to bring up and issue provisions for the troops and forage for the animals. Ammunition was

¹² William B. Franklin to George B. McClellan, 18 September 1862, Papers of George B. McClellan, Series I, Volume 80, Item 16282, Library of Congress; *Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, pt. 1, 627.

also a problem, particularly for the artillery. “A large number of our heaviest and most efficient batteries,” McClellan would write, “had consumed all their ammunition on the 16th and 17th, and it was impossible to supply them until late on the following day.” Lastly, by the nineteenth, McClellan expected to be reinforced by some fourteen thousand men, primarily Couch’s and Humphrey’s divisions, who would be in position to renew the offensive on the nineteenth, and possibly by thousands of militia he believed to be on the march from Pennsylvania under the command of General John Reynolds.¹³

Despite the logic behind this decision, McClellan fully understood that he would probably be criticized for letting pass an opportunity to destroy the opposing army, bringing the war to a successful conclusion. He therefore included in his final report a statement which said:

I am aware of the fact that under ordinary circumstances a general is expected to risk a battle if he has a reasonable prospect of success; but at this critical juncture I should have had a narrow view of the condition of the country had I been willing to hazard another battle with less than an absolute assurance of success. At that moment—Virginia lost, Washington menaced, Maryland invaded—the national cause could afford no risks of defeat. One battle lost and almost all would have been lost. Lee's army might then have marched, as it pleased, on Washington, Baltimore, Philadelphia, or New York. It could have levied its supplies from a fertile and undevastated country, extorted tribute from wealthy and populous cities, and nowhere east of the Alleghanies [sic] was there another organized force able to arrest its march.¹⁴

Some in the Second Army Corps would have agreed with McClellan’s assessment of the situation of the army and the great risk that he would be taking if he chose to renew the battle on the eighteenth. Captain D.P. Coyngnam in his history of the Irish Brigade

¹³ OR 19, pt. 1, 65-66.

¹⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 65.

would write that given the “demoralized state of the army after Pope’s campaign, and the short time McClellan had to reorganize it and fit it out with the necessary supplies, we must feel grateful for his signal victory.” Coyngnam considered Antietam the most important battle of the war because a defeat of the army there, he believed, would surely mean the fall of the national capital, and, therefore, he applauded McClellan’s decision because “the national cause could suffer no risk of defeat.”

But not everybody agreed with McClellan’s decision. Charles D. Page in writing the history of his regiment, the 14th Connecticut, commented, “The army though jaded and worn by the terrible experiences of the week would, however, have responded to a call for a further attack cheerfully.” But perhaps it was T.N. Rownsdale of the 14th Indiana who expressed the most common sentiment, especially among the enlisted soldiers, when he wrote for his son years after the battle, “we thought we had inlisted [sic] to fight and that the presence of a Confederate Army was sufficient provocation[,] but it was not to be.”¹⁵

II

Since there would be no resumption of the battle on the eighteenth, the attention of the soldiers of the Second Army Corps was turned to more immediate matters, collection and treatment of the wounded, burial of the dead, and notification of those at home of the

¹⁵ D. P. Conyngham, *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns* (Boston: Patrick Donahoe, 1869; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1987), 317; Charles D. Page, *History of the Fourteenth Regiment, Connecticut Volunteer Infantry* (Meriden, CT: Horton Printing Co., 1906; reprint, Gaithersburg, MD: Ron R. Van Sickle Military Books, 1987), 58; T.N. Rownsdale, “Story of Antietam, As Told to My Son,” TMs (photocopy), p. 6, Unit Files, Antietam National Battlefield, Sharpsburg, MD.

survival or death of their loved ones. Under normal circumstances the return of daylight should have greatly facilitated undertaking these tasks, but these were anything but normal circumstances. The two armies remained in close contact with one another, each expecting a momentary resumption of the battle, and so the soldiers on the skirmish lines of both sides nervously fired in the direction of any movement that they could detect. Under these conditions it remained a matter of great risk and even proved impossible in very many cases to collect the wounded or bury the dead who were between the lines or even in close proximity to the front lines, unless some informal arrangement could be made between the pickets. But this would not always be possible. Lieutenant Walter Gale of the 15th Massachusetts, which was still in the vicinity of the North Woods, reported that along with others he “made three attempts to get across to those who were left behind, but the enemy refused to grant this privilege.” Private George Beidelman of the 71st Pennsylvania, which was on the Poffenberger farm supporting a battery and not far from the 15th, noted in an ongoing letter to his father that while the wounded were being collected and taken away as fast as possible “a squad from our regiment endeavored to enter the rebel lines, and bring away any of our wounded and dead that might be left; but were refused permission on the plea that too many irresponsible parties were going around for the purpose.”¹⁶

At times, however, efforts to make informal arrangements for the collection of the wounded and burial of the dead were somewhat more successful. In the 64th New York,

¹⁶ Ford, 205; George W. Beidelman, *The Civil War Letters of George Washington Beidelman*, ed. Catherine H. Vanderslice (New York: Vantage Press, 1978), 103.

which was just north of the sunken road, Ephraim Brown and William Wimple were detailed to collect some of the regimental dead for proper burial. The body of their friend, Ephraim Green, lay on a small ridge close to the enemy's lines. The two men decided they would raise a white flag and go out and get Green's remains. When they got out there and picked up the body, however, they were shot at five times. Brown remembered it being "a close call; but we would not drop him if we fell by his side." Remaining undaunted, they went back and retrieved the bodies of Norman Foster, William Fuller, and John Orr, in the same way, and then buried all four under a large apple tree on the Roulette farmstead and "wrote & telegraphed to their Parents where they could be found."¹⁷

Incidents such as this one—and there must have been dozens more which went unrecorded—soon began to give many the impression that there was a general truce between the two armies, though no such arrangement existed or was even contemplated by either army commander. Captain Andrew Cowan, whose Sixth Corps battery was still in the vicinity of the East Woods, reported, "On the 18th a flag of truce prevented further action." One incident in the vicinity of the sunken road, though, did lead to a formal exchange between general officers. It began in front of the 5th New Hampshire where a wounded Confederate officer in the cornfield south of the lane continually begged for assistance. "At last, Colonel Cross [the regimental commander], moved deeply by these appeals, procured a canvas stretcher, and with the assistance of some of his men, went to

¹⁷ Ephraim E. Brown, *The Civil War Diary of Ephraim E. Brown, 1862*, ed. Patricia A. Murphy (Lakeland, FL: By the Editor, 1999), 24.

the officer's aid." Although this party crept forward through the rows of corn with great caution, a portion of the white canvass of the stretcher was at some point raised above the top of the corn and was mistaken by the Confederates, perhaps hopefully, for a flag of truce. Before long Brigadier General Richard Pryor, commanding Confederate forces in the vicinity of the sunken road, appeared in front of the road under his own flag of truce. Hancock dispatched Meagher to see what Pryor wanted only to learn that Pryor was not asking for a truce, but thought that the Federals were. As Hancock reported it, it was a misunderstanding that "had arisen on account of an unauthorized arrangement which had been made by the pickets of the opposing forces (our own particularly in fault), ostensibly for the purpose of collecting the wounded between our lines."¹⁸

This misunderstanding concerning the existence of a truce persisted. The exchange between Pryor and Meagher may have been witnessed by Private Hemmingen of the 130th Pennsylvania as he helped with the wounded at the regimental hospital on the Roulette farm. Hemmingen recorded in his diary seeing "two Confederate Officers with a white flag ride in the direction of McClellan's Head quarters [sic]." He then heard "that Lee had asked for a cessation of hostilities for 12 hours to bury his dead. And that it was granted." This same misconception existed on the rebel side for a little later a Confederate lieutenant colonel appear across from the lane with yet another white flag. Hancock again sent Meagher to learn the meaning of the flag. When Meagher confronted the Confederate officer, he was told, as Hancock reported it, "that the flag was intended to cover the operations of collecting the wounded and burying the dead, it being supposed

¹⁸ Osborne, 191; OR 19, pt. 1, 280-1, 405.

that a truce existed by an arrangement which had been made on our right.” Hancock went on to say that the officer was immediately informed that there was no truce, and that “in a few minutes hostilities recommenced.” Still, not everyone got the word and shortly enemy soldiers appeared in the cornfield south of the sunken road for the purpose of collecting the dead. Just as five of these men approached the Federal picket line, Confederate sharpshooters let loose from Piper’s orchard and the five in the burial party were promptly taken as prisoners of war. As Hancock put it, “A good deal of this uncertainty, no doubt arose from similar operations on our right, rendering it doubtful on both sides whether or not a truce existed.”¹⁹

The wounded between the lines or behind the enemy’s lines who could not be retrieved in many cases suffered grievously. Many of the wounded of Sedgwick’s division found themselves in just such a predicament. Sergeant Jonathan Stowe of the 15th Massachusetts had to lay unaided in the West Woods all night, unable to move. His pain, however, did not keep him from writing in his diary on the eighteenth. “How I suffered last night. It was [the] most painful of anything [I] have ever experienced. My leg must be broken for I cannot help my self [sic] scarcely any. I remember talking and groaning the whole night. Many died calling for help.” At about 10:00 a.m., Stowe was carried to the rear by a party of Confederates “who showed much kindness but devoted

¹⁹ John D. Hemmingen, “Diary of John D. Hemmingen, Company E, 130th Pennsylvania,” TMs (typescript), 18 September 1862, Michael Winey Collection, Military History Institute, Carlisle, PA; OR 19, pt. 1, 280-1.

much time to plundering the dead bodies of our men at the same time that [they] furnish water to a comrade—Water very short. We suffer much, very much in want of it.”²⁰

Like Stowe, Luke Bicknell of the First Company, Massachusetts Sharpshooters attached to the Stowe’s regiment, was wounded three times and left behind in the West Woods. His experience, however, left him somewhat more comfortable, even if it was, at one point it, more terrifying. Shortly after being wounded, he was given water by one Confederate soldier, but then had to be saved by a passing Confederate general from being bayoneted by another. Late in the day, he was picked up by a Confederate ambulance and taken to the rear where he was laid in a haystack and given brandy, but still “lay stupid except when aroused” throughout the eighteenth.²¹

Many of the worst experiences of those who lay between the lines or behind the lines would never be recorded or related. One that was, is the story of Milford N. Bullock, Company K, 34th New York, whose body was eventually retrieved by the members of his company. “The position in which he was lying indicated the painful circumstances of his death. He was lying on his back, his rifle by his side. The ramrod of his gun was in his hand, the lower end against the trigger of the gun, and the muzzle of the gun at his head. It appeared at the time that the wound he had received had not been sufficient to

²⁰ Jonathan P. Stowe, *Diary*, 18 September 1862. TMs (photocopy), Fifteenth Massachusetts Unit File, Antietam National Battlefield, Sharpsburg, MD.

²¹ Luke Emerson Bicknell, *The Sharpshooters: First Company, Massachusetts Volunteer Sharpshooters, 19 August 1861 - 18 July 1863* (Boston: Massachusetts Historical Society, 1985), 51-54.

cause instant death; but being in mortal agony, he had contrived to end his sufferings by taking his own life. He had placed the gun by his side, the muzzle at his head, and by means of the ramrod had succeeded in discharging it.” The thought of what had happened to Bullock was so painful to the members of his company, that at the suggestion of their commander, Captain Northup, no mention of the incident was made until Lieutenant Louis N. Chapin wrote the history of the regiment some forty years later.²²

Although the temperature on the eighteenth reached only to 79°, the soldiers remember the day as being a hot one, making it all the more imperative that the dead be interned as quickly as possible. Lieutenant Samuel Fiske of Company K, 14th Connecticut wrote home that the air grew “terribly offensive from the unburied bodies; and a pestilence will speedily be bred if they are not put under ground.” In the 14th Indiana, Private Rownsdale recalled that “we gathered our dead and buried them in a garden wrapped [sic] in their blankets, placed side by side in a long trench with cracker box lids for headboards.” Private J. Polk Racine of Company I, 5th Maryland remembered burying the dead that day as “the most disagreeable day’s work of my life.” He and three companions used fence rails to pick up the bodies and carry them to the burial trenches. “We take hold of the ends of the rail, and walk to the ditch; get two on each side. Then Pacer, who is the fussiest, yells, ‘Let him go,’ and he goes with a thud, just as he was picked up—all over blood, his broken leg, or arm, or neck, all doubled

²² Louis N. Chapin, *A Brief History of the Thirty-Fourth Regiment, N.Y.S.V.* (New York, 1903), 69.

under him.” Lieutenant Hitchcock of the 132nd Pennsylvania noted this apparent irreverence with which the dead were “planted,” especially the enemy dead. “The work was rough and heartless, but only comporting with the character of war. The natural reverence for the dead was wholly absent.” He excused this conduct, though, because he believed the soldiers’s attitude “was not the fruit of debased natures or degenerate hearts on the part of the boys, who knew well it might be their turn next, under the fortunes of war, to be buried in like manner, but it was recklessness and thoughtlessness, born of the hardening influences of war.”²³

In the rear of the lines the frantic work of treating the wounded continued. On towards evening, Lieutenant Hitchcock got the opportunity to see a field hospital up close when he went back to the Roulette farm to see the body of his colonel and visit with some of the wounded of his regiment. “A hospital tent had been hurriedly erected and an old house and barn utilized. . . . Outside of the hospital were piles of amputated arms, legs, and feet, thrown out with as little care as so many pieces of wood.” Wounded men he found filled every space laying on piles of straw and hay. “The poor fellows were lying so thickly that there was scarce room for the surgeon and attendants to move about among them.” The surgeons, he thought, were doing everything possible for those that

²³ Joseph L. Harsh, *Sounding the Shallows: A Confederate Companion for the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 2000), 21; Samuel Fiske, *Mr. Dunn Browne’s Experiences in the Army* (Boston: Nichols & Noyes, 1866), 49; Rownsdale, 6; J. Polk Racine, *Recollections of a Veteran, or Four Years in Dixie* (Elkton, MD: Appeal Printing Office, 1894; reprint, Maryland Bicentennial Committee of Cecil County), 48-9; Frederick L. Hitchcock, *War from the Inside: The Story of the 132nd Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry in the War for the Suppression of the Rebellion, 1862-1863* (Philadelphia, J.B. Lippincott, 1904; reprint, Alexandria, VA, Time-Life Books, 1985), 71-2.

need their help, “yet all that could be done with the limited means at hand seemed only to accentuate the appalling need.”²⁴

As there was no renewal of the battle, the work of treating the wounded and burying the dead continued throughout the afternoon of the eighteenth. Sergeant John Rhodes of Battery B, 1st Rhode Island Light Artillery (Hazard’s battery) remembered that “in the afternoon quite a smart shower of rain passed over us, cooling the air a little, and lessened the stench arising from the dead horses.” While the rain no doubt alleviated the discomforts of some, it just as assuredly intensified that of others, especially the wounded who now faced the coming of night wet and cold. Sergeant Rhodes noted that “thus the day closes, and night shuts in the scene of carnage, leaving many thousand men, helpless and bathed in blood upon the field, to watch for the return of light, and wait for removal and the dressing of their wounds. Who can imagine the suffering of that night, and the work for the surgeons on the morrow?”²⁵

III

The historian of the 14th Connecticut would write of the night of 18-19 September 1862 that it “was about as uncomfortable as that which preceded it.” The men of the 14th were still laying in the plowed field north of the sunken farm lane, wet through from the previous afternoon’s rain, entirely without the benefit of overcoats, blankets, or tents, and

²⁴ Hitchcock, 72-3.

²⁵ John H. Rhodes, *The History of Battery B, First Regiment Rhode Island Light Artillery in the War to Preserve the Union, 1861-1865* (Providence: Snow & Farnham, Printers, 1894), 125.

subject to being fired on by rebel pickets only a few yards in front of them. Their only solace that long night came from Commissary-Sergeant J.W. Knowlton who managed to bring one of the regiment's light wagons across Antietam Creek filled with provisions to refresh the men of his regiment "as far as a limited supply would admit."²⁶

A mile or so farther to the northwest in the vicinity of the East Woods, the men of the 71st Pennsylvania had a peaceful night, even though they "expected to be called upon as there was considerable picket firing on our left and not far off." Throughout the night, they constantly heard "a great noise and commotion . . . in the direction of the rebel lines, as if wagon trains were moving." A little farther to the north on the Joseph Poffenberger farm, the men of the 20th Massachusetts could also hear "the enemy moving all the night of the 18th, and were certain that they were retreating." Reports of what they were hearing were passed up the chain of command, "but nothing was done until we were advanced as skirmishers on the morning of the 19th, and found that the enemy had gone." At sunrise, Private Beidelman of the 71st wrote his father that "it turns out this morning that they have really fallen back, but we do not know how far." At 8:00 a.m. he would note the regiment was up and "ready to march again. I suppose in their pursuits."²⁷

Back down at the sunken farm lane a few hundred yards to the right of the 14th Connecticut, the men of the 57th New York passed the night shivering "again without other protection than a pretty thin blanket." They, like the men of the 14th, were

²⁶ Page, 47, 49.

²⁷ Beidelman, 103; George A. Bruce, *The Twentieth Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861-1865* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1906), 175.

apparently unaware of any movement of the enemy until “at eight o’clock the next morning, . . . the men on the skirmish line, suspecting by the stillness in front that something was up, advanced and found the enemy gone. Immediately,” according to Lieutenant Favill, “the men stood up and all was excitement.” The skirmish line of the 14th Connecticut also discovered at dawn that no enemy appeared to be in their front, and the line “advanced for over half a mile without meeting opposition.” As much of a relief as it must have been for the men of the 14th to find the enemy gone, the greater relief was that after thirty-six hours of laying flat in a plowed field “now we could stand upright and look around us.”²⁸

Reports from the skirmish line of a possible enemy withdrawal did not go unnoticed or unheeded at Second Army Corps headquarters. At 11:30 p.m. on the night of the eighteenth, Sumner sent the first dispatch to army headquarters alerting McClellan to the possibility that the enemy was beginning to withdraw. Sumner’s dispatch mentioned in particular that the enemy’s artillery was withdrawing to the west, and that in this withdrawal the rebels were felling trees behind themselves.²⁹

This news almost certainly did not come as a surprise to McClellan, who had already considered that that was exactly what might occur during the night. Although he would later claim in his official report of the campaign that on the eighteenth “orders were given

²⁸ Josiah Marshall Favill, *The Diary of a Younger Officer Serving with the Armies of the United States During the War of the Rebellion* (Chicago: R.R. Donnelley & Sons Company, 1909), 189.

²⁹ OR 19, pt. 2, 331; 51, pt. 1, 849-50, 852. Sumner’s dispatch of 11:30 p.m. has not been found, but essence of what was in that dispatch can be determined from the contents of the dispatches from Marcy to Sumner, Pleasonton, Franklin and Meade, and Porter.

for a renewal of the attack at day light [sic] on the 19th,” those orders amounted to little more than telling the corps commanders on the right, Sumner, Franklin, and Meade, that they should push their “pickets forward at an early hour in the morning to ascertain whether the enemy is in force in your front.” The closest that McClellan came to giving an actual attack order was to tell Franklin that he should send forward two companies of infantry supported by a brigade to seize Nicodemus Heights, and to “hold your whole corps in readiness to support the brigade, should this be required.” Once this movement was successful, Franklin was to “make such dispositions with your infantry and artillery as may be required to hold the position and to drive the enemy out of the adjacent wood [West Woods].” Sumner was to support this operation by replacing in line whatever troops Franklin might use.³⁰

McClellan’s response to Sumner’s 11:30 p.m. warning of the enemy’s withdrawal was to alert the corps commanders at 4:00 a.m.—Sumner included—to push forward their picket lines, and, if the enemy did indeed appear to be withdrawing, they were to mass their commands and be prepared to move in any direction. Pleasonton was to do the same, and also “to send out small cavalry detachments on the various roads leading from our position in the direction of the enemy’s retreat, to ascertain the nature and degree of the obstructions therein.” Sumner, as already noted, did indeed push forward the pickets of the Second Army Corps at first light, and at 7:30 a.m. reported to

³⁰ OR 19, pt. 1, 67; 51, pt. 1, 847, 848; War Department, Randolph B. Marcy to Edwin V. Sumner, 18 September 1862, Second Army Corps Telegrams Received, 1862-65, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 45, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

McClellan, "My troops are massed & ready for anything. My pickets report they are on the river directly in my front & no enemy to be seen."³¹

If, as he noted in his letter home to his father, Private Beidelman of the 71st Pennsylvania believed that the disappearance of the enemy and the preparations of his regiment to march "again" were the beginnings of a determined pursuit by the Army of the Potomac, he was to be disappointed. At 8:00 a.m., the same time that Beidelman was writing his father, McClellan wired his wife that the enemy had abandoned the field leaving behind all of his dead and wounded. At 8:30 a.m., he wired the same news to the General-in-Chief in Washington adding, "I do not yet know whether he is falling back to an interior position or crossing the river." In both telegrams, McClellan claimed that the victory was complete, and that he was undertaking a pursuit of the beaten Confederate army. But other than the 4:00 a.m. orders to the corps commanders to push forward their pickets, mass their commands, and be prepared to move in any direction, no orders to move in pursuit were forthcoming from army headquarters that morning. By 10:30 a.m., McClellan received confirmation of the enemy's withdrawal across the river and again wired Halleck. "Pleasanton is driving the enemy across the river. Our victory was

³¹ OR 19, pt. 2, 331; 51, pt. 1, 849-50, 852; Edwin V. Sumner to George B. McClellan, 19 September 1862, *Papers of George Brinton McClellan*, Series I, Volume 80, Item 16356, Library of Congress. In Marcy's dispatch to Sumner at 4:00 a.m. he mentioned that the 11:30 p.m. was just received.

complete. The enemy is driven back into Virginia. Maryland and Pennsylvania are now safe.”³²

In telling Mary Ellen and Halleck that his victory was “complete,” McClellan did not mean that he had beaten Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia to the extent that he could pursue it into Virginia and destroy it as an effective fighting force. Other than the arrival of Humphreys’s division of new troops and the return of Couch’s division, little had actually changed since the previous day. McClellan had believed throughout the campaign in Maryland that he faced a very substantial Confederate force. In his final report of the campaign he would list the strength of his foe prior to the Battle of Antietam as 97,445 men “present and fit for duty,” supported by four hundred guns. His own force at Antietam he reported as 87,164, exclusive of Humphreys’s division. His success, McClellan believed, was that he had forced the enemy to give up his plan of campaign and leave Maryland, and in accomplishing that mission he had caused the enemy to sustain a greater loss than his own.³³

What pursuit McClellan did authorize on the morning of the nineteenth was conducted by Pleasonton and his cavalry accompanied by several batteries of the Reserve Artillery under Colonel William Hays. Late in the morning, Pleasonton reported that the last of the Army of Northern Virginia was still in the process of crossing the river “under [the] cover of eight batteries, placed in strong positions upon the elevated bluffs on the

³² Beidelman, 103; George B. McClellan, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, Selected Correspondence, 1860-1865*, ed. Stephen W. Sears (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1989), 469; OR 19, pt. 2, 330.

³³ OR 19, pt. 1, 67.

opposite bank.” McClellan then determined that if some additional damage could be done to the Confederates at little or no risk to the Army of the Potomac, it must be made so. Accordingly, orders were sent to Fitz-John Porter, whose corps was by this time in line west of Sharpsburg on the Shepherdstown pike “to pursue the enemy and give aid to the cavalry brigade, then in advance.” At 11:45 a.m., Franklin was also given instructions to participate in the pursuit as far as the river. Franklin was to move his corps “into such a position that you can establish your batteries so as to enfilade the enemy's columns to as much advantage as possible, without exposing your men to the fire of the enemy's batteries on the other side of the river opposite the ford. Take all the prisoners you can and do the enemy all the damage possible, but do not attempt to cross the river without further orders.”³⁴

At 1:15 p.m., Pleasonton was told by Marcy that McClellan “does not propose to cross the river, and that he does not desire you to do so, unless you see a splendid

³⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 67, 339; 51, pt. 1, 851. It is indeed curious that McClellan would order both Porter and Franklin forward to the same point on the river. No copy of an order to Porter has come to light even though Porter mentions an order in his report. The order to Franklin does appear in the *Official Records* even though Franklin makes no mention of it or any resulting movement in his report or in his article in *Battle and Leaders*. It could be that the order to Franklin in the *Official Records* is actually the order sent to Porter, especially since it specifically directs the establishing of batteries on the Federal bank of the river, and the batteries of the Reserve Artillery had been with Porter's corps throughout the campaign. Colonel Hays, who commanded the Artillery Reserve, and directed his report to Porter, details the batteries that actually became engaged at the river (see OR 19, pt. 1, 342). Hunt in his report also mentions that batteries of the Reserve Artillery were engaged at the river on the nineteenth (see OR 19, pt. 1, 207). The reports of Franklin's battery commanders make no mention of any movement or engagement on the nineteenth.

opportunity to inflict great damage upon the enemy without loss to yourself.”

Clearly, whatever pursuit McClellan might undertake would end at the river.³⁵

What more concerned McClellan on the nineteenth was the possibility that the enemy might have withdrawn to Virginia only to seek an opportunity to immediately reenter Maryland at another point, especially if that would mean drawing McClellan and his army farther away from Washington. This possibility was raised by Halleck in a 12:30 p.m. telegram to McClellan. Halleck told McClellan that “so long as the river remains low there is much danger of a movement below your left. Letters received here give it as a part of Lee's original plan to draw you as far as possible up the Potomac, and then move between you and Washington.” McClellan, however, had already anticipated this possibility. Just fifteen minutes before Halleck released his telegram, McClellan had sent orders to Sumner “to send Banks' corps [Williams], via Rohrersville and Brownsville, toward Harper's Ferry, with instructions to occupy Maryland Heights.” At 3:35 p.m., Sumner responded that the order was received, and “the corps will be put in march at once.”³⁶

³⁵ OR 51, pt. 1, 853.

³⁶ OR 19, pt. 2, 330; Edwin V. Sumner to George B. McClellan, 19 September 1862, *Papers of George Brinton McClellan*, Series I, Volume 80, Item 16354, Library of Congress. The possibility of a return to Maryland by Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia just after recrossing to Virginia on the nineteenth might be considered as absurd by some. However, Dr. Joseph Harsh in his masterly study of Lee in the Maryland Campaign concludes that this was exactly Lee's intention in withdrawing from Maryland in the first place. According to Dr. Harsh, Lee did not abandon his plan to immediately reenter Maryland until sometime “during the night of the twentieth or early on the morning of the twenty-first.” See Joseph L. Harsh, *Taken at the Flood: Robert E. Lee & Confederate Strategy in the Maryland Campaign of 1862* (Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1999), 444, 466.

It was not his left, though, that would give McClellan the greatest concern on the nineteenth, it was his right. At some point, late in the afternoon, McClellan was made aware of a report that placed one thousand enemy infantry with one piece of artillery on the Maryland side of the river at Williamsport. McClellan apparently did not initially take this report as representing a serious threat, and almost certainly not as an early indication that the Confederates were planning to recross the river into Maryland at that point, because his counteractions were relatively weak. At 8:15 p.m., he ordered Couch to send a detachment of two thousand infantry from his division, supported by a battery and four squadrons of cavalry “to surround and capture the troops in possession of the town,” at daylight the following morning. At 9:30 p.m., McClellan had Marcy wire General John F. Reynolds—who had just arrived at Hagerstown with 14,000 Pennsylvania militia—advising him of Couch’s move on Williamsport, and suggesting that “it would be well for you to co-operate with this command by marching down from Hagerstown.” What McClellan did not yet know was that earlier in the day Reynolds had wired Halleck informing him that the militia had refused to go any further than Hagerstown, commenting that “I do not think much can be expected of them—not very much.”³⁷

Having made arrangements to cover the near river crossings on both flanks, McClellan tended to the arrangement of the remainder of his army intending that it would remain in the vicinity of Sharpsburg for some number of days. At 3:30 p.m., Sumner had informed army headquarters that the Second Corps was going into bivouac about a mile

³⁷ OR 19, pt. 2, 332; 51, pt. 1, 851, 852.

north of Sharpsburg. McClellan's response was inform Sumner that he should "select a camp-ground near your present position, with good water, &c., and camp your command." At 8:45 p.m., a circular was issued to all corps commanders informing them of the positions that they were to take up. "The troops of this command will immediately be placed in position as follows, viz: Franklin's corps on Hagerstown pike, Meade's corps between Franklin's and Potomac, Davis to examine country between Hagerstown pike and Potomac in front of Meade, Banks' corps on Franklin's left, Sumner to rest his left on Sharpsburg, Porter to rest his right on Sharpsburg, Burnside to take position on Porter's left, extending his left toward the Potomac."³⁸

As these arrangements were being made, however, the situation at the fords of the Potomac in front of Shepherdstown took an unexpected turn. Upon arriving at the river and relieving Pleasonton, Porter believed that he saw in the situation an opportunity to do the kind of additional damage to the enemy that McClellan was hoping for. Seeing that the enemy's defense of the fords consisted of unsupported artillery, Porter "determined to clear the fords, and if possible, secure some of the enemy's artillery." Accordingly, he deployed the infantry of Morell's and Sykes's divisions along the banks of the river and the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal as skirmishers and sharpshooters, while the artillery of these two divisions and some of the available batteries of the Artillery Reserve were "posted to control the opposite bank." As the concentrated fire of the skirmishers,

³⁸ Edwin V. Sumner to Randolph B. Marcy, 19 September 1862, *Papers of George Brinton McClellan*, Series I, Volume 80, Item 16355, Library of Congress; OR 51, pt. 1, 849, 850. The 8:45 p.m. circular had probably in preparation for some time, because it mentions a position for Banks's corps which was already marching toward Maryland Heights and Harper's Ferry.

sharpshooters, and artillery drove the enemy gunners from their pieces, an attacking party of volunteers under the command of Brigadier General Charles Griffin crossed the river and succeeded in capturing five of the enemy's guns along with "2 caissons, 2 caisson bodies, 2 forges, and some 400 stands of arms." After dark, the attacking party was withdrawn to the Federal side of the river.³⁹

Porter's success caused McClellan to modify he plans for remaining quietly in the vicinity of Sharpsburg. At 10:00 p.m., Marcy informed Pleasonton of Porter's fore ray across the river, and directed him to return to the river at daylight and "push your command forward after the enemy as rapidly as possible, using your artillery upon them wherever an opportunity presents, doing them all the damage in your power without incurring too much risk to your command." Porter had also informed headquarters that he intended to cross the river at daylight, and he was informed of the instructions given to Pleasonton, and told to cooperate with the cavalry.⁴⁰

At this point, however, the threat to the right of the army suddenly became more real and more ominous. Just before 11:00 p.m., a report was received that General J.E.B. Stuart with four thousand cavalry and six pieces of artillery was marching on Williamsport, and that some ten thousand infantry were also on the march toward that place from Winchester. McClellan reacted to this new threat by ordering Couch to Williamsport with his entire division, and by modifying Pleasonton's instructions to have him support Couch with half of the cavalry and two batteries of horse artillery. In

³⁹ OR 19, pt. 1, 339-40.

⁴⁰ OR 19, pt. 2, 331; 51, pt. 1, 853.

addition, Franklin was given orders at 11:45 p.m., that he should hold his “corps in readiness to support this movement if required.”⁴¹

IV

For the Second Army Corps, the nineteenth of September 1862 proved to be the last day of the Maryland Campaign. Porter’s plan for crossing the river early on the morning of the twentieth resulted in a reverse when Confederate infantry suddenly attacked the lead elements of the Fifth Corps in mid-stream and drove them back with substantial loss. Thereafter, neither Porter, Pleasonton, nor McClellan thought about crossing the river in even a limited pursuit of the Confederate army. The threat to the Federal right at Williamsport, though real enough, also proved to be inconsequential. Arriving there at daylight on the twentieth, Couch indeed found the town occupied by Stuart and a substantial force of cavalry, substantial enough that McClellan eventually ordered Franklin to march with his corps to reinforce Couch by daylight on the twenty-first. By the time that Franklin reached the village, however, the Confederate horsemen had voluntarily withdrawn across the river. In these relatively minor crises, Sumner was ordered to hold the corps in readiness to march, but was not called upon to do so.⁴²

After the nineteenth, the soldiers of the Second Corps remained on the battlefield of Antietam for two more days before they were ordered to Harper’s Ferry. Their principle

⁴¹ OR 51, pt. 1, 851, 852, 853.

⁴² OR 51, pt. 1, 854-5; War Department, Second Army Corps Circular, 20 September 1862, Records of the 1st-4th Divisions, 1862-65, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 68, Pt. 2, RG 393, National Archives.

tasks during this time were burying the dead and collecting arms left on the field.

The reports of burials later submitted by the division commanders indicate that during the three days from the nineteenth thru the twenty-first of September 1862, the corps buried 1,589 men, 621 Federals and 968 Confederates. Perhaps by design, the largest number of burials was reported by the new regiments of Morris's brigade, 579 in all, where the next highest total of burials by a brigade was Dana's with 164. When considering these totals, it should also be kept in mind, as Hancock reminded the corps commander in his report, that because of the presence of the enemy on the eighteenth no record of the burials made by the regiments that day were ever made.⁴³

On the twentieth, as required by army regulations, the tri-monthly Consolidated Morning Report of the corps was submitted to army headquarters. These reports show that on that date the aggregate present for duty strength of the corps was 13,604 men, officers and other ranks. This was 3,254 fewer soldiers than the corps had reported present for duty just one month before at Hampton Roads, Virginia, even though four newly recruited infantry regiments and Weber's brigade had been added to the corps during the month of September. At the same time that they were making out their strength reports, the regimental, brigade, and division adjutants were also compiling their casualty reports for the battle. As included in McClellan's final report of the campaign, the corps' loss on 17 September was 63 officers and 820 men killed, 188 officers and 3671 men wounded, and 3 officers and 393 men missing, for a total loss of 5,138, more

⁴³ War Department, Second Army Corps Division Reports of Dead Buried on the Battlefield of Antietam, 25 September 1862, Miscellaneous Records, 1862-65, *Records of U.S. Army Continental Commands*, Entry 70, Pt. 2, Box 4, RG 393, National Archives.

than double the loss of any of the other corps of the Army of the Potomac. Within the corps, the largest number of casualties was suffered by Sedgwick's division, 2,210, followed by French's division, 1,750, and Richardson's division, 1,165. The 15th Massachusetts in Sedgwick's division carried into the battle 606 officers and men, and suffered losses of 65 killed, 255 wounded of whom 43 would eventually die of their wounds, and 24 missing, qualifying it as the fourth highest regimental loss in a single engagement among all Federal infantry regiments throughout the entire war. The seventeenth of September 1862 remains the bloodiest single day of combat in all of American history.⁴⁴

The Second Army Corps would continue to serve as a part of the Army of the Potomac until the conclusion of the war in April 1865. It would play a prominent role in the fighting at Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, Bristoe Station, Mine Run, the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, North Anna, Cold Harbor, Petersburg, Sailor's Creek, and Appomattox, as well as in a host of lesser known and unknown actions. At the end of the war, among its regiments could be found the Federal regiment which sustained the greatest percentage of loss in any one action (1st Minnesota at Gettysburg), the regiment which sustained the greatest numerical loss in any one action (1st Maine Heavy Artillery at Petersburg), and the regiment which sustained the greatest numerical loss during its term of service (5th New Hampshire). The record of the Second Army Corps throughout the war would lead the historian and Civil War veteran William F. Fox to conclude in his

⁴⁴ OR 19, pt. 1, 191-3; pt. 2, 336; William F. Fox, *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War, 1861-1865* (Albany, NY: Brandow Printing Company, 1898; reprint, Dayton, OH: Morningside House, 1985.), 17, 37, 67.

monumental study of unit losses during the war, that the corps “needs no words of praise; its record was unsurpassed.”⁴⁵

The unsurpassed record of the Second Army Corps can be attributed to the character of the volunteer soldiers who filled its ranks from the beginning to the end of the war, and to the leadership of the regular and volunteer officers who were the brigade, division, and corps commanders that organized, trained, and lead the corps in battle, particularly those who were its earliest commanders during the Maryland Campaign.

In the First Division after the Maryland Campaign, Caldwell continued to command his brigade throughout the Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville campaigns. Rising to command the division during the Gettysburg Campaign, he temporarily took command the corps after the wounding of Hancock and again during the Mine Run Campaign, remaining on duty with the corps until March 1864. Meagher continued to command his beloved Irish Brigade through the Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville campaigns, but then resigned in May 1863 when the army threatened to disperse the decimated regiments of the brigade among the other units of the Army of the Potomac. Brooke, who commanded the Third Brigade during the Maryland Campaign as its senior colonel, reverted to command of his regiment—53rd Pennsylvania—during the Fredericksburg Campaign, but then was assigned to command the Fourth Brigade, Second Division. He was wounded at Gettysburg and Cold Harbor and by the end of the war was brevetted to the rank of major general. After being wounded by a shell fragment near the sunken farm lane, the division’s commander, Richardson, was taken to the Pry house where he

⁴⁵ Fox, 3, 17, 26, 36, 67, 69.

lingered for seven weeks before succumbing to his wound on 3 November. His replacement, Hancock, continued to command the division during the Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville campaigns, and commanded the corps at Gettysburg, where he was severely wounded while directing the repulse of the great Confederate assault on the third day. He returned to command the corps through most of 1864, and would be remembered as one the most distinguished Federal commanders of the war.

Of the brigade commanders of the Second Division, Gorman remained with the corps until mid-November when he was assigned to command the District of Eastern Arkansas. Howard, who replaced Sedgwick as division commander during the battle, continued in command of the division through the Fredericksburg Campaign and until he was assigned command of the ill-fated Eleventh Army Corps on 31 March 1863. Dana, who was severely wounded at Antietam, remained incapacitated for months, and although he returned to active duty in July 1863 and was promoted to major general, he never again served with the Second Corps or saw significant field service. The division's commander, "Uncle John" Sedgwick, also recovered from his wounds and returned to active service, but not with the Second Corps. He briefly commanded the Ninth Corps, but then was moved to command of the Sixth Corps which he led at Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, the Wilderness, and up until his death as its commander at Spotsylvania on 9 May 1864, one of only three federal corps commanders killed during the war.

Nathan Kimball in French's division continued in command of his brigade until he was badly wounded at Fredericksburg. After his recovery, he served as a brigade and division commander in the Western Theater. Morris continued to lead his brigade of new

regiments for a brief period, but he was not present at Fredericksburg and a permanent brigade commander was assigned to the brigade after that. The wound that Weber received while leading his brigade at Antietam cost him the use of his right arm, and he saw only limited duty thereafter, although he was the commander of the Harper's Ferry garrison during Early's raid of June and July 1864. The division commander, French, received his promotion to major general in November and commanded the division at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, but then was assigned the command of the Harper's Ferry garrison and, after Gettysburg, command of the Third Army Corps.

Early in October, the Second Corps' commander, Edwin Vose Sumner, the oldest general in either army on active service, requested that he be relieved of command of the corps and reassigned by the War Department to the command of a department in the west where he had spent most of his long and distinguished career as a soldier. In his endorsement of General Sumner's request to Halleck, McClellan pointed out that Sumner "from his age, state of health, and the many exposures he has undergone, I think that it is very doubtful whether he can stand the fatigues of another campaign. His long and faithful service and the extreme gallantry he has so often displayed during this war alike entitle him to the most favorable consideration of the Government. I would regard it as an act of official justice, as well as a personal favor, if the wishes of General Sumner can be complied with."⁴⁶

Sumner's request was granted and on 7 October he turned command of the Second Army Corps over to Darius N. Couch, and departed for the home of one of his daughters

⁴⁶ OR 19, pt. 2, 483-4.

in Syracuse, New York on a leave of absence. Sumner's service as an active field commander, however, was not yet at an end. In early November, Ambrose Burnside, as the new commander of the Army of the Potomac, asked Sumner to return and take command of one of the three grand divisions of the army that Burnside was just then organizing. Sumner's command would be the Right Grand Division which would consist of the Second and Ninth Army Corps, and a division of cavalry. Sumner expertly commanded this organization throughout the Fredericksburg Campaign and at the disastrous Battle of Fredericksburg. It is to Sumner's credit that after witnessing the failed attempt of the Army of the Potomac to break the strong Confederate defensive position on Marye's Heights at Fredericksburg on 13 December, Sumner dissuaded Burnside from making another attempt on the fourteenth.

In January 1863, as Burnside resigned his command of the Army of the Potomac, Sumner again asked for a new assignment as a western departmental commander. His request was granted, and he was given command of the Department of Missouri at St. Louis. It was at this point, however, that the rigors of a year of active campaigning finally took their toll on the health of Edwin Vose Sumner. Again at Syracuse on leave before traveling to his new assignment, Sumner fell ill with a congestion of the lungs that was probably pneumonia, and after five days died on 21 March 1863.

George Brinton McClellan continued on as commander of the Army of the Potomac through October 1862. During that period, he saw his principle duty as being the rebuilding of the corps of the Army of the Potomac in the aftermath of three major campaigns. On 27 September, McClellan wired Halleck, "This army is not now in

condition to undertake another campaign nor to bring on another battle.” He pointed out that the army was deficient in officers, that the old regiments of 1861 were so reduced in strength as to be mere skeletons, and that the new regiments of the summer of 1862 were in need of instruction. He would “hold the army about as it is now, rendering Harper's Ferry secure and watching the river closely, intending to attack the enemy should he attempt to cross to this side,” but an advance into Virginia would have to await the rebuilding of the army.⁴⁷

As McClellan went about rebuilding the Army of the Potomac, both the President and the War Department prodded him to cross the river and undertake a new campaign to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia before the onset of winter. On 6 October, at the direction of the President, McClellan was sent a direct order to “cross the Potomac and give battle to the enemy or drive him south.” Still, McClellan did not advance the Army of the Potomac citing as his reason that “the army was wholly deficient in cavalry, and a large part of our troops were in want of shoes, blankets, and other indispensable articles of clothing, notwithstanding all the efforts that had been made since the battle of Antietam, and even prior to that date, to refit the army with clothing as well as horses.”⁴⁸

It was not until the twenty-sixth of October that McClellan finally began to move the Army of the Potomac across the river for which it was named into Virginia. Even then, the operation took some eight days, and once in Virginia McClellan moved very slowly. It was not until 6 November that the corps of the army were concentrated in and around

⁴⁷ OR 19, pt. 1, 70.

⁴⁸ OR 19, pt. 1, 72, 74.

Warrenton, a mere fifty miles from Harper's Ferry. It was there on the late evening of 7 November during a severe snow storm that McClellan received a visit from General Burnside accompanied by Brigadier General Catharinus P. Buckingham, the War Department Adjutant General. In his pocket, Buckingham carried a copy of War Department General Order Number 182, dated 5 November 1862, which he presented to McClellan. It read, "By direction of the President of the United States, it is ordered that Major-General McClellan be relieved from command of the Army of the Potomac, and that Major-General Burnside take command of that army." Command of the Army of the Potomac during the Maryland Campaign of September 1862 proved to be the last command of George Brinton McClellan.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ OR 19, pt. 2, 545.

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