

Notes from the Little Round Table – Antietam: A Study in Calculated Risk

It had rained the night before, leaving the air humid and misty as dawn broke over Sharpsburg in Hagerstown Valley on September 17, 1862. As the day wore on the skies cleared, and the temperature ranged into the 70s.

While the weather was favorable, the terrain did not appear to be. Most of General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia (AoNV) was arrayed on the west side of Antietam Creek from southeast of Sharpsburg, around the town, and then north along Hagerstown Pike, which followed a low limestone ridge. Both wings of his army were weakened by straggling and illness. With each flank covered by one brigade of Stuart's cavalry division, two divisions of Jackson's Wing covered the northern approach (his third division was still coming up from Harper's Ferry). Longstreet's Wing held the remainder of the line. Facing Lee was a better-equipped army of double his size. Not only was the AoNV without any earthworks, but with the Potomac River curving around close to his rear, he had very little in the way of maneuver room.

The ground around Sharpsburg was rolling farmland, wooded areas, and steep ravines that could hide whole regiments. To his east was Antietam Creek, a tributary of the Potomac flanking the battlefield north to south. The area offered good roads and farm lanes that allowed Lee to use interior lines to move his forces around the battlefield, but the high ridges on the east side of Antietam Creek allowed the larger-caliber Union artillery to sweep the Confederate lines while being out of range of Confederate guns—a situation that led one Confederate artillery officer, Colonel S. D. Lee, to later remark, "Pray that you may never see another Sharpsburg. Sharpsburg was Artillery Hell."

There was only one crossing point over the Potomac River: Boteler's Ford. Rocky and deep, it was downriver of Shepherdstown about 1½ miles. (There had been a highway bridge across the Potomac at Shepherdstown, but a detachment under then-Colonel Thomas Jackson's command had burned it in June 1861.) Lee's right flank was the weakest because Antietam Creek below it was crossable by infantry at several points and "was, therefore, practically 'in the air.'" *[Alexander, 246]*

The Prelude

Just a few weeks earlier Lee had outthought, outmaneuvered, and outfought Maj. General John Pope at the Second Battle of Bull Run and sent his Army of Virginia scurrying to safety in and around Washington City. Lee contemplated what his next move should be. An attack on Washington City was too daunting. It was fortified by a ring of forts and seven Army corps of McClellan's Army of the Potomac (AoP) plus garrison forces—some 160,000 men in all. Moreover, while initially demoralized by recent defeats, McClellan remaining as overall commander buoyed Union spirits. Meanwhile, the Union blockade of Southern ports was reducing export of critical commodities such as cotton and tobacco to England and France.

Lee could not maintain the AoNV in northern Virginia—food and forage was scarce. Nor could he give up swaths of northern Virginia by falling back closer to Richmond. Only field victories could win the war—by reducing the North’s will to fight. So, he decided to take the fight into Maryland and Pennsylvania where he could capture supplies needed by the AoNV, influence Maryland’s stance in the war, keep Union attention away from Richmond, and draw the AoP into a decisive fight. A robust campaign might also influence talks in London and Paris of recognizing the Confederacy.

With the AoNV’s strength increased to some 70,000 on paper (*assigned*, as opposed to *present for duty*), Lee began movement on September 4. McClellan initially was slow to pursue, which reinforced Lee’s mindset.

Moving northwest on the Virginia side of the Potomac, the AoNV began crossing into Maryland by way of White’s Ford near Leesburg, Virginia. The bulk of the AoNV reached Frederick on September 7; the rest on September 8.

Lee had expected the Union garrisons at Martinsburg (some 2,500 men) and Harper’s Ferry (some 10,400) to retreat. They had not. They blocked his line of communications with the Shenandoah Valley, which he needed open if he was to continue his advance northward. He determined that McClellan’s slow pursuit gave him time to split his force to deal with them. He described his plan of operations in Special Order 191:

- Jackson’s Wing would move up Hagerstown Road (the National Road) to Boonsboro then down through Sharpsburg, cross the Potomac, drive the enemy from Martinsburg, and then move down the south side of the Potomac to Harper’s Ferry.
- Longstreet’s Wing would follow Hagerstown Road to Hagerstown.
- D. H. Hill’s division would form the rear guard at Boonsboro.
- Two other divisions, McLaws’s and R. H. Anderson’s, would move through Middletown to Harper’s Ferry and assist in its reduction.
- Walker’s division would move back down and re-cross the Potomac near Point of Rocks and then on up the south side of the Potomac to a supporting position on Loudon Heights east of Harper’s Ferry.

When their missions were completed, the scattered divisions were to reunite in the vicinity of Boonsboro and Hagerstown. Lee, still not expecting an aggressive McClellan, worried only about the potential of Union elements getting between him and the Potomac River. McClellan picked up the pace, however, on September 14, and battles ensued that day at South Mountain at Turner’s, Fox’s, and Crampton’s Gaps. The AoP prevailed in all three.

This changed Lee’s assessment. His ability to gain and maintain the initiative had given him the freedom to control the tenor of the campaign until now. Having watched the defense of South Mountain, he determined that the troops at hand were insufficient to prevent an expected Union attempt to exploit their successes on South Mountain the following morning, which would have put his scattered army in a

compromising situation. He decided to end the campaign in Maryland and withdraw the troops to Virginia by way of Boteler's Ford. [Lang, 11-13]

Lee had expected Harper's Ferry to be surrounded by September 12, but it was September 13 before that happened. Jackson had lost time capturing Martinsburg, and it held out until September 15. With his decision to end the Maryland campaign, he ordered Longstreet's Hood and D.H. Hill divisions to withdraw from South Mountain in the direction of Sharpsburg. McLaws and Anderson were to abandon their positions in Pleasant Valley (northeast of Harper's Ferry) and make their way back to the Virginia side of the Potomac any way they could. Jackson was to abandon his Harper's Ferry operation, and Pendelton, Lee's chief of artillery, was to position batteries three miles west of Boonsboro and send the remainder of the reserve artillery with a small infantry force to cover Boteler's Ford.

Fate intervened. The evening of September 15, Jackson reported that Harper's Ferry had fallen. Lee immediately reversed his planned withdrawal, deciding instead to remain north of the Potomac River. This was a calculated risk.¹ He would confront an enemy he believed to outnumber his army by two to one.

Why choose Sharpsburg to fight?

After considering a march to Hagerstown, Lee decided to make a stand. He first considered doing so at Keedysville but decided that Sharpsburg was a better place. [Noe, 176; Lang, 15] It provided an advantageous position to concentrate his army north of the Potomac should he have the opportunity to continue the campaign northward. The 15 or so square miles in the immediate area were surrounded on three sides by water. Only the northern flank had no such barrier. Antietam Creek to the east provided a natural barrier against McClellan's advance from the east. It was a fairly deep and swift stream with steep embankments common along its course. It had three important bridges and a few fords.

At Sharpsburg, Lee had some 25,000 men. The Confederates at Harper's Ferry might add 14,000 men, but it would take at least a day for these troops to rejoin the army at Sharpsburg. He believed that if he could position his forces well, he could defeat the AoP. Importantly, he believed his men superior to their Union counterparts. One only had to look at the string of AoNV victories. While his men shared his confidence, he seems to have erroneously equated poor leadership with individual soldier performance. Both sides fought heroically.

At Lee's back was the Potomac River. If he was driven back to Boteler's Ford by an aggressive McClellan, it could mean disaster for the Confederates. Still, Lee was reluctant to withdraw from Maryland so soon after his "liberating" entry only a week earlier. And even though his command might be outnumbered, he had confidence that his men could hold their own against the AoP. His decision to engage at Sharpsburg was another calculated risk.

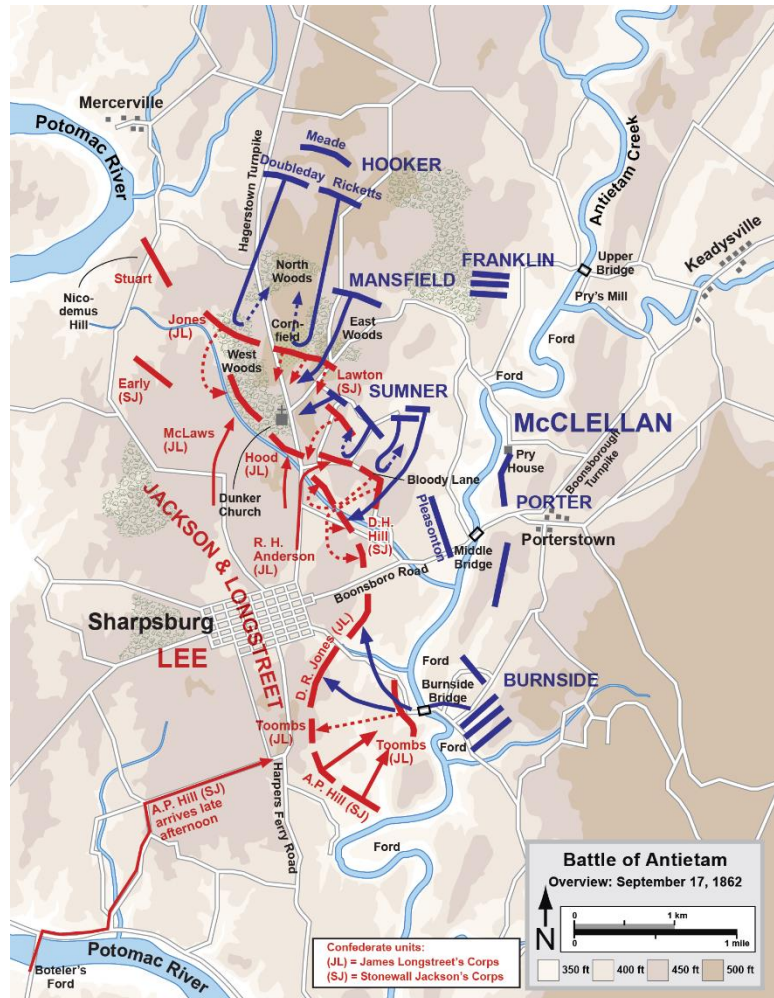
McClellan positioned his six infantry corps in an arc around the AoNV. He ordered Hooker's I Corps to initiate the attack with Mansfield's XII Corps ready to support. Burnside's XI Corps, on the Union left, was

to attack *on McClellan's order*. Sumner's II Corps would cover the middle. Franklin's VI Corps would be held in reserve in the north (close to the Upper Bridge) and Porter's V Corps would be held in reserve in the center, close to McClellan's headquarters at Pry House. McClellan placed Pleasanton's cavalry division, with its horse artillery batteries, in the center in reserve. [Alexander, 270-271.] It would play no substantial role in the battle.

McClellan would decide whether Hooker's attack or Burnside's would become the main assault based on Lee's initial response to Hooker. [Noe, 177.] Unfortunately, the attacks between and within the corps were uncoordinated and piecemeal, and the battle devolved into three overlapping fights rolling from north to south. Franklin's and Porter's corps remained in reserve throughout the battle, unengaged.

Into the Maelstrom

At 5:15 a.m., on September 17, Hooker's I Corps, led by Seymour's brigade of Pennsylvania Reserve regiments² stepped off. They would attack southwestward through the East Woods and through the eastern part of the D. R. Miller cornfield toward Dunker Church. They soon ran into Douglass's brigade of Georgians (Lawton's division, Jackson's Command). The fight quickly grew fierce. Soon, the rest of I Corps was engaged. The fighting spilled across Hagerstown Pike, and J. R. Jones' division (Jackson's Command) joined in. By 6:45 a.m., Wofford's and Law's brigades of Hood's division had come up, attacking into the cornfield. The fighting was ferocious. The final elements of I Corps were committed, soon followed by lead elements of XII Corps. By 7:45 a.m., Hood's Texans and North and South Carolinians were in retreat, with the Georgian's and North Carolinians of Ripley's brigade (D. H. Hill's division) moving to cover them. Fighting continued to rage in and around the cornfield, with yet another Confederate brigade, Colquitt's (D. H. Hill's division) coming in behind Ripley. By 8:15 a.m., the brigades of D. H. Hill's division were forced to retire. With the XII Corps spent, two divisions (Sedgwick and French) of Sumner's II Corps came in from the east. Sedgwick was in the lead, aiming toward West Woods and Dunker Church. They came



Map by Hal Jespersen, www.cwmaps.com

straight on, brigades in column, thinking they were heading into the disorganized remnants of J. R. Jones' and Hood's divisions. They were unaware of McLaws' division moving up from the south until Barksdale's Mississippians and Early's Virginians slammed into their left flank. It was brutal. Meanwhile, the division behind Sedgwick, French's division, did not stay tight. It turned left (to the south) toward the Sunken Road.

By mid-morning the fight in this northern part of the battlefield had exhausted itself, and the action devolved toward the center of the Confederate line and the Sunken Road (Bloody Lane, as it would come to be known). This was another bloodbath when French's division ran head-on into D. H. Hill's North Carolinians and Alabamians. Both sides poured more men into the fray: Anderson's two brigades of Floridians and Mississippians, and II Corps' remaining division, Richardson's, which included the Irish Brigade. With heavy artillery fire from both sides, Union assaults finally prevailed after some three hours with the remnants of D. H. Hill's and Anderson's divisions having been beaten back several hundred yards, but the Union attack had played itself out. By 1 p.m. the threat to the Confederate center receded and the battle devolved again, this time to the southern part of the battlefield and the Rohrback Bridge over Antietam Creek southeast of town (also known as Lower Bridge and, later, as Burnside Bridge).



Hood's attack into the cornfield was amazing. In fighting that lasted 60 minutes—a lifetime for many of his men—his division engaged the onslaught of two Union corps and suffered over 1,000 killed, wounded, and missing—a full 50% of what he started with. Only when overwhelmed by fire and casualties did his men withdraw. This may have been Hood's finest hour as a battlefield commander.

McClellan had planned for Burnside's IX Corps to make a diversionary attack that morning "with the hope of something more," but it was 10 a.m. before Burnside received the order to attack. His was an ill-



Sedgwick's attack into the West Woods was disastrous but was it the right thing to do? Arguably yes. It maintained the momentum of the Union attack and was aimed at the mass of disorganized Confederates that were pulling back. Delay would have given the Confederates time to reorganize whereas maintaining momentum could break their line completely. Sedgwick's impulses and intentions were understandable but failed due to the unforeseen arrival of fresh Confederate brigades thrown into the mix with equal vigor.

planned and poorly executed assault that began about 11 a.m. Two attempts to cross the Antietam were repulsed before a third attempt at about 1 p.m. was successful. By this time the Confederates on this end of the line were wearing thin, and the fight shifted into the Union's favor. IX Corps pressed its attack, but it, too, was starting to lose steam when A. P. Hill's division, having force marched from Harper's Ferry, began arriving on the field about 4 p.m. By 5:30 p.m., it had pushed the Union forces back. The line stabilized (still west of Antietam Creek), and the battle died down. Both sides exchanged cannon and rifle fire for the next

several hours until darkness put an end to the fighting. Both sides were broken, bleeding, and out of breath.

Lee had fought a Union force twice his size to a draw. The reason for this is two-fold. First, fighting on interior lines, Lee could shift forces to meet the rolling Union assaults—he could concentrate more quickly than McClellan. This dovetails with the second reason: the pattern in which the AoP fought. McClellan’s plan going into the battle was reasonable, but his implementation was lackluster and uncoordinated. His plan was to apply pressure to both flanks and let the results of each thrust determine which would be his main attack. His assaults did not unfold that way. Moreover, his style showed his typical lack of battlefield supervision, having tried to manage the battle from his headquarters at Pry House. It could be argued, too, that the tenacity, grit, and elan of the Southern soldier was greater than their Union counterparts, but that is unfair to the soldiers of the AoP. The individual soldiers on both sides were well matched in this battle; each side gave as good as it got.

The Civil War’s bloodiest day, this truly had been a pitched battle. Corps after division after brigade after regiment had been fed into the cauldron by both sides. The slaughter was tremendous, with casualties numerous even among senior commanders. Strength estimates vary, but some 87,000 Union troops on the field supported by 275 artillery pieces engaged some 35,000 Confederates supported by 194 guns. By the end of the day, Union casualties amounted to 2,108 killed and 10,902 wounded and missing versus Confederate losses of 1,567 killed and 8,770 wounded and missing. The total number of Americans killed and wounded that day was 20,976.

Pendleton’s Folly

September 17 was not the end of Lee’s Maryland campaign. At the end of that bloody day, with both armies depleted and exhausted, many on both sides were ready to disengage. But not Lee. He was a brilliant, aggressive commander who believed the offensive was the most important principle of war. He wanted to keep his enemy off balance, and he wanted to capitalize on McClellan’s less aggressive style.

Lee wanted to continue the battle by flanking the Union’s right above West Woods. Consulting with Jackson and other commanders on September 18, he eventually acceded to their recommendations that Union forces on that part of the battlefield, supported by some 40 cannon, could not be turned. So, he went to his back-up plan: cross the Potomac at Boteler’s Ford, his only avenue of withdrawal (a movement he began that evening) and then swing northward through Virginia and recross the Potomac at Williamsport. From there he would strike towards Hagerstown and threaten a thrust into Pennsylvania, or toward Baltimore or Washington.



*Brig. Gen. Wm "Granny" Pendleton
AoNV Chief of Artillery*

Anticipating the AoP might probe his retreat, the lynchpin in his plan was to leave AoNV’s reserve artillery under Pendleton’s command on the bluffs overlooking Boteler’s Ford with 44 guns along with some 600 infantry as a rearguard force. Union guns and infantry from

Porter's V Corps, heretofore unengaged, were soon deployed on the bluffs overlooking the Chesapeake and Ohio Canal that ran along the opposite, north side of the Potomac.

Pendleton was on excellent terrain atop bluffs overlooking the Potomac and Boteler's Ford from the Virginia side. He had never commanded troops in battle, though, and when later that day (September 19) Union artillery pounded his gunners and Union infantry started across the Potomac, he panicked. Incredibly, he left the battlefield looking for help. He finally found Lee near midnight and reported that he had lost all his artillery—*all 44 guns*—and that the Union Army had captured the south bank of the Potomac. This was grossly inaccurate. His gunners and supporting infantry had saved at least 40 of the guns. Later reports put the loss at between 2 and 4. Moreover, even though Pendleton's force had retreated, the Union forces returned to the Maryland side of the river in the early evening.

Based on Pendleton's report, though, and worried that his rearguard had collapsed, Lee ordered Jackson to send troops back to the Boteler's Ford to stem the tide of the presumed Union follow-up. Jackson sent A.P. Hill's "Light Division" (some 7,000 men) at dawn on September 20. At about the same time, a three-brigade Union reconnaissance in force (some 3,000 men) crossed the river to locate the Confederates. The two clashed mid-morning about 1½ miles south of the river. Outmanned, the Union elements retreated across the river.

Epilogue

The consequences of the Battle of Shepherdstown were significant. Lee aborted his movement north and, on September 21, ordered his troops to retreat into Virginia. The implications of the Williamsport Plan had it been pursued are significant, but they would not be realized because of Pendleton's ineptness—a trait that followed him throughout the war. Ironically, this turned out to be in Lee's favor because it saved the AoNV from a dangerous continuation of the campaign.

Here was another example of Lee calculating risk, this time leading to a more cautious decision. His nature pushed him to continue the Maryland campaign. Presumably, he felt that he had fought the Union army to a standstill and that McClellan was in no frame of mind to pursue. But Lee was also overestimating the capability of his army.

When McClellan seemed to be unexpectedly aggressive, pursuing him across the Potomac at Boteler's Ford, Lee knew he must deal with it. After he blunted the Union probing at Boteler's Ford, Lee decided it was time to pull back into Virginia to regroup and refit.

Both armies were worn out, more so the AoNV. It had been campaigning—marching and fighting—almost continuously since June's battles in front of Richmond. Union losses in the Maryland campaign exceeded Confederate, both in men and in senior leaders, but their overall numerical advantage increased. Moreover, the better part of two Union corps had not yet been engaged. And, critically important, Lee's supply lines were strained. It is highly questionable that Lee could have successfully

pursued his Williamsport Plan. His remaining advantage would have been McClellan himself and even then, it would have been a bridge too far.



Many thanks to April Harris for her valuable guidance and editorial support. --Emil

Notes –

¹ *Calculated risk: When success is less than a sure thing but through analysis of the salient aspects of the problem, including costs and consequences of failure, a commander decides to proceed.*

² *The Pennsylvania Reserve regiments were an interesting lot. They were formed in response to President Lincoln’s April 15, 1861, call for volunteers (“the militia of the several States of the Union”). Pennsylvania exceeded its quota of fifteen regiments by some ten regiments. These, followed later by a few more, were formed into a division that ultimately was assigned to the AoP. Totalling 13 regiments at Antietam, they comprised the three brigades (along with two batteries of Pennsylvania field artillery) of Meade’s 3rd Division of Hooker’s I Corps. Later in the war they were redesignated as Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry regiments with new numerical designations.*

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