

G E T T Y S B U R G | **The First Day** [PART I of III]

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Version 3: 2013 ©

*Edited and revised for the 150th commemoration of The Battle of Gettysburg—July 1-3, 2013—
as well as the 20th Anniversary of the trip that led to this narrative documentary.*

The original preface:

Thursday July 1—Saturday July 3, 1993, marked the 130th commemoration of the Battle of Gettysburg. I spent these three days out in the fields, valleys, woods, along the creeks and runs and atop the ridges and hills where this battle took place. I mapped my movements, based on location and time, to coincide with the flow of battle. The following writings are the result ~

INTRODUCTION

My journey began on June 30, 1993. Mounting up, a 1986 Buick my steed, I made the 6-hour drive south from Rochester, New York (where I was then living), through eastern and southern Pennsylvania. My planned approach into Gettysburg was a route starting just past Harrisburg and heading south, the general direction by which the Confederate (C.S.) II Corps would arrive en masse near noon on July 1, 1863. I didn't realize a navigation error until I was well south of the battlefield, almost to Maryland. Doubling back, by chance I caught the Taneytown Road running north into the National Park, the general direction by which most of the Union (U.S.) *Army of the Potomac* would file onto the battlefield at Gettysburg. As I approached the southern boundary of the park, I began to notice a succession of small blue metal signs alongside the road. It seemed as if one stood before every old stone or clapboard house, barn or lot. Curious, I finally pulled off to read one, discovering that they located the sites of Union field hospitals—their ubiquity solemnly explained.

Having checked in to a motel located on the south end of the small city, I made my way out towards Cemetery Hill: a key anchor in the Union line ... The battle history of the Civil War is laden with simple descriptive titles of places made infamous by the barbarity of the fighting

that occurred there: the “Round Forest,” “Sunken Road,” “Hornet’s Nest.” Gettysburg lays claim to some of the more recognizable: “Devil’s Den / the Wheatfield / Little Round Top.” I made my way out to where the hill blends into Cemetery Ridge (which runs due south). This is an area known simply as “the Angle.” Named for the ninety degree turn a stonewall takes in bordering the plot, “the Angle” was the culminating focus of Pickett’s Charge. At this spot, three days of bloody conflict ended in a horrific finale. Here, the famed C.S. *Army of Northern Virginia* was summarily repulsed and forced to retreat from northern soil back towards Virginia—the Confederate States’ best opportunity for victory in the field retreating with them.

There is a certain electric sense about “the Angle.” You can sense it just about anywhere on this battlefield; but in “the Angle” it is a tangible thing. It presides over every thought, settles like humidity. As I walked about on the night of June 30, 1993, lightning bugs strobed over the monuments, their luminescent green light tapering lazily in the wet air. Despite this being a popular spot and the commemorations only a day away, I was alone under a cloudy grey dusk. A bit is lost with the nearby bustle of the small city, the fast-food chains and light pollution. But it dissipates quickly once on National Park land. The mood—that sense—is undeniable out in the fields. You feel the brutality of pride, of ideology, of economic theory having been translated into political / cultural battle-cry and having played itself out in the fear of mostly young men who were asked to confront their mortality—while killing others. It’s a visceral thing when thinking of those who fought here; men who carried simple ideals and forty rounds of ammunition ... And yet, despite the hard thoughts and the electric sense you get walking about the fields, throughout my time at Gettysburg I would feel a strange serenity: as if all suspense had been delivered to conclusion over the first three days of July, 1863.

THE FIRST DAY

McPherson's Ridge .

I made my way out to McPherson's Ridge northwest of the town of Gettysburg about 7:30 a.m. on July 1, 1993. Rain fell in an easy summer shower. Fields flow like a rolling sea of farmland along this ridge and the line of parallel rises to the west. It was here that Union detachments made initial contact with Confederate infantry: July 1, 1863.

A day earlier on June 30th, Union cavalry had encountered Confederate scouts testing their way towards the town in search of badly needed supplies. Following a minor skirmish, more so a handful of shots fired in surprise, the Confederate scouts had pulled back and informed their high command of a Union presence. It was decided to push the C.S. III Corps from Cashtown, about half-dozen miles northwest, towards Gettysburg. The C.S. I Corps, encamped further west near Chambersburg, would follow the III Corps. It was a critical time for the Confederate invasion force. The replenishment of an exhausted supply train was tantamount and this crossroads town—with its plentiful stores—was the best re-supply opportunity they were likely to have.

Add to it, that the C.S. *Army of Northern Virginia* was operating in unfamiliar waters, marching as they were through a “foreign” land. In Virginia, they could expect help and ready supplies. But the army’s high command was well aware that they could rely on neither their own supply lines to extend from Virginia with any certainty, or to gain a helping hand from civilians in Pennsylvania. Their revered commander, Robert E. Lee, knew going in that they would have to live off the land. They would also have to keep moving in order to maintain the advantage of favorable terrain. For the U.S. *Army of the Potomac* was also on the move. Maneuvering between Lee’s army and Washington, the Union army fanned out in a defensive ring across northern Maryland. U.S. cavalry scouts scoured the Maryland and Pennsylvania countryside in search of the elusive Confederates, having slid down the Shenandoah Valley and past them. These two armies would come together soon enough; C.S. officer J. F. J. Caldwell: “*a great blow was to be stricken by Union or Confederate, before the revolution of many suns.*”

Leading to Gettysburg .

The Confederate campaign into Pennsylvania came at a point in the Civil War when the C.S. government and leading military figures realized that if their cause was to end victorious, or with even an agreeable compromise, then it was a time to act. In the east, effective strength and troop morale was at its peak. Robert E. Lee’s lean aggressive *Army of Northern Virginia* had, in one form or another, been getting the best of the larger more adequately supplied Union forces in Virginia for nearly two years. The Union’s main army in the east, the trial ridden *Army of the Potomac*, had been taking the brunt of that beating. Only two months earlier the two armies had come together at Chancellorsville, Virginia. A corps commanded by legendary C.S. General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson had overcome great odds and a forced-march to rout a portion of the U.S. *Army of the Potomac* in a bold stroke of on-field maneuvering. The C.S. strategy employed at Chancellorsville—considered Lee’s masterpiece—had the cumulative effect of

beating back a Union army nearly twice its size. Tragically for the Confederates, Jackson was mistakenly shot by his own troops, dying soon after. Despite this monumental loss, Chancellorsville gave the *Army of Northern Virginia* yet one more victory to proudly stitch onto its battle-flags. Many within its ranks and command structure viewed their army as invincible. By 1863, the boast was hard to argue. The U.S. *Army of the Potomac*—in its various forms—had yet to claim a conclusive battlefield victory against Lee's now-veteran force.

But the Virginia countryside had paid a price for Confederate success. The land had been rudely foraged and fought over. Large areas lay in ravaged cinders. Resources were dwindling in the Old Dominion. While just north over the “old line,” Pennsylvania remained untouched: rich abundant farmland. The agreeable summer season promised a tremendous yield.

Aside from the lopsided successes so far achieved and the understandable belief that a conclusive victory was one more fight away, another reason for a Confederate offensive in the east was due to the dire situation out west where comrades-in-arms were fighting for their very survival. Ulysses S. Grant’s hardscrabble, yet powerful U.S. *Army of the Tennessee* had ground on in its campaign to take control in the Mississippi Valley—having finally encircled John Pemberton’s smaller Confederate force at Vicksburg, Mississippi. A formidable stronghold, it was but one of only two left on the entire length of the Mississippi River. And with U.S. Admiral David Farragut’s naval squadron having moved up from the Gulf of Mexico in 1862 and taken possession of New Orleans (the largest city in the South), Grant in the early summer of 1863 was threatening to cut the Confederacy in two ... This strategy was identical to one developed in 1861 by then U.S. supreme commander, the aged hero, Winfield Scott. Called the “Anaconda,” it was designed to encircle the South via a naval blockade of its coastal cities, while letting loose a powerful array of land forces who would cut the South in two and strangle the Confederacy to death. Taking control of the Mississippi was key to the plan. This strategy had been passed over at first in favor of striking directly into Virginia toward the Confederate capitol at Richmond, only one hundred miles south of Washington, D.C. 1862 proved a year of hapless bloody failure in all attempts to conquer Richmond. But Grant and his western army had not let occasional

setbacks stop them, moving with leviathan-like steadiness in providing the Union with constant forward progress even as things looked irrevocably bleak back east. As their progress advanced down the Mississippi, the “Anaconda” plan took hold whether planned or not. Alongside the U.S. navy’s success in opening up most of the Mississippi, Grant’s drive on Vicksburg had by the late spring of 1863 bowled its way through the state of Mississippi and besieged the only Southern force in the area still offering a fight. C.S. departmental commander Joseph Johnston could do little to resist Grant’s force and C.S. General Braxton Bragg’s *Army of Tennessee* was being pressed by the Union’s third major army—*The Army of the Cumberland*—in middle Tennessee. By June 1863, the fall of Vicksburg seemed just a matter of time.

But despite the favorable situation out west, winning the war itself was little more than supreme optimism in the eastern theatre by June 1863. Lee and his army had fought ferociously. With a larger force there’s no telling how the Civil War might have resolved in the east. Except for the horrific Battle of Antietam fought in September 1862—the first of Lee’s incursions into northern territory (the battle considered a tactical Union victory, though few would call it an outright victory in the field)—the combat record of Lee’s army was exemplary. Lee understood the dire situation facing the South: always on the defensive, fighting armies well-supplied that often dwarfed their effective strength. But Robert E. Lee was a bold strategist and repeatedly employed daring plans in spite of long odds of success. Given the Southerners situation, such hazards in the end seemed inevitable. And Lee, maybe more than any other C.S. commander during the war, understood this. He also understood how to exploit the weaknesses and mistakes of his various counterparts.

The Union armies in the east were well-outfitted, had shown exceptional bravery, but had been led terribly through June 1863; in certain cases, even criminally so (the devastating human toll suffered at the Battle of Fredericksburg the previous December a case-in-point). The industrial north had everything at its disposal by which to prosecute such a war effort; but had fielded negligent commanders, one-after-another. Many of these eastern commanders had proven empty egos strategically ill-prepared for the decisive Robert E. Lee. It seemed to many in

Washington that it was simply a matter of time before this weakness at the top led to a show-stopping disaster; a tightrope that had already been tread more than once. Had it not been for the merit and sheer strength of the common soldier—as well as obvious competency at the division, brigade and regimental levels of leadership—a decisive defeat would have long since broken the U.S. *Army of the Potomac*. In their favor, the North fielded armies of tremendous size; consistently over 100,000 troops in the east. This was far more than the Confederate States could ever hope to field in Virginia. In hindsight, this fact alone seems to have marked military victory by Union forces as inevitable. But the situation was not that cut-and-dry. There was Robert E. Lee and his *Army of Northern Virginia* to contend with.

Lee had overlooked the ever present disadvantages and rallied his troops with tactical swiftness, alert subordinates and creative deception. More than once was the flamboyant yet unavailing *Army of the Potomac* commander, George McClellan, convinced that he was up against two or three times the number of Confederates than were actually present on his front during his abortive, costly, Peninsula Campaign of 1862. One of Lee's more daring deceptions all but sent McClellan packing. Produced by resourceful subordinate, John Magruder, Lee had left Magruder with only 20,000 men in front of Richmond to face McClellan's entire army of well over 100,000 troops—while Lee covertly shifted the main body of his army above McClellan's right flank north of Richmond. To keep McClellan in place while this great gamble was playing out, Magruder kept up a faux front of impregnable manpower: marching and shuttling the same regiments back and forth before the incredulous eyes of Union lookouts. It worked so well, that McClellan was deceived into perceiving a massive buildup of C.S. troops to his front and south—spooking him to such a degree as to prompt frantic messages back to D.C. via telegraph, calling for reinforcements lest he be overrun. Magruder went so far as to stage mock charges. McClellan was entirely bewildered by the time Lee staged the real assault on the Union right flank, pressing the *Army of Northern Virginia* forward in a series of relentless, if costly, assaults. Known as “The Seven Days,” Lee hammered McClellan’s army again-and-again, eventually shoving the massive *Army of the Potomac* south of Richmond to a fallback position along the James River.

The Union army was soon packing up and shipping out for Washington via the Potomac itself ... And this is only one of many examples in which Lee forced various commanders of *The Army of the Potomac* to fight on his terms. Supported by a solid loyal network of subordinates, Lee reaped great success in exploiting the cautious and cumbersome nature of the Union leaders, combining “quick-strike” mentality with high stake gambles, all the while maneuvering to fight on the most advantageous terms—and terrain—possible. Given their track record, it wouldn’t take much to persuade Jefferson Davis and the Confederate Congress to allow Lee to bring the war to the Union’s backyard. Lee felt he had the force to whip this Union army. To do so on northern soil, might just break their will too.

The state of the Union’s will, generally, was still another factor urging a Confederate offensive. Political developments were then taking shape in the war-weary, victory-starved North. Grant’s recent successes out west were not the lead stories in the east coast newspapers, the constant and highly-publicized problems of the *Army of the Potomac* commanding attention and taxing popular support for the war in the North. They had grown tired of their young boys returning home missing limbs or with horrible disfigurements; if, that is, they came home at all. By 1863, the more conservative Democratic Party was already on the search for a candidate to upend Abraham Lincoln in the 1864 presidential election. Lincoln’s Republican Party stood firm on prosecuting the war until an absolute and complete subjugation of the secessionist states had been achieved. But the Democrats looked to bring about an immediate end to the war through any means necessary—including truce. The “Peace Party” would become their moniker. If Lee’s invasion was successful, it very well might weaken the will of the northern people and bring about a political and diplomatic end favorable to the Confederacy.

Confederate leaders could not deny the dire situation out west, but could sense that Lee’s military strength, his army’s record of swift successful strikes and the North’s lapsing will coalesced to create an opportunity for victory that the South was not likely to see again. Lee would focus his efforts north in a fast powerful demonstration. Perhaps he could raise doubt of the Union cause within the Northern states, or possibly impress Britain or France enough to

intervene on behalf of the Confederate cause (long the hope of Confederate politicians). Lee could envision a decisive triumph over the stumble-prone U.S. *Army of the Potomac*—and again, at this point who could blame him? Such a victory could open the door to investing Baltimore, Philadelphia—or the greatest prize: Washington City. A particularly confident C.S. officer pictured himself storming Bunker Hill in Boston. The *Army of Northern Virginia* was complete in its confidence, in its ability to do or accomplish anything. It would take this confidence into Pennsylvania.

In June 1863, the *Army of Northern Virginia* was put in motion. Facades were raised, troops movements covered, as this army set out on the most significant military offensive the Confederacy would muster. Past and present circumstances had coalesced to provide a window of opportunity for the indefinite existence of the Confederate States of America. Lee would take the war to the Union's heartland. Future circumstances would determine the rest.

Into Pennsylvania .

The first engagement of the Gettysburg campaign is generally viewed as the massive cavalry battle at Brandy Station, Virginia. In early June of 1863, J. E. B. Stuart, dashing cavalry chief of the C.S. *Army of Northern Virginia*, was assembling his horsemen along the banks of the Rappahanock River in north central Virginia. Stuart had been planning a grand review of his cavalry for the C.S. high command prior to the campaign, when he was surprised by the U.S. cavalry of Alfred Pleasonton. In the largest cavalry battle of the war—in a war where cavalry was used more for their reconnaissance value, than as a general fighting force—Stuart's numerical superiority eventually beat back the spirited Union attack. But Stuart had been caught entirely off guard; a very rare occurrence ... C.S. cavalry had cemented a fearsome reputation by 1863. In all theaters of the war they had rarely met an opponent they could not best. And though Brandy Station ended with the Confederates in control of the field, the precipitous and embarrassing

fashion by which the U.S. cavalry had been able to run right up into the Confederate camps was an audacity unfamiliar to Stuart and his men. The battle at Brandy Station set a sour tone that would prove a harbinger of Stuart's poor performance during the invasion.

Stuart's orders on this campaign were the usual: scout the enemy, track his movements, harass and hamper his advance—and most importantly: report the enemy's whereabouts. They were to be Lee's “eyes-and-ears” ... Stuart had gained deserved fame by riding his cavalry force in a looping raid around the rear of the *Army of the Potomac* during McClellan's Peninsula campaign, a daring move around a massive army that just so happened to go off without a hitch. Stuart was eager to repeat such headlines-grabbing success on this campaign, perhaps more so after Brandy Station—striking out soon after the battle for the heart of Maryland. He and his men were soon across the Potomac and behind the Union army. But this time, Stuart's bold strike would prove a disservice. He didn't yet know it, but he had ridden his horsemen completely out of the campaign.

While the fighting raged at Brandy Station, Lee was setting his army in motion, moving them north and west by corps from their encampments near Fredericksburg, Virginia, through a gap in the Blue Ridge Mountains just north of Sperryville, Virginia. Screened by the low rolling hills, Lee would move his infantry down the Shenandoah Valley, aimed for Chambersburg and the heart of Pennsylvania. Along the way, the Confederates swept up makeshift Union garrisons with ease—most notably the supply post at Winchester, Virginia, near the northern-end of the Shenandoah. By mid June, the C.S. II Corps was fording the Potomac at Williamsport, Maryland. Lee's second invasion of the north had begun.

Sensing a general advance was underway, U.S. cavalry—having made their presence felt at Brandy Station—began a hurried reconnaissance; often in close proximity to the marching Confederates. Lee was out there and was up to something, but his intentions were as yet unknown. In character, the latest commander of the *Army of the Potomac*, Joseph Hooker, was a step behind Lee—his army still stuck in their encampments around Falmouth, Virginia; just across the Rappahanock from the recently vacated Confederate encampments near

Fredericksburg. On June 13th, Hooker finally broke camp and set out in pursuit of Lee. Hooker offered his superiors in Washington the option of marching directly on Richmond with the sudden absence of the C.S. army. But Hooker's fall from grace at Chancellorsville was still thick in the air, and Lincoln would never hear of leaving Washington open to a Confederate advance. "Fighting Joe" Hooker's days were already numbered as he marched his army north into Maryland.

Lee had a big jump on Hooker and made the most of it, moving quickly across Maryland into Pennsylvania behind the shelter of a long foothill of the Blue Ridge known as South Mountain. The *Army of the Potomac* could only speculate about Lee's destination, marching north of Washington to Frederick, Maryland—shielding the capital as they went. From there, Hooker spread out his forces in a wide strong arc across north Maryland. In doing so, the *Army of the Potomac* had unwittingly created a logistical problem for the Confederates. The broad expanse of their line had forced Stuart's cavalry to take an alternate tack much further to the east of their planned route. Stuart would have to traverse nearly all of mid-Maryland and ride very hard to avoid the spread-out flank of the U.S. army. This left Stuart completely out of touch with the Confederate march north. Minus his mobile reconnaissance, Lee was—himself—left guessing on the whereabouts of the Union army he knew to be in pursuit. Instead of securing the advantage of terrain and letting the enemy come to him, he was left as uncertain about the location of his enemy as the *Army of the Potomac* was of the *Army of Northern Virginia*.

With Stuart's error, Lee was forced to press on blind. He split his forces during the last week of June 1863: II Corps, Jackson's old command now under Lieutenant General Richard Ewell, moved northeast towards Carlisle and the state capitol at Harrisburg, with Major General Jubal Early's division of II Corps moving east past Gettysburg towards York and the Susquehanna River; Lieutenant General A.P. Hill moved the newly formed III Corps in behind Early's advance—stopping at Cashtown; Longstreet's rugged I Corps brought up the rear of the army, stopping at Chambersburg where they would remain masked by South Mountain.

It had been a tiring advance for the Confederates over uncertain ground. To this point in the war, the army had operated on familiar turf. Now they were in enemy territory, Pennsylvania a solid Union state. The army would need to be alert and intuitive. For many, this was the first time they had ever seen northern land and the Southern ranks were thoroughly impressed with the fertile countryside. In order to create the best impression possible, Lee—perhaps thinking of the public-relations / political ramifications of the invasion—issued standing orders that his invading soldiers' treat the countryside and its inhabitants with respect. Private property was not to be mishandled. Those caught violating this order were dealt stiff penalties. This ragged collection of fighters would maintain a disciplined front. Some Northerners were impressed. Most still saw them as one thing, and one thing only: “invaders.”

The civilian population of Pennsylvania, from Harrisburg all the way to Philadelphia, was sent into a frenzied panic. Municipal details built makeshift defenses before the larger cities. And though these defensive lines would never offer much protection before the hardened ranks of the C.S. *Army of Northern Virginia*, they were seen to out of instinct. These Northerners were tasting the bitter fear of war on their own doorstep ... But despite the panicked reactions of northern civilians, Lee's army was tasting the bitter reality of campaigning far from home. Their massive supply train—which spread for a dozen miles at a time—was further emptied with each advancing mile. Procuring provisions was imperative or the invasion would fail. Many in the ranks marched without shoes.

By the end of June, A. P. Hill had begun regular reconnaissance missions in the region around Cashtown. Forced to use infantry with the irritating absence of Stuart's horsemen, his squads roamed far and wide—carefully searching for the enemy and supplies. Likewise, the U.S. *Army of the Potomac* was operating blind in fanning out from their defensive encampments in Maryland. But while the Confederates had initiative on their side, Union cavalry was proving proficient in their reconnaissance. On June 30, 1863, a small detachment of Major General John Buford's cavalry crossed paths with Hill's scouts out past McPherson's Ridge. Shots were fired and both sides pulled back. The Battle of Gettysburg would start the next day.

First contact, July 1st.

Gettysburg was a small country crossroads town in 1863, home to a modest college and unfinished railroad spur. Its importance lay in its centrality. It was the hub of a dozen turnpikes, all of which converged on the town centre. As was the case with many once-remote crossroads, the ease of rapid convergence over good roads (which were generally rare in the Civil War era) invited a conflict between opposing armies.

It was dawn July 1, 1863, when advance guards of the *Army of Northern Virginia*'s III Corps made their approach through the farmland north and west of Gettysburg. Union cavalry, as mentioned, was charged with detecting and interpreting Lee's designs, as well as impeding the progress of his spread-out force. June 30th had produced a chance meeting. Cautious calculation was now shelved for decisive action.

Along these successive ridges west of town a little less than a division of cavalry under the command of John Buford moved into position. The first shots were fired about 5 or 6 a.m. Heavily outnumbered, the cavalry, mostly New Yorkers, rapidly formed a line of battle. When contact had been made the previous day Buford was ordered to either stall a Confederate advance into the town, if one should ensue, and wait for word to withdraw south so as to rejoin the main body of the Union army—or—hold for reinforcements. But on July 1st, the dismounted Union horsemen dug in for a fight. Stretching themselves thin north and south of the Cashtown-Chambersburg Pike, the main approach road into Gettysburg from the west, there was no equivocation; they were to hold their position until reinforced.

Major General Ambrose Powell Hill, a tough leader known for his dogged nature (and prolific swearing), was at the helm of the Confederate's III Corps. The corps had been formed just prior to the campaign as a means of streamlining the chain of command with the tragic loss of Jackson. Even with the reorganization, the Confederate corps that fought at Gettysburg were

still larger than their Union counterparts. The C.S. brought three to Gettysburg. The U.S. would eventually field seven. A. P. Hill, achieving fame early in the war with his swift hard-hitting “light division,” pushed with purpose down the Cashtown-Chambersburg Pike. Major General Henry Heth’s division led the way. Around 8 o’clock Heth turned out his lines of battle with the full intent of quickly sweeping away what he believed to be local militia. But this was not the case, as Heth and his men would soon realize.

Still unsure .

Early on the morning of July 1st, it was still not the intent of either side to bring a general engagement at Gettysburg. If anything, both sides were trying to avoid it, adding to the fateful resolve of the conflict. Heth wrote of C.S. intentions after the war, stating: *“Lee wanted to fight the battle at Cashtown, with the mountain (South Mountain) at his back, so his flanks would be well protected. There he could have whipped any army in the world.”* This plan hinged on Lee bringing about a fight on his terms. He had already scripted the decisive battle in Pennsylvania; but having the leverage to set the terms was fast slipping away.

The bulk of the U.S. *Army of the Potomac* was still encamped in a wide semi-arc across northern Maryland, the border only fifteen miles south of Gettysburg. The possibility of the Union bringing a fight on their terms had been pinned to this curving defensive-line set along an extended tributary of the Potomac, called Pipe Creek. “The Pipe Creek Circular” sheltered both Washington and Baltimore, but also allowed the army to move quickly into Pennsylvania if need be. Yet gearing up for an offensive was not the hope of the newly installed Major General George Gordon Meade. Meade, having replaced “Fighting Joe” Hooker, had been in the pilot’s seat for less than a week. An able corps commander, he had to make the adjustment to commander-in-chief in the face of an enemy campaign and major engagement. Meade felt the command better suited to his well-respected friend, John Reynolds, commander of the *Army of the Potomac*’s I

Corps. Nonetheless, he took to the situation. Meade knew that Lee and his army would have to move decisively and would have to keep moving to survive in the North. If he could entice Lee to engage the strong natural position along Pipe Creek, the U.S. *Army of the Potomac* might be able to deal a fatal blow to the C.S. *Army of Northern Virginia*.

Meade's plan was sound. Like Lee's South Mountain strategy, Meade's ideal natural position along Pipe Creek would have the fight on his terms. But it would come to pass, quickly. By noon on July 1st, Lee had ordered a general concentration and had set his entire army on the roads and turnpikes for Gettysburg. Ewell's II Corps, his advanced units having been within view of the spires of Harrisburg, would soon be retracing their steps—passing through Carlisle in heading south towards Gettysburg. With lead elements of Hill's III Corps already engaged and the rest of his corps filing in rapidly, James Longstreet set his I Corps in motion behind Hill's on the Cashtown-Chambersburg Pike. Lee was still leery of a major engagement, but events were shaping up out of his control. The fight was on.

Buford's defense .

The Union cavalry prepared for tough fighting, knowing that they faced a much larger force. (As mentioned, cavalry campaigned on horseback, but fought dismounted—unless engaged with enemy cavalry.) On July 1st, Buford's cavalrymen were dismounted, prone or kneeling. They were also outfitted with new breech-loading carbines, providing a rapid rate of fire over the one-shot rifled Enfield, Springfield and smoothbore muskets that the advancing infantry of Brigadier Generals James Archer and Joseph Davis's C.S. brigades carried into battle.

The advance of the C.S. III Corps was assembled at the east base of Herr's Ridge, about a thousand yards west of McPherson's Ridge. Archer's men, made up of Alabama and Tennessee regiments, moved off Herr's slope south of the Cashtown-Chambersburg Pike; Davis's infantry—

Mississippians—north of it. A battery of Union artillery joined the cavalry and was put into position on a rise just north of a deep manmade cut a few dozen yards above the turnpike through which the unfinished railroad line would eventually run west towards Chambersburg. This railroad cut, like so many other landmarks across this battlefield, would soon achieve infamy for the bloody human destruction about to occur.

The grey / butternut clad troops approached quickly (“butternut” a nickname given to southern troops due to the inconsistent colors and patterns of their uniforms, southern armies forced to rely on brown, tan, or greyish “homespun” clothing where they could get it with the lack of consistent government-organized uniform production and material). Skirmishing fire grew thick. Major General John Reynolds, his I Corps the closest Union infantry to Gettysburg at the time, arrived ahead of his troops who had broken camp that morning near the Maryland border. Reynolds set out to observe the situation and discuss options ... There is a Lutheran Seminary that stands atop aptly named Seminary Ridge, which lay next in line to the east of McPherson’s Ridge, closer in towards Gettysburg, and about the same distance that Herr’s Ridge lies west of McPherson’s. The Seminary is crowned by a tall cupola. At the time of the battle, this was the highest vantage point in the area and would be used as an observation post by leaders of both armies. On the morning of the 1st, Reynolds and Buford climbed the tower to get a good look at what they were facing. They decided to hold the line until the U.S. I Corps could arrive. Buford stated: “*my arrangements were made for entertaining him*”—him referring to the Confederate wave right then sweeping down off the ridge in his immediate front. Heth figured quickly from the rate of the enemy’s fire that he was not facing state militia and stepped up his attack. A morning’s drizzle soon vaporized in the face of what would be three days of unforgiving summer heat and humidity (temperatures would in the 90s all three days). The cavalry put up a stout fight, denying the Confederates easy access to the town. The sweet smell of damp grass and oats was soon substituted for the sulfuric discharge of powder-fired weapons.

On the northwest portion of the auto route, in the rain .

It was drizzling early on July 1, 1993, the first day of my tour—130 years to the day of the opening of the Battle of Gettysburg. The elements had me writing notes and observations under the “coke bottle” wash of rain down the windshield. Forgetting all contemporary additions to the nearby fields for a moment, I found myself able to envision a time when all before my view was still an unbroken vista of farmland. I imagined—best that I could—the Confederate columns advancing on this position along McPherson’s Ridge. I tried to sense hearing their famed “Rebel Yell” for the first time, the hair standing up on the back of my neck as they let fly their blood-curdling psyche-out tactic. Southern units were often referred to as “good yelling outfits.” An anonymous source described it: *“an unearthly, fiendish yell, such as no other troops or civilized beings ever uttered.”* The Southerners that fought with the *Army of Northern Virginia* included men from the backwoods communities of the Shenandoah, the Cumberlands, Carolinas, the Black Belt, the Delta, the Trans-Mississippi. Such a “fiendish” yell no doubt came easy to such a hardy set. The rural Deep South was wholly represented at Gettysburg, regiments from Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, and Texas. A soldier represented his state during the Civil War, “states’ rights” a simplistic moniker amalgamating a host of discrepancies political leaders of the Confederacy had with the Union—all of it socio-political and economic legalese orbiting the core demand: the right to deal with and administer slavery as it deemed fit. The majority of those in the ranks could stop short of the understanding that states’ rights was a thin veneer covering a “national” defense of slavery, their motivating factor instead being to fight—with honor—in defense of hearth-and-home. But it does not diminish the underlying reason why their leaders took them war. It was a simpler time, for sure; widespread sophistication of the real factors behind political and economic motivations less obvious. And there is something to be said of the honor of—simply—performing your duty with courage. Why the Southern rank-and-file fought is a book-length treatise for another day; but fight they did. And looking out over McPherson’s Ridge on July 1, 1993, I couldn’t help think that not much had really changed, physically at least

—it was still a vista of nearly unbroken farmland ... As 9 o'clock drew near on July 1, 1863, the Pennsylvania air had cleared of rain showers, growing thick instead with the crack of muskets, the thunder of artillery.

I drove west a bit upon the new and improved Cashtown-Chambersburg Pike, now Route 30. I took a perpendicular side road going south along the crest of what I believed to be Herr's Ridge. There are several old houses left, evident in imperfect bricks and uneven lines of mortar; but modernity is firmly stamped: the ridge topped of residential homes and a Jehovah's Witness Hall. The modern view of McPherson's Ridge is obstructed from this vantage due to the growth of trees; but in 1863, this would have been the vantage point of the advancing Confederates—facing E x SE.

The battle had begun to build by this time on July 1, 1863. James Longstreet's I Corps had begun to wind its way down the turnpike behind Hill's Corps, now actively engaged ... I doubled back on Route 30 along the approach route of the C.S. III Corps.

The commitment .

Lee arrived on the field about this time to take in the developing scene. He removed all doubt of a minor engagement and set a heavy strike in motion—a decision Henry Heth had, for all intents-and-purposes, made for him about an hour earlier. J. F. J. Caldwell said of Lee at this time: "*he now appeared to be invincible, immovable.*" When Lee ordered an attack, the blows often came hard and swift. But this campaign would be plagued by an uncharacteristic sluggishness among the C.S. high command, and at a time they could ill afford it. Lee had grown accustomed to the dauntless ferocity of "Stonewall" Jackson and the hammering body-blows of Longstreet. But Lee did not have the decisive Jackson at his disposal. The triumph and tragedy of Chancellorsville left Lee with a division commander at the helm of his II Corps. Ewell was used to implementing orders. He had the mind of a soldier; and though competent, he did not

field the creative innovation that Jackson had displayed—and on which Lee had come to instinctually rely. In fairness, few did. Longstreet and Hill were tough fighters; so was Ewell, but as Jackson's right hand man. Ewell had put Jackson's orders into motion as a high-level subordinate, having gained a solid reputation during Jackson's famed Shenandoah Campaign of 1862. Lee was moving as if Jackson were still in command. But this campaign was different. Jackson was dead.

Reynold's I Corps reinforces .

Buford's hard-fighting cavalry was in danger of being overrun by the superior numbers of Heth's infantry just as Reynolds's U.S. I Corps arrived to reinforce the line. Brigadier General James Wadsworth's division was the first on the scene. A regimental fife and drum band led the I Corps playing an old traditional: "*the Campbells are Coming*," to announce their arrival on the field. Brigadier General Lysander Cutler's brigade took up positions north of the turnpike, while Brigadier General Solomon Meredith (nicknamed "Long Sol" due to his towering six foot six inch frame), led his famed "Iron Brigade" into line south of the turnpike. A hearty stock of western troops from Wisconsin and Michigan, the "Iron Brigade" had earned the nickname. They had assembled a combat reputation that was second-to-none within the U.S. *Army of the Potomac* and were feared by the Confederates that had to square off against them. Both Union brigades were still filing into place on the crest of McPherson's Ridge, when Archer and Davis's C.S. troops, south and north of the turnpike respectively, came on in a concerted attack. A young boy who'd watched this initial Confederate assault, later wrote: "*the first wave swelled in successive waves, grey masses with the glint of steel as the sun struck the gun barrels filling the highway, spreading out into the fields, and still coming on, wave after wave.*" Lieutenant Colonel Rufus Dawes of the Iron Brigade's 6th Wisconsin regiment, later wrote:

For a mile up and down the open fields before us, the splendid lines of the veterans of The Army of Northern Virginia swept down upon us. Their bearing was magnificent. They came forward with a rush, and how our men did yell, “come on Johnnie, come on!!”

At “Reynold’s Woods”.

John Reynolds was busy aligning his fast-arriving U.S. I Corps along McPherson’s Ridge. The skirmishing before the ridge sharpened, a general Confederate assault underway. Reynolds, mounted on horseback, was focused on the duty at hand and not the great risk he was taking—mounted in an advanced position, a conspicuous and no doubt valuable target. (Any individual mounted during the Civil War was certainly a person of great importance, especially to an enemy sharpshooter.) A Confederate soon measured his shot and fired. The bullet ripped through the woods before Reynolds’ men and pierced his brain. The shot killed the general instantly. Slumping out of the saddle, Reynolds was dead before his body hit the ground.

I sat for awhile near the base of the monument erected in his honor. I scanned the immediate area, which was alive with birdcalls and a woodpecker’s steady rhythm upon a tree within, posthumously named, Reynolds Woods. It was peaceful, the drizzle had stopped and the Seminary’s restored tower sounded 10 o’clock. I figured that these woods must have been less dense back then. If not, then the shot that killed Reynolds had to have been lucky—or unlucky, depending on which side of the war you were on ... Weaponry was modernizing at a rapid pace when the Civil War erupted. But the standard arms continued to be rudimentary for the average infantryman, even the sharpshooter. For the most part, they fired one-shot muskets. As a soldier, you would reach into a cartridge box, pull out a ready-made packet with powder and bullet (forty rounds was the standard issue), pack it into the base of the barrel with a ramrod, replace the ramrod, place a percussion cap, cock the hammer, take aim, fire—and repeat. Skilled soldiers could fire three or four shots a minute. The shot that dropped Reynolds was most likely

fired by a marksmen with a primitive scope, taking his aim carefully; executing the killing with professional skill.

As a result of Reynolds' untimely death—the man having been revered by his troops and held in high esteem by his peers—command of the corps fell to none other than the spiritual father of baseball, Abner Doubleday; second in command of the U.S. I Corps. Doubleday worked quickly to overcome this demoralizing event, stepping up to finish the alignment that Reynolds had begun. The I Corps had hard-fighting reputable troops and despite a growing disadvantage in numbers, Doubleday knew his men would not give in easy. The “Iron Brigade” was a label given to them, not by them—Cutler’s troops having proven themselves equally tenacious.

The fight opens on McPherson’s Ridge .

The Confederates’ early deployment, prior to the U.S. I Corps’ arrival, meant that the opposing lines faced each other off-centre. Davis on the Confederate left overlapped Cutler’s Union troops then straddling the Cashtown-Chambersburg Pike and extending to the railroad cut, while Meredith’s men on the Union left extended slightly south of Archer’s lines then marching towards them. The Iron Brigade would wasted no time exploiting Archer’s exposed right flank. Meredith swung his men, as if the hand of a clock, taking the Confederates off-guard. The Southerners quickly realized they weren’t up against a cavalry detachment. On first sight of the Iron Brigade—its troops known for their unique tall black hat (as opposed to the low-riding regulation “kepi”—it was written that a Confederate expecting action against weak state militia exclaimed: “*there are those damned black hatted fellers again! ... that’s The Army of the Potomac!*”

The Iron Brigade went to work. At the base of the west slope of McPherson’s Ridge’s is a creek named Willoughby Run. Meredith’s troops crossed the creek, coming up on the flank of Archer’s advance and surprising them ... On July 1, 1993, I walked along Willoughby Run and

across its slick slate and moss-topped stone in following the Iron Brigade's approach route. It is now a contemplative scene. The stream pursues a slow easy route. Even for the imaginative, it would be hard to envision the sudden appearance of a duly named brigade falling hard on an unsuspecting Confederate advance—it all accompanied by a sonic eruption of volleys, yelling, screaming—the immediate scene being so peaceful ... But on July 1, 1863, Archer's Confederates were stunned to a stop. After a short brisk fight, the Iron Brigade rolled up Archer's right flank and pushed towards the turnpike, taking about a thousand prisoners—including Archer himself. The broken remnants of Archer's command straggled back towards Herr's Ridge.

As the Iron Brigade swept across Willoughby Run and through McPherson's Woods south of the turnpike, Davis' Confederates had pitched into Cutler's troops north of the turnpike at the railroad cut. The initial assault fell hard on the Northerners, forcing them back towards Seminary Ridge. But they recovered from the initial shock and solidified in a new position. They would soon receive help. The segment of Cutler's brigade straddling the turnpike witnessed the thrashing dealt out by the Iron Brigade. Seeing their front cleared by the Westerners, they moved north to the deep trench of the railroad cut to aid their comrades. The 6th Wisconsin of the Iron Brigade, having been held in reserve in front of Seminary Ridge, moved forward to aid Cutler's men—mostly New Yorkers. As the Union counter was taking place, Davis attempted a unique deception. With the Union troops to his front occupied, Davis ordered a segment of his men up the concealed dugout of the railroad cut. Once they were on the Union line, they were to launch an attack on the flank of Cutler's wavering line. It was a shrewd plan, but was found out. The 14th Brooklyn (called "those red legged devils" by counterparts, due to the fire red trousers they wore) rousted out the deception, jumping the trapped Confederates in the railroad cut. Rufus Dawes, commanding the 6th Wisconsin, yelled to Major Edward Pye, commanding the 95th New York: "*we must charge!*" Pye's response: "*then charge it is!*" Davis's scheme came unglued. The firefight in the railroad cut was ferocious and bloody. The Confederates had no choice but to withdraw or be obliterated in the trench. They gave ground grudgingly, the Union

reserves taking terrible casualties. Davis's entire C.S. line fell back. Cutler and Meredith's line retained their positions, bloodied but unbroken.

There was a short reprieve from the fighting at this point. It was about 11 o'clock. The cavalry units had been fully relieved by the U.S. I Corps, now on the field in its entirety. Still, any U.S. optimism was short-lived. Two C.S. corps were about to pour full-strength into the fight. By midday July 1, 1863, the steady erosion of the Union position would begin.

Unforeseen at the time, a decisive turn had already occurred in the nation's history. Gettysburg was by midday July 1, 1863, elevated from one of any of the thousands of small crossroad towns in America, to one of the most significant landscapes in the country. What could have been an unimpeded Confederate advance into, through and beyond Gettysburg had been held up by the stout resistance of dismounted U.S. cavalrymen. Having held at bay the better part of a C.S. division until Union reinforcements could arrive to hold the position, they had—as a result—set up Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, to host the bloodiest battle in American history ... As I hiked up-and-down McPherson's Ridge, stopping to take numerous notes—a drizzling rain having resumed—I found myself so deep into the history of July 1st that I half-expected to be caught within the rain of whistling lead bullets, looking on in amazement as long lines of infantry roared out of my imagination and across the fields in front of me. But every time thoughts on the violent bloodshed that occurred on these fields would swell, it would be pre-empted by an over-arching solitude. Again, it would be the solitude—less the thoughts of extreme violence—that would get me out on the fields of Gettysburg. Every view is so important and peaceful. A car would approach and pass on the auto tour road, leaving me again to the silent peace time-and-again.

The fighting resumes .

C.S. General Henry Heth had watched from atop Herr's Ridge in futility as his initial two-brigade-attack was beaten back. Undaunted, he sent in two more: the brigades of Colonel John Brockenborough and Brigadier General James Pettigrew, with Davis's bruised Mississippians following as support. At the same time, U.S. Brigadier General Thomas Rowley was assembling his division in behind Wadsworth's men atop McPherson's Ridge. The Confederate's path into Gettysburg would now have to force its way through a solid wall of blue. The Confederates came on. But the line of *Army of the Potomac* veterans now before them were the wrong troops against which to wage a test of will. Wadsworth and Rowley's troops stood fast and repelled Heth's second attempt to dislodge them, with bloody results. As their comrades fell back, Confederate artillery opened up on the Union defenses along McPherson's Ridge.

The U.S. I Corps had extended its line to protect its right flank against a Confederate move from the north. Brigadier General John Robinson's division was placed at the north end of Seminary Ridge. Their line curved, facing north and east to block any force moving down the Mummasburg Road. All the roads that converge on Gettysburg do so in a radial fashion, like spokes of a wheel. The Mummasburg Road, running northwest into the town and north of the Cashtown-Chambersburg Pike, could have provided an open avenue for flanking this Union line out of their positions along McPherson's Ridge had it not been for this alert adjustment. Still, six more turnpikes converged on Gettysburg from the north and northeast. And the C.S. *Army of Northern Virginia*'s II Corps was pressing hard from Carlisle almost due north.

Robinson's U.S. brigades under Gabriel Paul and Henry Baxter extended south along Seminary Ridge, linking with Cutler's battered brigade now positioned where the ridge and the turnpike meet. The Iron Brigade and Rowley's division still stood a few hundred yards in their front on McPherson's Ridge. The Union line had time enough only to catch their breath when they were called to attention. Major General Robert Rode's division of Ewell's II Corps had arrived and was slowly filing into the wooded thickets on and around Oak Hill north of Seminary Ridge and the Mummasburg Road. Despite the recent adjustment made on its flank, the Union

placement was now in question. Oak Hill was the highest ground on the field, a place that commanded a clear view of the first day's field of conflict.

The afternoon was shaping up into a major fight as the dark work of C.S. cannon opened on the U.S. lines. It was punishing. A. P. Hill's chief of artillery, Major William Pegram, oversaw the Herr Ridge end of the cannonade. Pegram was less than the physical model of an officer. He was short, carried an unassuming character and wore spectacles. But his looks were irrelevant. His presence meant action. Upon sighting Pegram, a soldier yelled to his comrades: "*there's going to be a fight ... here comes that damn little man with the specs!*" The exposed lines of Cutler's battered troops north of the turnpike fell victim to an enfilading artillery fire (a firing-point perpendicular to an enemy's line, instead of straight-on, and often devastating) from advance batteries of Rode's C.S. division on Oak Hill to the north. Combined with the pounding of Pegram's batteries firing on their front from Herr's Ridge, the barrage was, as the saying went: "exacting a terrible effect." An officer of the C.S. III Corps noticed a gunner within Richmond's "Letcher Battery" who after each pull of the lanyard would cross himself and mutter: "*Lord, be marsiful to their poor souls*" ... But despite the cannonade, the hardened Union veterans stood their ground. As was often the case, infantry would have to settle the contest.

The U.S. XI Corps arrives .

At about 1 o' clock, Major General Oliver Otis Howard, commander of the U.S. XI Corps, arrived slightly ahead of his hard-marching troops. Having learned of Reynolds' death, Howard, as ranking officer, took command on the field. Robinson was told to be ready for what seemed an imminent C.S. offensive from the north. Howard saw that threat already filtering in through the woods on Oak Hill. The Union line of defense was thin. If the Confederates could punch through here, the entire line would have to fall back. Howard ordered forward two divisions of

the XI Corps, those of Brigadier General Alexander Schimmelfenig (serving for Major General Carl Schurz, who had taken over XI Corps with Howard assuming overall command) and Brigadier General Francis Barlow. The rest of the XI Corps marched up from the south and halted on Cemetery Hill, just south of town. Schimmelfenig's troops moved through the town on the run and dispersed into the outlying fields directly north of town. They extended the Union line, connecting with Baxter's men atop the north end of Seminary Ridge. A great cheer went up from U.S. I Corps troops as these reinforcements approached, the division made up mostly of German immigrants. H.E. Jacobs, a Gettysburg resident, described the Germans' advance:

... they flowed through (the town) and out into the battlefield beyond, a human tide at millrace speed.

Barlow's division set up on the right flank of Schimmelfenig to the east. Two U.S. divisions—four brigades—now covered the northern approach routes into Gettysburg down four separate pikes: the Mummasburg, the Newville and Carlisle (merging just north of town), and the Heidlesburg from the northeast. But the feeling of relief would be short, as Ewell's II Corps approached en masse.

Full commitment .

With resolve, hard-marching troops began to cascade—division after division, corps after corps—into this once peaceful crossroads, bringing with it the beginnings of a monumental conflict. Bruce Catton offers this synopsis of the early stages of battle:

It had begun as an almost accidental collision between two armies—it had continued because sheer force of circumstance made it impossible to break it off, and it was actually fought for possession of control over the future of America.

Lee recanted on a single sweeping assault down the Cashtown-Chambersburg Pike and had called for a general offensive by all C.S. troops in the area. Reynolds and Buford had long ago committed the Union to the fight. Howard was now in charge of staving off superior numbers and holding the field. With only two corps and cavalry in Gettysburg, only about one-quarter of the *Army of the Potomac* was in position to fight. The remaining corps, having been arrayed in their defensive positions along Pipe Creek, had broken camp and were marching hard for Pennsylvania. Soldiers North and South began to size up the situation. All could see that there was a big fight ahead.

On the morning of July 1st, as I Corps was marching to the aid of Buford, a Pennsylvania sergeant began to talk enthusiastically of fighting for his home state. A member of his unit yelled in response: “*we'll stand by you until hell freezes over, and then fight on the ice!*” Jesse Bowman Young, a lieutenant in the U.S. III Corps, proudly stated: “*there is no man who cannot fight the better when it is for his own home.*” Commitment to one’s homeland was often expressed as something akin to sacred in the Civil War era. The commitment to battle here at Gettysburg was no longer negotiable. J. F. J. Caldwell’s prediction was taking shape.

George Meade knew better than to take on Lee with only partial strength. And so, the other five corps of the *Army of the Potomac* had been set to grueling forced-marches beneath the summer heat. Meade also knew that the Union troops already on the field would have to perform without fail if any chance for victory was to remain. The *Army of Northern Virginia* had the bold reputation of striking fast and with furious strength. Lee and his commanders had shown decisive ability, often defeating an opponent surprised, under-strength or gripped with confusion, in-detail. But the southern army had a serious disadvantage on this July 1, 1863: “Stonewall” Jackson was not at the helm of their II Corps ...

As I followed the first day's battle, 130 years later, I was forced back into my car by a steady rain. I parked overlooking John McPherson's barn sitting on the crest of the ridge named for him and just south of route 30, the Cashtown-Chambersburg Pike. This barn would be used as Rodes' divisional field hospital, noted by the small blue metal sign standing before it. There is another sign before Oak Hill standing near an empty field that marks the former site of John Forney's farmhouse. As mentioned, these signs are everywhere.

Rodes moves in .

Cutler's U.S. troops, who had moved back to Seminary Ridge and linked with Paul's regiment of Robinson's division, had created a gap in doing so. If sighted from the north, the Iron Brigade defense atop McPherson's Ridge was now in front (west) of Cutler and Robinson by a few hundred yards. From Herr's Ridge, it would appear as a slight staggering in the Union line. But from the north it was distinct. It is possible that C.S. Major General Richard Rodes saw this and set about to exploit it. Yet Rodes was overzealous in ordering the assault on Cutler and Robinson's troops, figuring the Union line would surely break in rout if pressed by so large a force. Under cover of the woods of Oak Hill, he lined up Colonel E. O'Neal's Alabama brigade on the left and Brigadier General Alfred Iverson's Carolinians to their right (near today's Eternal Peace Light Memorial). They were sent forward down the hill and into the open fields before Seminary Ridge. The attack faltered from the start.

Oak Hill offers the best view of the first-day's battlefield. Before it and leading down to Seminary Ridge, lies Forney's Field, fields flowing down over a wide sweeping valley. On July 1, 1863, this land depression was transformed into a gruesome scene ... Rodes must have thought a quick strike would catch the Union line off-guard. But the hard deadly defense of that line in turn caught the Confederates off-guard before they'd really had a chance to organize. The charge staggered forward. O'Neal advanced in force down the eastern slope of Oak Hill. Iverson balked,

unsure, not confident. O’Neal’s Alabamians were quickly exposed and gunned down, retreating in confusion. Iverson finally moved forward, but it was too late. The Union troops were in the midst of a ferocious killing spree. They had repulsed one wing of the assault and simply adjusted to dish out the same punishment to Iverson’s Confederates. C.S. Sergeant H. C. Wall later stated: “*unwarned, and unled as a brigade, we went to our doom.*” Robinson’s men, closest to the C.S. advance, poured a withering fire into the advancing Carolinians. Cutler’s brigade swung ninety degrees to the north from their position on Seminary Ridge, trapping Iverson’s men in Forney’s Field and nearly swallowing the advance whole. Captain Isaac Hall of Baxter’s 97th New York described the Confederates’ fated assault as they “*staggered, halted, and were swept back as by an irresistible current.*” A few of Iverson’s troops made it to within about forty or fifty feet of Paul’s men (Robinson’s Division) on the ridge. A small monument rests at this spot, where they were slaughtered. Those who could limped back to Oak Hill. It was murder at the hands of impatience and overconfidence—and Rodes’ men paid the price.

Still, the shifting tide of battle would soon overwhelm this minor Union victory. Early’s division of Ewell’s C.S. II Corps was then arriving via the Heidlesburg Road to the northeast. These were tough soldiers from Georgia and Louisiana, the rest of the II Corps close behind. The thin overextended line of the Union’s two XI Corps divisions would prove no match for Ewell’s numbers. Howard had optimistically sent forth the XI Corps troops to help stem a rout and hold out for the main body of the U.S. *Army of the Potomac*. Instead, it would be their precipitous collapse that would—piece-by-piece—dissolve the whole Union line north of Gettysburg.

The auto road past Oak Hill .

I drove down the front of Oak Hill on the auto tour road, the general route of O’Neal’s fated assault. The view stretched out over rolling countryside that slowly melded with the town. It was hot and humid and still threatening rain, reminding me of summer days growing up. The

smell of fresh cut grass was in the air. Old barns shared space with an auto garage warehouse and a large radio antennae a ways off. To the south, you could see the Seminary's tower. Things had certainly changed since 1863, a helicopter passing over to help prove my point. Technology and society march on, but the history of these fields is not easily erased. It clings to its roots, hangs in the air ... The approach routes of Early's Confederates spread out to the east of the auto road, north of town. For the remainder of the battle, the Union would be on the defensive.

The auto road curved around and brought me to the northern rise of Seminary Ridge. From here there is a clear view of Forney's Field from Baxter's and Paul's positions (again, Robinson's Division) along the northern-most end of the Union line, mid-day July 1, 1863. While standing in front of the Eternal Peace Light Memorial atop Oak Hill, this field seemed peaceful. But from the Union positions, the field took on a savage reality. I stopped the car and took advantage of the break in the rain. After walking around the area for awhile, I took a seat at the base of the 97th New York Infantry monument and looked out across Forney's Field. It takes little imagination to sense the magnitude of the killing that occurred here.

The battle shifts around to the north .

As mid-afternoon rolled in, Early opened on Barlow's flanks, bearing down hard along the Heidlesburg Road northeast of town. Brigadier General George Dole's brigade of Rode's Division moved off the eastern side of Oak Hill, away from O'Neal's previous line of advance, aimed for a head-on collision with Schimmelfenig's U.S. line to the right of Paul. Most of this immediate area is now a part of Gettysburg College. Athletic fields stand alongside the battlefield park—ironic considering a common 19th century view of war as sport.

Barlow had moved his Union division to a knoll in front of his original position. His force, including artillery, was now on the highest ground in the area and aided by the wide, if fordable, Rock Creek in his front. It seems like it should have been a strong position. But in

placing his troops, Barlow failed to seal off the route that the Heidlesburg Road took directly into his line's rear. This exposed his right flank. Almost as soon as Barlow was in position, the Confederates' appeared. Brigadier General Harry Hays's "Louisiana Tigers" and Colonel Isaac Avery's Carolinians rushed down the Heidlesburg Road. Brigadier General John Gordon's II C.S. Corps troops moved in behind Hays and Avery and advanced directly on Colonel Leopold Von Gilsa's troops, Barlow's division. The two met atop the knoll; and after a fierce firefight, the Confederates swarmed over the position driving back Von Gilsa's men. All the while, Barlow's artillery fired furiously into the advancing Confederate ranks. But Hays and Avery's men closed in behind them. The Union position was now untenable, its artillery overrun. Early's force had laid the groundwork for a complete rout. Three Confederate brigades fell on Barlow's men with determination, Howard's U.S. XI Corps line coming apart. Doles' C.S. brigade moved down on Schimmelfenig's front directly north of the town about the same time that Barlow's men began to fall back. The entire north end of the Union defense was undone. Paul's men on the north end of Seminary Ridge found themselves in danger of being flanked with the XI Corp falling back. He was forced to move his men south along the ridge, taking up a tentative position behind the spent troops of Cutler's command. Baxter followed Paul's retreat south along the ridge. C.S. Brigadier Generals' Stephen Ramseur and Julius Daniel of Rodes' Division—along with a patchwork of what remained of O'Neal's men—pursued the I Corps retreat across Forney's Field and down Seminary Ridge to the north-end of McPherson's Ridge (near to the original position of Union cavalry early that morning). Daniel's Confederates pressed down hard on Rowley's division atop McPherson's Ridge, the area soon shrouded in thick, near-impenetrable smoke. The whole Union line was falling apart in the face of superior numbers, a general rout in the making. The Confederates could taste victory in the acrid air.

The Union demise .

As the U.S. XI Corps fell back through the town, the streets became a scene of chaos. Fleeing soldiers and artillery batteries clogged all the roads, any semblance of an orderly retreat undone by those frantically attempting to escape. Early's energized Confederates were hot on their heels. There was a general breakdown of unit structure, at points devolving into every man for himself. Bullets flew thick, artillery raining down amongst the defeated throngs of Union troops. Buildings and houses provided some cover, until the pursuing Confederates moved in—initiating a rare Civil War instance of house-to-house fighting.

Despite the collapse of the entire U.S. line north of town, one brigade refused to accept defeat: the Iron Brigade standing their ground atop McPherson's Ridge. A rejuvenated C.S. attack in their front hurled everything it had at them. But the westerners held them off, punishing the Confederates as they did. Major General William Pender's entire division, the brigades of Pettigrew, Brockenborough and Davis, ground their way forward. Colonel Roy Stone's brigade of Rowley's U.S. division took up Cutler's former position, half of his force bent back along the turnpike to face Daniels' C.S. brigade then advancing from Oak Hill to the north. Bloody hand-to-hand fighting now consumed the area of the railroad cut. Stone's men (mostly Pennsylvanians and New Yorkers) was being overwhelmed by the Confederate tide. One Union regiment seemed set to break for the rear, when their color bearer, Sergeant Benjamin Crippen, ran unarmed into the face of a regiment of North Carolinians flaunting the "stars and stripes," shaking his fist and yelling obscenities at the invaders. He was instantly riddled with bullets. But his regiment rallied in sight of his suicidal bravery, and held. Confederate Colonel William Oates (whose men would play a large role in the battle on the second day), described a statue erected years later in Crippen's honor—depicting the sergeant as he received the fatal shot—as "*a fine piece of art.*" I never did find the monument, if it is still there.

Battery B of the 4th U.S. Artillery, commanded by an old U.S. army regular, James Stewart, managed to momentarily check the overpowering wave of grey and butternut flowing up over the ridge near the railroad cut. An anonymous cannoneer's description of this battery's work, as it was near to being overrun, relays a gruesome scene with peculiar enthusiasm:

The very guns became things of life—not implements, but comrades. Every man did the work of two or three. At our gun at the finish, there was only the Corporal, No. 1, No. 3, with two drivers fetching ammunition (there was a standard crew of four per cannon, with a corporal or sergeant directing operations and drivers in the immediate rear with horses and limbers). The water in Pat's bucket was like ink (a water bucket into which a staff was dipped and used to sponge the inside of the cannon's barrel so as to douse lingering sparks while reloading). His face and hands were smeared all over with burnt powder and the crimson streaks from his bloody head, Packard looked like a demon from below! Up and down the line, men reeling and falling, splinters flying from the wheels and axles where the bullets hit—in rear, horses tearing and plunging, mad with wounds or terror, drivers yelling, shells bursting, shot shrieking overhead, howling about our ears or throwing up great clouds of dust where they struck—the musketry crashing on three sides of us, bullets hissing, humming, whistling everywhere—cannon roaring, all crash on crash and peal on peal, smoke, dust, splinters, blood, wreck, and carnage indescribable. But the brass guns of 'Old B' still bellowed and not a man or boy flinched or faltered! Every man's shirt was soaked with sweat and many of them with blood from wounds not severe enough to make such bulldogs 'let go'—bareheaded, sleeves rolled up, faces blackened! If such a picture could be spread out on the canvas of life! Out in front of us an undulating field, filled almost as far as the eye could reach with a long, low, grey line creeping toward us, fairly fringed with flame!

Lt. James Davison was in command of three of these guns north of the railroad cut. With the Confederates within earshot of the battery, he stomped between his gunners in a mad frenzy directing the fire and screaming: "feed it to 'em, God damn 'em, feed it to 'em!"

The fighting was fierce. Hand-to-hand struggles were fought tooth-and-nail, no inch of ground given up without a fight. But the general C.S. assault was in the end just too much,

dropping down on the outnumbered Northerners like a deluge. The U.S. line along McPherson's Ridge slowly collapsed. Daniels's C.S. brigade and other units from Rode's division tightened the vice from the north as Doubleday's troops gave way. The U.S. I Corps fought for its life against the better portion of two C.S. corps: Hill's III and Ewell's II. The Iron Brigade would be so torn up by their defense of the ridge that it would never again field troops in brigade strength. Fierce fighting continued as the U.S. I Corps retreated. The lurid stench of sulfurous fumes poisoned the air. Smoke made it impossible to see, the noise deafening. The Union troops grudgingly hobbled back across Seminary Ridge and into town "*fighting the whole way*," as the 14th Brooklyn monument proudly boasts. The Union resistance had been "spirited," but costly. The fight was all but over and the first day's fields—northwest and north of town—belonged to the Confederates ...

I made my retreat through the town of Gettysburg at about the same time-of-day that the U.S. XI Corps was making their panicked retreat through town 130 years earlier. I found my trek a bit frenetic and confusing as well, encountering the "spirited" rush hour of July 1, 1993—all while navigating a pell-mell scene around the modern traffic circle downtown. Gaining my bearings—my own disorderly retreat behind me—I made my way south of town.

Early's Confederates careened into Gettysburg from the north, taking thousands of prisoners. With every street already clogged full with the U.S. XI Corps, the succeeding I Corps' demise led to a major traffic jam—complete with continued shelling from Confederate artillery. Downtown Gettysburg was a frantic scene presided over by the demoralization of defeat. Those that did escape fled south, filing out onto the slopes of Cemetery Hill where the disorganized Union troops were being drawn up.

In the midst of a very bad situation for the Union army, Schurz turned command of the XI Corps back to O. O. Howard, as a new commander was on the field. Major General Winfield Scott Hancock, commander of the *Army of the Potomac*'s II Corps, had arrived with orders from Meade to take command until Meade arrived. Howard protested, as he outranked Hancock. But Hancock—his orders from the very top—quieted the upset Howard and focused on rectifying the

chaos then filtering out onto high ground south of town. Howard likewise, attempted to repair his corps' mass disorganization. The XI Corps and Doubleday's I Corps—also hobbling in—had become completely intermixed in their retreat through town. Having fought all morning and to the last atop the ridges west of town, the I Corps was badly mauled. The situation was indeed grim for the Union army. But Meade wanted to hold here at Gettysburg. It was Hancock's duty to guarantee that was the case: a difficult task, at best. For as one of Hancock's subordinates described: "*defeat and retreat were everywhere.*"

Ewell's inaction .

Gettysburg was now an occupied town, one of the few northern towns ever to be held by Confederate forces during the war. It had been a tough fight, but the momentum was with the Southerners. One of Early's officers saw the scene that late-afternoon as a stepping stone towards a total annihilation of the *Army of the Potomac*, overconfidently proclaiming: "*it looked as if the end of the war had come*" ... hyperbolic, no doubt. Nonetheless the events of that late-afternoon set up one of the very few hinges on which the direction of the war could have swung either way. A swift and strong Confederate assault against the broken and disorganized Union forces then clinging to Cemetery Hill south of town, would almost certainly have altered the course of this battle—and with it the war.

With Doubleday's U.S. I Corps all but crushed and the whole Union force still on the field in disarray, Ewell moved the C.S. divisions of Rodes and Early into the town early that evening, presumably to continue the offensive. It was sweltering, had been a very hot humid day. Ewell's troops had marched hard and fought hard, taking heavy casualties in the process. But Early felt his men would have little trouble taking the hill south of the city. Early was in fact more than confident, he was champing at the bit, swearing in general protest of Ewell's inaction. Lee, who was not yet present, had given permission to continue the fight. Hill's III Corps, having taken

heavy casualties in fighting the U.S. I Corps was still awaiting the arrival of their only fresh division under Major General Richard Anderson. Rode's division was out of the question. They had fought hard and were exhausted. Early and, or the last remaining C.S. II Corps division under Major General Edward Johnson, just then arriving on the field, would have to complete the day's work. But Ewell was unwilling to move forward without a direct order, the protocol that he was used to following as a subordinate of Jackson. Lee had, in so many words, told Ewell to use his better judgment. But all this suggestion accomplished was to stifle the indecisive Ewell. Lee was issuing orders as if Jackson were still in command of the II Corps.

It was about this time, near 6 p.m., that a loud thud filled the air around the collection of Confederate generals deliberating the next course of action—the unmistakable dull whack of a musket ball striking. All those gathered immediately looked to Ewell. “*Are you alright general!*” many asked in panicked surprise. Cool and collected, Ewell responded: “*it doesn't hurt when you've got a wooden leg,*” a musket ball having imbedded in Ewell’s artificial limb; his leg having been amputated following a wound he’d taken at Manassas the preceding year.

And it was this stolid stance that Dick Ewell struck. Sitting on his mount, he waited for the direct order to attack that would not come, Early ranting at his side—the hot sun slowly disappearing to the west ...

The first day's fighting was over. The Confederates continued to wait as Hancock built the anchor of what would be a very strong defensive position for the Union army on the hills and ridges south of town. The Battle of Gettysburg had begun, as Bruce Catton wrote, with a near “*accidental collision*” of the two armies. It would end as one of the most significant events in American history ~

[CONTINUE to PART II]

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