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# General Daniel Edgar Sickles, Storm at the Peach Orchard

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GENERAL DANIEL EDGAR SICKLES, STORM AT THE PEACH ORCHARD

A Master Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty

Of

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By

Robert Wible

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree

Of

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this to my dearest wife Leticia whose support, patience and assistance made this project a success.

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## ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

## GENERAL DANIEL EDGAR SICKLES, STORM AT THE PEACH ORCHARD

By

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This study examines the events leading up to and including the controversial actions of General Daniel Edgar Sickles on July 2<sup>nd</sup> 1863, at the Battle of Gettysburg, during the American Civil War. It is a study of the performance of General Sickles during the Battle of Gettysburg, specifically, the decision he made to re-deploy Third Corps from its assigned position on Cemetery Ridge to the Emmitsburg Road. This study will examine the ascension of Dan Sickles through the ranks of leadership within the Union Army and his professional relationship with his superiors. Additionally, his experiences during the Peninsulas Campaign, Battle of Fredericksburg and the Battle of Chancellorsville will be studied to determine how these battles influenced his judgment and conduct at Gettysburg. Finally, this study will look closely at the effect of the Peach Orchard position on the Confederate attack that targeted the left flank of the Union position on Cemetery Ridge.

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## Introduction

The American Civil War is considered the world's first modern war and is often referred to as a seminal event in American History. The four year struggle pitched countryman against countryman, neighbor against neighbor and even brother against brother in a ferocious and bloody war that would determine the future course of the nation. It was a destructive and deadly conflict resulting in an estimated 1,094,453 casualties for both sides.<sup>1</sup> Bruce Catton in his book, *America Goes to War: The Civil War and Its Meaning in American Culture*, writes, "Men do not control modern war; it controls them. It destroys the old bases on which society stood; and because it does, it compels men to go on and find the material for new bases, whether they want to do so or not."<sup>2</sup> As Catton so aptly points out, with war comes change and the American Civil War radically altered the balance of power away from state bureaucracies to a federal government that centralized authority and expanded its power and jurisdiction. Reconstruction and emancipation would spur great societal revolutions that would alter the collective fabric of the Southern antebellum plantation culture forever. An outcome of the war that would have far reaching effects on the American social structure was the establishment of the progressive movement which would dramatically reform the socio-economic structure of the country as it progressed into becoming a global Industrial power.

The American Civil War would spur the introduction of new weaponry, improved battle tactics and the creation of medical and logistics management systems that would form the

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<sup>1</sup> Foote, Shelby. *The Civil War: A Narrative, Vol. 3*. (New York, NY: Random House, 2011), 1040.

<sup>2</sup> Catton, Bruce. *America Goes to War: The Civil War and Its Meaning in American Culture*. (Middletown, CT, USA: Wesleyan University Press, 1992). ProQuest ebrary. Web. 29 August 2015. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=10468416>

foundation of the American military establishment of the future. The concept of warfare that targeted the enemy's civilian populations and infrastructure was introduced into the lexicon of military strategic planning. Historian Russell Wrigley in his book, *A Great Civil War, A Military and Political History, 1861-1865*, suggests that the winning genius of generals Grant and Sherman was the implementation of what was to become a unique form of American warfare that would be defined as "total war."<sup>3</sup> Grand campaigns, such as General Sherman's "March to the Sea," that targeted the South's population and industrial centers with the goal of eliminating the support structure of the enemy army would become an established tactic within American institutional military circles. In the context of military and cultural change that can be brought upon a society by warfare, few have had greater impact than the American Civil War.

The Civil War provided the country with great leaders that would rise to the challenge of the time and have a deciding effect on the very nature and course of the war. For the Confederacy, General Robert E. Lee would be the principal guiding force on whom the fortunes of the South rested. Through the early years of the war, Lee would successfully engage and defeat every Union General President Lincoln set after him. He defeated McClellan in the Seven Days Battle ending the Peninsular Campaign; he defeated Pope at the 2nd Battle of Bull Run, defeated Burnside at Fredericksburg, and at Chancellorsville Lee defeated General "Fighting Joe" Hooker. Only at Antietam would Lee suffer a military setback which forced a premature end of his first attempt to invade Northern territory. These victories would create a perception that Lee and his ragtag army were all but unconquerable. This belief in the superiority of the southern soldier became pervasive not only in the South but amongst a growing number of Northerners as

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<sup>3</sup>Weigley, Russell. *A Great Civil War, A Military and Political History, 1861-1865*. (Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press), 2000, 29-30.

well. Michael Korda in his book, *Clouds Of Glory, The Life And Legend Of Robert E. Lee*, writes, “the victory at Chancellorsville had reconfirmed in Lee a tendency to rely in the fighting spirit of Confederate Soldiers.”<sup>4</sup> Lee counted on the élan of his men and their officers to overcome incredible odds and provide him victories through sheer force of will and exemplary leadership. Ironically, these stunning victories would ultimately sow the seeds of defeat for the Confederacy.

Despite the dramatic successes of his army, Lee knew the South had neither the materials nor the men to compete with an army that had a virtually unlimited supply of both. Author Allen C. Guelzo in his book, *Gettysburg, The Last Invasion*, writes that Lee, rather than being delighted, was depressed after the stunning victories at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville. “We had really accomplished nothing,” Lee stated, “we had not gained a foot of ground, and I knew the enemy would easily replace the men he had lost.”<sup>5</sup> Lee understood the dire implication that the Confederacy was literally bleeding to death in front line soldiers and competent officers to lead them. In spite of suffering disastrous defeats on the battlefield, even after suffering the carnage of Antietam, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, the North continued to be stubbornly persistent in its efforts to overcome the rebellious confederates. General Lee soon realized that the war could not be won on a strictly military basis and had begun to look for a politically negotiated conclusion to the conflict. Michael Korda writes that, “Lee’s position as the South’s most respected and admired military figure, and the high drama of his rapid marches and his victories against much larger armies, had a profound effect on southern military strategy.”<sup>6</sup> Lee

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<sup>4</sup>Korda, Michael. *Clouds Of Glory, The Life And Legend Of Robert E. Lee*. (New York, NY: Harper, 2014), 535.

<sup>5</sup> Guelzo, Allen C.. *Gettysburg, The Last Invasion*. (New York: Radom House LLC, 2013), 19.

<sup>6</sup>Korda, Michael. *Clouds Of Glory, The Life And Legend Of Robert E. Lee*. 524

had concluded that a only a successful military incursion, deep into northern territory that directly threatened the safety and security of its cities and people, could pressure the Federals into negotiating an end to the conflict that would be favorable to the Confederacy.

No one comprehended the importance of a successful campaign in northern territory more than Lee. He knew the South's resources in men and material were limited and a prolonged contest with the North could only end in disaster for the South. The victories at Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville significantly boosted the morale of the Confederate Army and added to Lee's conviction that his men would accomplish any task he set before them. Edwin Coddington in his book *The Gettysburg Campaign, a Study in Command*, writes, "The Confederates had gained psychologically; their confidence in the military prowess of the Army of Northern Virginia under Lee soared to new heights."<sup>7</sup> Given the successes of the previous months fighting, Lee had sound tactical reasoning for taking the war north and that the summer of 1863 was the most opportune time for such a decisive campaign. Within the Confederate hierarchy there was considerable pressure to redeploy troops to confront the growing threat in the western theatre of battle. Edwin Coddington explains that, "Lee felt that at this stage of the war a major victory in the east would go further to solving the strategic dilemma of the Confederacy than any other event, and Lee's army had the best chance at achieving that goal."<sup>8</sup> Lee would prevail and his grand strategy to take the war to the north would be approved. It would be a triumphant and confident Confederate army that would follow its hallowed leader north into the very heart of the Union to strike the blow they believed would secure the independence of their nation and insure

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<sup>7</sup>Coddington, Edwin, B. *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*. (New York, NY: Touchtone. 1979) 6.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 9.

the continuance of the Southern way of life. Little did they know that the campaign they were about to undertake would culminate in one of the greatest battles to be fought on American soil and would have a profound effect on the outcome of the war.

In every major conflict there are turning points, crucial moments when one side attains the belief and conviction that theirs is the superior army, that they can defeat the enemy in the field and win the war. For the Union Army under the command of General George Meade, that moment was the Battle of Gettysburg (July 1<sup>st</sup> to July 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1863), when they would decisively defeat the Confederate Army under the leadership of General Robert E Lee. Stephen Sears in the introduction to his book *Gettysburg* writes that, “For General Lee, Gettysburg was a defining defeat. The result of the battle effectively ended any possibility of a Confederate victory and hopes of Southern independence. Gettysburg marked the turning point of the war in the east ... repelling the Confederates offensive and stripping the initiative from General Lee.”<sup>9</sup> The stunning defeat of the Rebel Army at Gettysburg, coupled with the fall of Vicksburg to General Grant, were critical events in the war, signaling that the “tide had changed” and the defeat of the Confederacy had become all but inevitable.

Gettysburg was just one of many major battles fought during the Civil War. However, the concurrent loss of Vicksburg, a vital Confederate bastion that controlled the Mississippi River, one day after the defeat at Gettysburg, are considered by historians as two of the most decisive defeats suffered by the Confederates during the Civil War. Samuel Drake in his book, *Battle of Gettysburg 1863*, writes, “The battle of Gettysburg has often been called the turning-point of the

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<sup>9</sup> Sears, Steven. *Gettysburg*, (New York, NY: Barnes And Nobel, 2004) XIV.

War Between the States.”<sup>10</sup> Edwin Coddington in, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, writes, “Lee’s Northern campaign and Battle of Gettysburg seemed to have been a turning point in the course of the conflict, and it became popularly known as the place where the Confederacy reached its High Water Mark.”<sup>11</sup> Author Shelby Foote in, *The Civil War: A Narrative, Volume Two, Fredericksburg to Meridian*, writes that officials in Richmond “were staggered by the double blow of losing Vicksburg and the failure of Lee’s northern campaign.” Confederate Chief of Ordnance Josiah Gorgas confessed an even darker view of the situation. “Yesterday we rode on the pinnacle of success, today absolute ruin seems to be our portion. The Confederacy totters to its destruction.”<sup>12</sup> Stephen Sears in his book, *Gettysburg*, writes, “At the least, a success in Pennsylvania would offset any failure at Vicksburg. At the most, a great victory on enemy soil might put peace within Richmond’s reach. Secretary Of State for the Confederacy, James Seddon said it well: Such a movement by the Army of Northern Virginia “is indispensable to our safety and independence.”<sup>13</sup> James McPherson in *Battle Cry for Freedom: The Civil War Era*, writes that “Lee and his men would go on to further laurels. But they never again possessed the power and reputation they carried into Pennsylvania those balmy midsummer days of 1863, Gettysburg and Vicksburg provide to have been its critical turning point.”<sup>14</sup> At this point the conflict would devolve into a war of attrition, each battle regardless of

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<sup>10</sup>Drake, Samuel A.. *Battle of Gettysburg 1863*. North Scituate, MA, USA: Digital Scanning, Inc., 2001. ProQuest ebrary. Web. 2 October 2015, 160.

<sup>11</sup> Coddington, Edwin, B. *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, vii.

<sup>12</sup> Foote, Shelby. *The Civil War: A Narrative, Vol. 2*, 641.

<sup>13</sup> Sears, Steven. *Gettysburg*, (New York, NY: Barnes And Nobel 2004) 17.

<sup>14</sup> McPherson, James. *Battle Cry for Freedom: The Civil War Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 665.

the victor and each campaign regardless of its success would subtract from the South's dwindling resources and add to the cumulative Union advantage of men and material.

The Battle of Gettysburg began as a minor skirmish on July 1<sup>st</sup>, 1863 between a division of Union Cavalry on a scouting mission and a division of Confederate infantry on a foraging assignment and rapidly escalated into a desperate three day struggle that would have a major impact on the course of the American Civil War. History will record the Confederate attack on Cemetery Hill on July 3<sup>rd</sup> as the high-water mark of the Southern war effort. Pickett's Charge was indeed a valiant, yet ultimately fruitless effort to break the Federal line and turn the tide of the battle. In truth the greater chance of a complete victory for the Confederate Army was the attack on the previous day. Michael Korda refers to the attack that Longstreet carried out on the Federal line as perhaps "the most critical assault in the history of the Confederacy."<sup>15</sup> On the second day of the battle, the Confederate Army launched a major assault on the left flank of the Federal position along Cemetery Ridge south of Gettysburg. Historians agree the result of that day's action played a decisive role in deciding the outcome of the Battle of Gettysburg and quite possibly the war.

There were many tactical mistakes made by both sides during the fighting on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. However, a singular decision, one that had a major effect on the outcome of the battle, and stands out as one of the most controversial of the war, was made by General Dan Sickles. Just hours prior to a massive Confederate attack on the Union Line, Major General Dan Sickles ordered Third Corps off its assigned position along Cemetery Ridge out to higher ground located half a mile to the west along the Emmitsburg Road. Historians have debated whether the deployment of Third Corps to the Peach Orchard, contrary to the orders of his Commanding Officer, either

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<sup>15</sup> Korda, Michael. *Clouds Of Glory, The Life And Legend Of Robert E. Lee*, 574.

saved the Union Army, or placed it in dire peril. Sickles' lack of formal military training and deeply inherent personal bravado would cause him to make what can only be described as a reckless tactical decision. The Commander of Third Corps would reposition his men to a strategically unsound and indefensible position that was neither anchored nor easily supported by the rest of the army. Allen Guelzo in his book, *Gettysburg, The Last Invasion*, included in his text the testimony of General Hancock of Second Corps who upon viewing the impressive display of Sickles' entire Corps marching out to the Emmitsburg Road remarked to his staff, "Gentlemen, that is a splendid advance, and beautiful to look at," he concluded his observation by stating, "and those troops will be coming back very soon."<sup>16</sup> There is little argument against the premise that General Sickles disregarded the intent of the orders given directly to him by his superior officer. However, the reasoning behind General Sickles' action can be better understood by examining his experiences in which his own instincts and tactical advice had been ignored to the severe detriment of his men. Additionally, Sickles, being a politically appointed officer, was possessed of a military sensibility far different than that of his peers many of whom had the benefit of professional military indoctrination at West Point Academy. There are instances in which Sickles' professional and social background may have been the cause of the indifferent treatment he would receive when addressing his concerns to the officers and staff of General Meade. Additionally, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that General Sickles' bold action set in motion a course of events that effectively blunted the momentum of the Confederate assault on the Federal line at Cemetery Ridge and was in large part responsible for the failure of Longstreet's mission to roll up the left flank of the Union Army.

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<sup>16</sup>Guelzo, Allen C.. *Gettysburg, The Last Invasion*, 251.

Most historical texts singularly blamed General Sickles for the near disaster that occurred on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. Historians refer to official documents that were generated as a result of the battle when accusing him of disobeying the direct orders of his commanding officer and using poor judgment in placing his corps in a precarious situation. Additionally, much has been made of his notorious past and lack of professional military training. However, James M. McPherson in *Battle Cry Of Freedom*, writes that "Sickles unwise move may have unwittingly foiled Lee's hopes."<sup>17</sup> Confederate General E.P. Alexander in his memoir, *Fighting for the Confederacy, The Personal Recollections of Edward Porter Alexander*, states, "I may say that in my judgment it was no harm to Meade to have our charge expend its first fury upon an advanced line in front."<sup>18</sup> Additionally General McLaws stated that, "in carrying that position against Sickles ... our forces exhausted themselves and by the time the Confederate advance reached the main Federal line it was too scattered and lost so many commanders and rank and file as to be unfit and unable to make further combined effort."<sup>19</sup> Finally, General Longstreet believed that "his troops would have easily occupied Little Round Top and flanked the entire Union position had the circumstances of Sickles actions been different"<sup>20</sup> and E.P. Alexander adds to his assessment of Sickles action by stating, "Sickles claims that his advanced position is what gave Meade the victory, and in my opinion he has reasonable ground for thinking so."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> McPherson, James. *Battle Cry for Freedom: The Civil War Era*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 657.,

<sup>18</sup> Alexander, Edward Porter. *Fighting for the Confederacy, The Personnel Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander*. ed. Gary W. Gallagher. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University Of North Carolina Press, 1989) 238.

<sup>19</sup> Stackpole, Edward J. *They Met At Gettysburg*. (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1956), 220.

<sup>20</sup> Longstreet, James. *From Manassas To Appomattox, Memoirs Of The Civil War In America*. (New York: Barnes Noble, 2004), 322.

<sup>21</sup> Alexander, Edward Porter. *Fighting for the Confederacy, The Personnel Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander*, 238.

It was General Sickles who correctly surmised that an attack on the extreme left of the Union position on Cemetery Ridge was imminent and took steps that in his discernment would most effectively address the threat that was developing to his front. Sickles action, to reposition his Corps out to the Emmitsburg Road, caused a significant disruption in the cohesiveness of the Confederate attack, so much so that Longstreet's Corps failed in its objective to turn the Union left flank. Had Sickles remained in position on Cemetery Ridge, that part of the Union Army could have crumpled under the sheer mass of more than 14,000 Confederate infantrymen supported by batteries of artillery positioned in the Peach Orchard. General Meade's reluctance to address the tactical concerns of one of his corps officers precipitated the action by Sickles which would necessitate a crisis response to save the army. A defeat on the battlefield that day would surely have forced a withdrawal of the Union Army from its defensive position along Cemetery Ridge and a subsequent retreat south towards the Federal Capital City of Washington.

## Chapter 1

### The Making of a Political General

By every measure General Sickles performed his duties as a military leader in the American Civil War in keeping with the standards and expectations of an officer in the United States Army. In each accounting of Sickles performance in battle, from the Seven Days campaign through Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, there are no reports of him lacking in the performance of his duty or being insubordinate to his superior commander. In most respects he led his men well and fought bravely. Sickles performance as a leader stands in stark contrast to the vast majority of political generals who were considered inadequate to the task. This was due to their being essentially amateur soldiers with no prior training or even an understanding of military protocol to speak of. This was a particularly large problem for the Union where such generals were routinely given command over large combat units without the benefit of professional military education or experience. Sickles rapid ascension to the ranks of senior military leadership can be described as opportunistic because like other politically appointed generals, he took advantage of dire times to secure his lot in the military infrastructure. James Hessler in his book, *Sickles at Gettysburg : The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, documents Sickles introduction into the cadre of military hierarchy, “Sickles claimed that he had enlisted fully expecting to serve in the ranks, but as he was getting ready to leave for camp, he was convinced by his friends “that I could better serve the cause by raising a regiment” and “thus

rapidly was I advanced from the ranks to the grade of a regimental commander.”<sup>22</sup> Sickles rise to command of an entire Corps of Infantry, without the benefit of a West Point style education was not unusual in the desperate times of the Civil War and as a consequence many of the politically appointed generals, ill suited for the rigorous demands of military leadership in war, would be replaced. Sickles, however, was possessed of a personal resolve that would motivate him to succeed and surpass many of his contemporaries as a leader and battlefield commander.

Dan Sickles began his civilian career as a printers apprentice before opening a law practice and subsequently entering in politics, joining the Democratic Party. In 1855 he won a seat in the New York State Senate and was elected to the House of Representatives in 1856 and 1858. The low point in Sickles controversial life occurred when he became involved in a sordid incident in which he would be put on trial for the murder of Philip Barton Key, the son of Francis Scott Key, the author of “The Star-Spangled Banner.” Phillip Key was having an affair with Sickles’ wife and in Sickles would shoot and kill Phillip in a very public and tawdry manner. Sickles high powered defense team argued before an American jury for the first time what would become known as the “temporary insanity defense”<sup>23</sup> Sickles would be acquitted by reason of insanity, however, the political fallout of the trial and the controversial reconciliation with his wife Teresa, would irreparably damage his political reputation and he would not seek reelection in 1860. In March of 1861, Dan Sickles returned to New York unpopular and unemployed. One month later the bombardment and surrender of Fort Sumter in Charleston, South Carolina, would mark the beginning of the American Civil War and a chance at redemption for Dan Sickles. The Civil

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<sup>22</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*. (Havertown, PA: Savas Beatie, 2010), 22.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

War would provide politically savvy men like Sickles the opportunity to obtain the fame and fortune that he had otherwise been denied in civilian life.

On December 20, 1860, South Carolina seceded from the union and President Lincoln called for 75,000 volunteers to bolster the armies' ranks for the war to come. Responding to Lincoln's request Daniel Sickles petitioned New York Governor Edwin Morgan for permission to raise eight companies of volunteers, the bulk of a regiment. Sickles and his associate Captain Wiley would prove to be so successful at recruiting men to serve in the army that they would be given permission to raise a brigade rather than just a regiment. Sickles would begin his military career with the initial rank of Colonel as a result of having raised the regiment and subsequently he would raise an entire brigade which allowed him to petition the government for his Generalship. James Hesler writes that this was fortuitous for an impatient Sickles since it allowed him to fast track his promotion. "The excitement following the capitulation of Fort Sumter made it relatively easy to gather large numbers of men to a flag. Using speeches and calls to patriotic duty, the pair recruited about 3,000 eager enlistees, which Sickles promptly dubbed the "Excelsior Brigade" after the New York State motto ("Ever Upward")."<sup>24</sup>

The disaster that befell the Union Army at the First Battle of Bull Run would provide Dan Sickles that chance he was longing for, to prove his metal in battle and salvage his honor and prestige. While his base motivation may be in question, Sickles would rise to the task and prove to be an excellent organizer and an authoritative motivator of men. Russell Beatie in his book, *Army of the Potomac: McClellan's First Campaign*, writes that "according to Montgomery Meigs who would serve as the Quartermaster General of the U.S. Army, Sickles' strict economy and untiring vigilance produced a fully armed and equipped brigade at less cost to the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 22.

government than any other similar unit. His Excelsior Brigade did not want for criticism and he had achieved recognition as an effective brigade commander.”<sup>25</sup> Sickles, being a man adept at recognizing a politically advantageous set of circumstances, did not let this once in a lifetime opportunity pass him by. Through the process of raising and funding a brigade of infantry for the Federal Army, Sickles obtained rank and privilege many of his peers had labored years in military service to achieve.

Sickles prowess as a politician would come to serve him well in the early days of his military career. Sickles and his partner Capt. Wiley had been so successful at raising volunteers in New York for the Excelsior Brigade, that Republican leadership in New York became concerned about his Democratic leanings. There were accusations that Dan Sickles would march his brigade south and swear allegiance to Jefferson Davis. Governor Morgan, under pressure from county officials struggling to meet manpower quotas, ordered Sickles to disband all but eight of his forty companies. Sickles, indicative of his combative nature, would not take this challenge lightly and took the issue directly to the President. Thomas Keneally in, *American Scoundrel: The Life of the Notorious Civil War General Dan Sickles*, writes that Sickles’, “ made an extraordinary decision, one interesting from the point of view of ideology and personality. While a congressman, he had been a defender of states’ and even cities’ rights. Obviously Sumter had changed all that. The present emergency and, the unkind would say, the desire for rank drove him to a new vision.”<sup>26</sup> West Point may provide its cadre with excellent training to prepare young men for duty as officers and gentleman in the United States Army; Sickles, however, was a man with the experience and affinity for doing battle within the complexities of bureaucratic

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<sup>25</sup> Beatie, Russel. *Army of the Potomac : McClellan's First Campaign, March - May 1862*. (Havertown, PA, USA: Savas Beatie, 2007), 28.

<sup>26</sup> Keneally, Thomas. *American Scoundrel: The Life of the Notorious Civil War General Dan Sickles*. (Westminster, MD: Knopf Publishing Group, 2003), 221.

power struggles. Sickles was very well prepared to confront head on the political challenge that threatened his military aspirations.

It is fitting that Dan Sickles first battle as a politically appointed officer in the United States Army would be against a bureaucrat, New York's Governor Edwin Morgan. This would be a fight that Sickles background had well prepared him for. Influential citizens of primarily republican upstate New York complained to Governor Morgan that the "State" brigade was drawn too much from Democratic New York City. They resented that their counties were not being included in the brigade. Thomas Keneally writes that Morgan, "not wanting to alienate his base of support, ordered Sickles to disband 32 of the 40 companies he had raised."<sup>27</sup> Sickles bristled at the thought of outside interests interfering in what was becoming the central focus of his life. Sickles was desperate to maintain the integrity of his cherished Excelsior Brigade and would take the issue to the highest office to present his case. Sickles would travel to Washington and use his prior connections as a congressman to arrange a meeting with President Lincoln. Sickles would argue that since his men were responding to a federal emergency and as such the federal government should accept them directly as volunteers to the United States Army, constitutionally voiding any interference from the state governors. What Sickles was proposing would be considered sacrilegious for that time as the raising of militias had always been a state right. Keneally states that, "In response to Lincoln's concerns over usurping the authority of states in the matter of training militias Dan urged Lincoln to consider the authority contained under Article I, Section 8, Clause 12 of the Constitution providing the United State Congress the power to raise and support armies."<sup>28</sup> It was a desperate time for Lincoln and the catastrophe at

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 220.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 222.

the First Battle of Bull Run while disastrous for the administration, would portend to be an opportune event for Sickles because shortly thereafter the War Department would issue orders designating the Excelsior's as the New York Volunteer Troops.

Despite his obvious lack of experience Sickles' displayed a unique quality of leadership that was to endear his men to him and he would earn their respect as a result of his positional authority. However, it was not long before Sickles was forced to learn an important lesson in regards to the rigors of maintaining good order and discipline among a large body of men with little to keep them occupied other than liquor and mischief. During the recruiting phase of his brigade's development Sickles' was compelled to lead a detachment of his troops with bayonets fixed to the Philadelphia docks to keep a company of Philadelphia volunteers from deserting. Thomas Keneally writes that, "on his return to New York, he discovered that the discipline of his brigade had vanished in his absence. Strewn across City Hall Park, the men were hungry, dirty and some drunk and unruly. Sickles marched them to Crosby Street where every man was given a haircut and a shave for 10 cents apiece. Sickles then arranged for the brigade to be transported to Long Island where an unused racetrack in Queens County could serve as a campground."<sup>29</sup> Away from the city and civilians, Sickles set his men and officers to train in the hopes that their new military skills would indeed be used in battle. Despite these setbacks, writes Keneally, "Dan showed a daily enthusiasm for commanding and training his mass of young men, and did not fear being intimately bound to them, he was able into exercise strong command without evoking resentment, and the daily routine of reveille, roll call, morning and afternoon drill, surgeon's call, guard mounting, evening parade, and retreat was insisted upon."<sup>30</sup> Sickles

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 223.

demonstrated a fundamental understanding of the importance of strict adherence to basic military protocols. The routine that Sickles placed in force at his camp instilled the sense of good order and military discipline that is the mark of a well led fighting unit. Keneally writes that Sickles “was becoming a serious student of military affairs, and in his papers is found pages of memoranda that indicate as such.”<sup>31</sup> Dan Sickles took to the demands and style of military life readily and vigorously applied himself to the study of the art of war.

The defeat suffered by the Union army at First Bull Run would provide the needed impetus for the Federal Government to fast track the recognition and deployment of regiments to the field. James Hessler writes that, on July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1861 Sickles was authorized to muster into service as many regiments under his command as possible, “armed and ready and put en route to Harpers Ferry.”<sup>32</sup> Following outfitting at Harpers Ferry, Sickles unit was assigned to cover the southern approaches on the lower Potomac River in Charles County, Maryland. The Excelsior’s spent late 1861 posted in Southern Maryland locales, such as Buds Ferry, Piscataway, and Charlotte Hall. The Excelsior Brigade, also known as Sickles' Brigade, was mainly composed of the Seventieth, Seventy First, Seventy Second, Seventy Third, Seventy Fourth and One Hundred and Twentieth, New York infantry regiments. The brigade was assigned to General Hooker's Second Division of General Heintzelman’s Third Corps. During this assignment Sickles would get his first exposure to combat while leading one of the campaign’s numerous reconnaissance missions across the Potomac River into Virginia. Although minor in the context of the battles to come, these expeditions served to build the trust of his men in Sickles leadership. James

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>32</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 25.

Stevenson served in the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment of the Excelsior Brigade and in, *History of the Excelsior Or Sickles' Brigade*, writes, “ These movements had the effect of implanting in on the minds of the men the greatest confidence in General Sickles, for both his coolness and bravery were remarked by all.”<sup>33</sup> On one such mission Sickles and a hand-picked detachment of the “huskiest and most reliable men that I could find” moved from Liverpool Point, Maryland, toward Stafford Court House, Virginia. Sickles did fall into the common practice of over-stating the size and quality of his adversary in that battle as he would later claim that he collided with two of General James Longstreet’s infantry regiments. A contemporary news account stated the opposition that day was comprised of a confederate cavalry regiment performing screening operations along the river. However, this could not take away the exuberance Sickles felt after at his first exposure to combat “There was a hot fight,” wrote the former Congressman. “This was the first time that I or any of my men had been under fire. I was surprised when it was over and the Confederates had retired, evidently thinking we were the advance of a whole army. I was surprised that I had taken it so coolly, mind you, I do not say this boastingly; simply as a man reviewing his sensations under certain conditions.”<sup>34</sup> When not involved in scouting and interdiction missions along Virginia Potomac coastline, Sickles ever vigilant to the problem of idle soldiers would employ his men in practicing field maneuvers and drills to improve his generalship and prepare his men for the rigors of battle that were soon to come. One of Sickles’ more significant assignments was a scouting mission that assisted General McClellan in the preparation of his planned invasion of the South. Sickles was eager to take on risk that even his immediate superior, the venerable

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<sup>33</sup> Stevenson, James. *History of the Excelsior Or Sickles' Brigade*. Patterson, NJ: Derhoven & Holms, 1863, 16.

<sup>34</sup> Beatie, Russel. *Army of the Potomac: McClellan's First Campaign, March - May 1862*, 28.

“Fighting Joe” General Hooker thought too risky. Russell Beatie writes a brief account of the venture:

Sickles crossed the Potomac with a thousand men to see if they could learn anything about the rebel movements prior to McClellan’s Peninsula Campaign to insure that the Confederates had indeed abandoned their works at Centerville and Manassas. Sickles crossed the Potomac and headed south, navy gunboats guarding his left flank for a short distance. When he turned west, his uncovered flank made him uncertain about continuing; but he decided to accept the risk and go far enough to confirm his belief that the Confederates had gone to Fredericksburg. From Shipping Point to Stafford Courthouse he marched, learning along the way that a force of Confederates occupied Fredericksburg. A strong outpost composed of a regiment of infantry, a regiment of cavalry, and a battery of guns held position at the courthouse. Hastily, he withdrew to report his information.<sup>35</sup>

The tactical intelligence Sickles obtained would be used by McClellan to formulate his battle plans for the upcoming Peninsular Campaign. General Sickles demonstrated his eagerness at taking the initiative and being aggressive in the face of the enemy. However, he also exhibited a sense of prudence when it came to challenging enemy forces that were in a superior position and avoided the action that would have placed his men at risk unnecessarily.

George B. McClellan became General-in-Chief of the Armies of the United States in the fall of 1861 and he immediately began organizing his command to prepare the army for his Grand Peninsular Campaign. In the spring of 1862, the army’s Third Corps was reorganized and command given to Major General Samuel P. Heintzelman. Hooker became one of Heintzelman’s three division commanders, and Sickles’ Excelsior Brigade was assigned to Hooker’s division.<sup>36</sup> The Excelsior Brigade’s first significant engagement would be without their leader who was back in Washington lobbying for his promotion to brigadier general. On May 5<sup>th</sup> the Excelsior

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>36</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 27.

would be called into action to reinforce Union troops in a desperately fought engagement to dislodge Longstreet's Confederates fighting rear-guard action around Williamsburg. Sickles Brigade ended up fighting what could most accurately be described as a futile effort to force the enemy out of a well prepared defensive position supported by covering artillery fire from a redoubt in Fort Magruder. Reserves had to be called up to support the brigade when a Confederate counter-attack forced Union infantry to withdraw as their left flank had become dangerously exposed. Russel Beatie writes that Colonel Dwight, leading the brigade's Seventieth New York Regiment quickly realized the precariousness of his situation, the regiment and the entire brigade were fighting for their existence, "Dwight's men fought in the slashing from log to log, sometimes hand to hand. Dwight could hear heavy firing to the left and rear where Patterson struggled against great odds. He concluded that he would have to hold his own position and rely on others to take care of that."<sup>37</sup> At one point during the battle, Dwight, his men running out of ammunition, gave the order to "fix bayonets and hold your places."<sup>38</sup> With the withdrawal of the New Jersey regiments, the New Yorkers of the Excelsior's were the only thing preventing the fierce counterattack by enemy forces under General Longstreet from routing Hooker's entire Division. Sickles brigade would suffer almost 800 casualties in the battle and relinquished the field only when they had exhausted their ammunition and Phillip Kearny's Third Division arrived on scene to provide support.

While the Excelsior brigade battled the Confederate army in Virginia, Sickles was back in Washington battling bureaucrats to attain the promotion he felt deserved due to his highly successful recruiting efforts. After word was received of the Excelsior brigade's stalwart

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<sup>37</sup> Beatie, Russel. *Army of the Potomac : McClellan's First Campaign, March - May 1862*, 571.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 572.

performance at Seven Pines, Sickles was awarded his brigadiership. He returned to his command in time to lead the brigade into its first significant combat at Fair Oaks in Henrico County, Virginia. On May 31<sup>st</sup>, Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston attacked Samuel Heintzelman's Third Corps and General Erasmus Keyes' Fourth Corps, both of which had become isolated from the rest of McClellan's army south of the rain-swollen Chickahominy River. Hooker's division remained unengaged during the heavy fighting of the 31<sup>st</sup>, but Heintzelman moved it forward as a ready reinforcement when the Confederate attack was renewed on the morning of June 1<sup>st</sup>. While Hooker was moving the division toward Heintzelman's right, Heintzelman detached Sickles' brigade and shifted it to the left. During the movement Sickles again exhibited composure while deploying the Excelsior brigade under heavy fire, personally recalling that "Rebel minie balls seemed specifically directed at mounted officers, which of course would include his-self."<sup>39</sup> By all reports Sickles, as had become his custom, acquitted himself well in battle, calmly directing the placement of his men as they advanced and providing steady reassurance to his regiments when at the defensive. An infantryman with the Excelsior Brigade, James Stevenson, provides his personal observation of Sickles leadership:

Here at Williamsburg, the rebels availed themselves of the advantage of the woods, from which they kept up an incessant fire of musketry, but effected little injury. Immediately on discovering this, General Sickles ordered the second regiment to charge which was complied with in a splendid manner, eliciting admiration of all who beheld it. With one continues cheer as they dashed across an open field, fully exposed to the fire of the enemy.<sup>40</sup>

George McClellan specifically praised the two bayonet charges made by the Excelsior brigade in a message to Secretary of War, Edwin Stanton. Thomas Keneally writes of "The

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<sup>39</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 29-30.

<sup>40</sup> Stevenson, James. *History of the Excelsior Or Sickles' Brigade*, 26.

dashing charge of the Second and Fourth Regiments,” and Sickles proudly described the action, “the cool and steady advance of the Third, occurred under my immediate observation, and could not have been surpassed.”<sup>41</sup> James Hessler writes that General Hooker referred to Sickles as the brigade’s “gallant leader,” and “their intrepid chief.”<sup>42</sup> By Sickles own admission he found the experience of combat to his liking, and by all appearances Sickles was finding himself to be very well suited to such actions.

As can sometimes be the case even the most stalwart of fighting units have moments when their performance is not up to their best. One such moment occurred when Excelsior brigade faltered at a critical point in a battle, but even this unfortunate incident would bring out in Sickles a determination and sternness which would inspire his men to rally and succeed. On June 25<sup>th</sup>, the Seven Days Battles began and McClellan ordered Hooker and Philip Kearny’s divisions to advance aggressively along the Williamsburg Road in preparation for moving the Federal siege artillery closer to Richmond. Hooker’s morning attack faltered in large part because Sickles’ brigade, on the right of Hooker’s line, encountered difficulties moving through portions of White Oak Swamp, and met heavy Confederate resistance on the right flank. James Hessler documents that the event would cause Sickles much consternation especially with his superiors in close observation;

Colonel George Hall of the Second Excelsior were reconnoitering the right when a heavy volley hit Hall’s line and caused part of the regiment (in Sickles’ words) to break “to the rear in disgraceful confusion.” Sickles called for the remaining men to hold their ground and “used my best exertions,” along with the help of nearby officers, to “rally the fugitives.” This was all “mortifying” to Sickles because it occurred in Hooker’s presence, but Hooker’s report noted Sickles’

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<sup>41</sup> Keneally, Thomas. *American Scoundrel: The Life of the Notorious Civil War General Dan Sickles*, 244.

<sup>42</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 31.

“great gallantry in rallying a part of the Seventy-first New York Regiment and returning it to action after it had given way.”<sup>43</sup>

General Sickles was gaining battlefield experience and had earned a stalwart reputation as an aggressive and bold leader. The Excelsior Brigade remained active throughout the Seven Days Battles, reporting 308 casualties from June 25 through July 1, as General Lee took the offensive in an effort to destroy the Army of the Potomac and drive it away from Richmond. At the Battle of Malvern Hill one of Sickles regiments, the Seventy Second New York would be involved suffering over 60 casualties. Both Generals McClellan and Hooker were impressed by Sickles overall performance during the campaign. Fighting Joe Hooker had gained a reputation as an aggressive and courageous battlefield commander and he saw those same attributes in Sickles. Hooker perceived Sickles as his most successful brigade commander and promoted him to command of his division upon Hookers promotion to corps commander. Sickles had earned the respect of both peers and subordinates alike by his performance on the field. However, one cannot ignore the fact that Sickles skills as a politician were helpful as he ingratiated himself to one who may someday be in position to reward his allegiance. Unfortunately civil related matters would once again take Sickles away from his command at a critical time in the war. Hessler writes, “Sickles spent the late summer of 1862 doing what political general did best giving recruiting speeches and ginning up support for the war effort.”<sup>44</sup> The result of this non-military assignment was that Sickles did not gain the battlefield experience from the battles of Second Bull Run and Antietam where he would have been exposed to circumstances that would have provided him a keener tactical insight on the field of battle and may have an influence on his performance at Gettysburg.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 32.

Sickles men would be spared the worst of the horrors that was to be the Battle of Fredericksburg. However, the event would still have a profound effect on the future of the General. At Fredericksburg Sickles was in command of the Second Division in Hooker's Third Corps. Kept in reserve they were only called forward to support General Reynolds assault on the left of the Union line of battle. Shortly after 2:00 P.M., Sickles received orders from General Stoneman to move his division to the front. By the time Sickles arrived, Gibbon's division was having difficulty holding its line and was in danger of being forced from the field. Sickles formed two lines on Birney's right, where the Confederates briefly threatened Sickles' own right until a combination of sharpshooters and artillery secured the flank. James Hessler records the observations of Chaplain Joe Twichell of General Sickles in action. Twichell, who watched a mounted Sickles directing infantry and some artillery fire to secure the flank and remarked that Sickles appeared "as unconcerned as if riding before a plough. The presence of Birney and Sickles strengthened Reynolds' line."<sup>45</sup> With the exception of skirmishing and some artillery fire, little of consequence occurred on the Federal left for the remainder of the battle. Meanwhile, on the Union right, Burnside continued with a series of futile assaults against Lee's strong position atop Marye's Heights, adhering to a faulty strategy that would needlessly cost thousands of Union soldiers their lives and General Burnside his job.

There was an event during the Battle of Fredericksburg that had possible implications on the course of the battle on July 2<sup>nd</sup> at Gettysburg. During the battle, General Birney, destined to become the commander of Sickles First Division of Third Corps, would draw the ire of General Meade, who commanded a division in General John Reynolds First Corps during the assault on a wooded height occupied by General Stonewall Jackson's infantry. General Meade was able to

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid., 39-40.

exploit a gap in the line between two Confederate brigades that if fully developed could have resulted in a major breakthrough that would have threatened the entire Confederate line. However, Meade was unable to gain support for his division despite several urgent requests to Birney for assistance. Hessler writes that, “Birney received one and perhaps as many as three requests for assistance from Meade. When neither Birney nor Gibbon provided direct assistance to his embattled troops, a furious Meade reportedly rode to the rear, found Birney, and verbally castigated him.”<sup>46</sup> Despite having played a key role in repelling a Confederate counterattack and being fully supported by General Reynolds for his actions, Birney would continue to receive condemnation from Meade for not supporting him in the battle. Meade was so angry over the incident that he would confide to his wife that he and Birney would, “always have Fredericksburg between us”. Historians agree that both Meade and Birney carried the animosity developed by this incident with them to Gettysburg. It should be noted that General Birney was also a political officer in the same mold as Sickles. It is probable that the lack of trust by Meade in Sickles leadership at Gettysburg was actually an extension of his distrust in the leadership of the whole of Third Corps

Following the Union disaster in the Battle of Fredericksburg Lincoln would once again be impelled to replace his top commander. General Burnside would be replaced by General Hooker and as an affirmation of Sickles astute choice of political affiliations Hooker would subsequently appoint Sickles as Commander of Third Corps. There was little dissent among the rank and file with Sickles promotion to Corps commander and many thought it was much deserved in lieu of his consistent performance on the battlefield. Major General Sickles, now in charge of Third Corps, accompanied General Hooker’s Army to Chancellorsville in what was to be a grand

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 39.

flanking movement intended to crush the Confederate Army once for all. General Hooker's plan of campaign against the forces of Lee still arrayed above the township of Fredericksburg was tactically sound, efficient, and had all the earmarks of a highly successful movement. Hooker managed to transfer 42,000 men to Lee's left flank by moving northeast from Fredericksburg and crossing the Rappahannock at Kelly's Ford. Another 40,000 Union troops would cross the Rappahannock below Fredericksburg and threaten the Confederates still holding vigil on Marye's Heights. Thomas Keneally writes that:

The movement was a total success, "they had moved largely undetected except by a small and confused Confederate patrol. Hooker outflanked the enemy's army, and had placed themselves where Lee did not yet know them to be. The surprise pincer attack against Lee needed only to be triggered. Hooker told his men, "The operations of the last three days have determined that our enemy must either ingloriously fly, or come out from behind his defenses and give us battle on our ground."<sup>47</sup>

General Hooker had successfully positioned his army in a location that he hoped would induce Lee to attack. Hooker was supremely confident as to the strategic superiority of the position he now occupied. Shelby Foote in Volume 2 of his epic 3 volume set on the Civil War, *The Civil War, A Narrative, Fredericksburg to Meridian*, writes that, "Hooker believed that the current situation was so much in his favor that, "the enemy in his desperation will be compelled to attack me on my own ground. The enemy is in my power, and God Almighty cannot deprive me of them"<sup>48</sup>

Sickles Third Corps was initially assigned as a diversion, holding ground at Falmouth to present the appearance that the Federals were holding position on the North side of the Rappahannock. Thomas Keneally recounts an example of what was to become a common

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<sup>47</sup> Keneally, Thomas. *American Scoundrel: The Life of the Notorious Civil War General Dan Sickles*, 264-265.

<sup>48</sup> Foote, Shelby. *The Civil War: A Narrative, Volume Two, Fredericksburg to Meridian*. 282.

observation of Sickles demeanor when under fire. He and his troops came to the attention of Confederate artillery as they moved towards Chancellorsville as the rear guard of Hookers flanking march. The troops did not descend into the rough, rut marked sunken road but instead walked in the grassy field at its side. A soldier in Third Corps remembers a moment as he marched along the sheltered plank road, “General Sickles surrounded by his staff, sat chewing his cigar, watching the troops go by, and keeping an eye out to the east. Some enemy batteries in that direction saw his troops and began landing shoot among his men. Dan, according to the soldier, without changing his own position, remarked in his peculiar deliberate tone, “Boys, I think the enemy sees you – you had better take to sunken road”<sup>49</sup> Keneally uses this moment, one that is a common occurrence to men and officer’s experiencing the deliberate and often mundane aspect of maneuvers between battles to show that Sickles possessed what generals described as maintaining a sense of elegant tranquility in the face of peril. This was to instill in his men a sense of confidence, not just in their leader but in the command system itself. Calmness in the face of battle is as infectious to the soldier on the line as is panic and General Sickles demonstrated repeatedly that he could consistently maintain a soldier’s professional composure in all circumstances. The days ahead would truly test the mettle of General Sickles as his aggressive leadership would place Third Corps in the thickest of the fighting that was to come. Unfortunately for Sickles, it would be his friend and mentor, Fighting Joe Hooker that would lose his nerve under the pressure of an aggressive Confederate attack and cause him to doubt his own leadership at a critical time in the campaign.

On May 1<sup>st</sup>, Sickles Third Corps would move into position and be posted in the defensive battle line between the Eleventh Corps of General Howard and General Solcums’ Twelfth Corps

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<sup>49</sup> Keneally, Thomas. *American Scoundrel: The Life of the Notorious Civil War General Dan Sickles*, 265.

located in Fairview Crest along the Orange Plank Road. General Sickles requested and was given permission to send out scouting parties to investigate the movement of enemy troops operating to his south. General Birney would lead one of Sickles divisions out to some high ground known as Hazel Grove. The elevated position offered by the field at Hazel Grove afforded a view of Catharine Furnace and the rebel column moving along a stretch of road that disappeared into the woods. As has become common with Sickles aggressive nature he requested and received permission to move on the enemy column that was passing to his south. In his official report to Brig. Gen. S. Williams, Asst. Adjt. Gen., Army of the Potomac, Sickles stated:

This continuous column--infantry, artillery, trains, and ambulances--was observed for three hours moving apparently in a southerly direction toward Orange Court-House, on the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, or Louisa Court-House, on the Virginia Central. The movement indicated a retreat on Gordonsville or an attack upon our right flank--perhaps both, for if the attack failed the retreat could be continued. The unbroken mass of forest on our right favored the concealment of the enemy's real design. I hastened to report these movements through staff officers to the general-in-chief, and communicated the substance of them in the same manner to Major-General Howard, on my right, and also to Major-General Slocum, inviting their cooperation in case the general-in-chief should authorize me to follow up the enemy and attack his columns." ... At noon I received orders to advance cautiously toward the road followed by the enemy, and harass the movement as much as possible. Immediately ordering Birney to push forward over Scott's Run and gain the heights in the Wilderness, I brought up two battalions of sharpshooters, under Colonel Berdan, to be deployed as skirmishers and as flankers, so as to get all possible knowledge of the enemy's movement and of the approaches to his line of march. At the same time I communicated again with Major-Generals Slocum and Howard, and was assured of their prompt co-operation.<sup>50</sup>

This report provides further evidence that General Sickles was well versed in the standard tactical deployment of units in advancing a line of battle towards an enemy whose location had not been positively fixed. This was not a reckless action but a deliberate and thoughtful

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<sup>50</sup>Report of Maj. Gen. Daniel E. Sickles, U. S. Army, Commanding Third Army Corps. The Chancellorsville Campaign APRIL 27-MAY 6, 1863.

operation that successfully engaged the enemy in force. The immediate effect of Sickles actions was the capture of “quite a number of prisoners”<sup>51</sup> from Jackson’s rear guard. From these men Sickles obtained information that made him to believe the enemy was fleeing west and begged Hooker to allow him, accompanied by General Pleasanton’s cavalry, to pursue. A few of the captured Confederates did provide information as to the true intentions of General Jackson’s march. However, their eagerness to provide this information caused the Federals, to their detriment, to doubt the validity of their tale.

It was during this momentary interlude in the Battle of Chancellorsville, that Stonewall Jackson began his famous flank attack on Hooker’s Federal Army. The Confederates would catch General Howard’s Eleventh Corps unaware and with the exception of a few isolated regiments that stood steadfast against the Rebel onslaught, General Howard’s corps would be put to flight in one of the greatest military routs of the war. Shelby Foote writes, “Within twenty minutes of the opening shots, Howard’s flank position had gone out of military existence, converted that quickly from organization to mob.”<sup>52</sup> Sickles has received criticism for the position of his Third Corps at the time of the flank attack on Eleventh Corps. Sickles occupation of Hazel Gove, while excellent high ground in a key point of the line, created a salient that allowed for a break with the left flank of Howard’s Eleventh Corps. However, even if the lines had been maintained the rout of Howard’s men was inevitable as they were completely unprepared for the mass of Confederate soldiers that fell upon their ranks determined to push the entire Union Army into the Rappahannock River. General Pleasanton’s artillery units on the

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<sup>51</sup>Warren, Gouverneur K... Army of The Potomac, General Meade, March 7, 1864. *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War at the Second Session Thirty-eighth Congress*, 45. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1865. <https://archive.org/details/reportjointcomm00gocgoog>

<sup>52</sup> Foote, Shelby. *The Civil War: A Narrative, Volume Two, Fredericksburg to Meridian*. 296.

heights of Hazel Grove would provide effective support for Sickles and his two divisions covering the retreat. According to the testimony of Major General David B. Birney before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, “General Sickles and General Pleasonton worked with artillery corps and a thousand cavalry with which they had managed to stay Jackson’s corps ... and in my opinion, saved the army from a great disaster.”<sup>53</sup> To his credit Sickles was able to keep his men together and focused on the impending threat despite having thousands of fleeing soldiers from Eleventh Corps pouring through his lines. There are reports that General Sickles was able to reform several regiments of the Eleventh Corps and get them back into the battle and he is credited with playing a major role in halting the Confederate attack.

The next morning on May 3<sup>rd</sup>, after the Federal line had been stabilized, General Hooker rode forward to examine Sickles position on the heights of Hazel Grove. Hooker, concerned over the extended position Sickles now occupied, would order Sickles to pull his entire corps back to a contracted defensive line around Chancellorsville. Sickles immediately raised an objection to Hooker’s directive as he felt the ground he now held could be of use to support a counterattack should Hooker decide to do so. As it turns out Sickles was in good company in recognizing the strategic importance of Hazel Grove. General E. P. Alexander is considered one of the finest artillerymen in either army and happened upon the open clearing of the Hazel Grove position. In his memoirs, *Fighting for the Confederacy, The Personnel Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander*, he writes “This included a beautiful position for artillery, an open grassy ridge, some 400 yards long, extending N.E. and S.W., & only about 200 yards from the forest

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<sup>53</sup> Birney, David B.. Army of The Potomac, General Meade, March 7, 1864. *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War at the Second Session Thirty-eighth Congress*, 35. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1865. <https://archive.org/details/reportjointcomm00goocgoog>

through which our line was now approaching.”<sup>54</sup> Union General Pleasanton’s horse drawn artillery used that very same platform to effectively place double canister rounds into Jackson’s advancing Confederates a day earlier. General Doubleday in his book, *Army in the Civil War, Volume 6: Chancellorsville and Gettysburg*, writes that Jeb Stuart, who took command of Jackson’s corps following his severe wounding, “saw at a glance the immense importance of this ground, and did not delay a moment in crowning the hill with thirty pieces of artillery, which soon began to play with fatal effect upon our troops below.”<sup>55</sup> James McPherson writes that pulling Sickles off the High Ground at Hazel Grove, “allowed Lee and Stuart to reunite the two wings of their army and to mass their artillery at Hazel Grove, one of the few places in the wilderness where it could be used effectively.”<sup>56</sup> Clearly Hazel Grove was a key position on the battlefield and should have been held. From this point Hooker had he so desired could have rallied his army and even launched a counter-attack. Sickles recognized the military importance of that position and begged Hooker to allow him to “hold this higher ground.” Hooker disagreed and Keneally writes that, “Sickles was frustrated that he was being ordered from what he believed was the best position on the entire battlefield.”<sup>57</sup> He acquiesced to his commander’s directives despite his own misgivings about giving up the high ground. In obeying Hooker’s orders Sickles demonstrated an understanding and respect for the military protocol of positional subordination to command authority.

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<sup>54</sup> Alexander, Edward Porter. *Fighting for the Confederacy, The Personnel Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander*, 204.

<sup>55</sup> Doubleday, Abdner. *Army in the Civil War, Volume 6: Chancellorsville and Gettysburg*. New York, Charles Scribner’s Sons, 2001, 46.

<sup>56</sup> McPherson, James. *Battle Cry for Freedom: The Civil War Era*, 644.

<sup>57</sup> Keneally, Thomas. *American Scoundrel: The Life of the Notorious Civil War General Dan Sickles*, 268.

Unfortunately for Sickles and Third Corps, he would be proven right in the worst possible way. General Stuart had chosen that exact location to close his position and had prepared for an all-out assault against the Union troops he assumed were still occupying Hazel Grove. As the Southerners approached the crest of the heights they witnessed Sickles' men, in obedience to Hooker's orders, retiring towards Chancellorsville. Stuart immediately exploited the opportunity by placing several batteries of cannon on the Hazel Grove heights and began shelling Union lines with devastating effect. Sickles Corps took the brunt of the damage and author Thomas Keneally believes that this experience may have strongly influenced Sickles' judgment at Gettysburg. He writes that "that the experience of giving up high ground and then seeing his men torn apart by guns placed there was a significant one that would explain much of Sickles' behavior."<sup>58</sup> Additionally Keneally writes that at Gettysburg, while scouting his assigned position on Cemetery Ridge that Sickles, "above all else, thought of the consequences of his ordered withdrawal from the high ground at Chancellorsville and the more than four thousand casualties his corps suffered. He did not want a repeat of that carnage."<sup>59</sup>

Some historians have given Sickles credit with having a solid performance at Chancellorsville. Generals Sickles and Pleasonton were instrumental in halting Jackson's assault after Howard had been routed and the fact that Sickles stood his ground while others fled is testament to his fighting character. Sickles also presented a respect for authority in that while he strongly opposed Hooker's orders moving him off the good defensive terrain in Hazel Grove he nevertheless obeyed those orders. Sickles' last military action at Chancellorsville was in covering the withdrawal of the army across the Rappahannock. Again, his action against the enemy

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 269.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 280.

symbolizes the determination and courage Sickles consistently displayed when in the thick of battle. General Abner Doubleday writes that,

The Third Corps left their last position at Chancellorsville slowly and sullenly. Hayman's brigade, not far from the Chancellorsville House, finding the enemy a good deal disorganized, and coming forward in a languid and inefficient manner, turned— by Sickles' direction— and charged, capturing several hundred prisoners and several colors, and relieving Graham, who was now holding on with the bayonet, from a most perilous flank attack, enabling him to withdraw in good order.<sup>60</sup>

It is possible that the Battle of Chancellorsville could have turned out very differently for the Union if Hooker had heeded Sickles advice and used Hazel Grove as a launching platform for a counter attack against the Confederates. After the route of Eleventh Corps and the defensive perimeter of the Union army having been secured, General Hooker called his Corps commanders together for a strategy meeting. Of particular interest to this study is the stance Sickles took when General Hooker consulted his generals as to how they think the army should proceed. Generals Howard, Reynolds and Meade argued for advance. General Sickles however, would respond more as a bureaucrat than a corps commander. Thomas Keneally writes, that Sickles, still convinced that the position had been lost when he was not supported at Hazel Grove stated, "There was sound military reasoning for advance, however he did not want to put his opinion against that of men trained in the profession of arms. But the political Horizon was dark. Success by the Army of the Potomac was secondary to the avoidance of disaster."<sup>61</sup> Sickles went on to list the logistical problems related to maintaining the offensive and the pending problem of the expiration of enlistment contracts all of which could have a depressing effect on the army.

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<sup>60</sup> Doubleday, Abner. *Army in the Civil War, Volume 6: Chancellorsville and Gettysburg*, 50.

<sup>61</sup> Keneally, Thomas. *American Scoundrel: The Life of the Notorious Civil War General Dan Sickles*, 270-271.

“Better to cross the river and recuperate, said Dan.”<sup>62</sup> General Hooker would decide against the recommendations of his more experienced, professional soldiers, which included General Meade, and heed Sickles advice to withdraw. Keneally records General Reynolds dissatisfaction with the decision so it is not hard to imagine that Meade was also displeased to have been overruled by a “political” officer.

It is interesting to note that the incident at Hazel Grove bares a stark resemblance to the circumstances at Gettysburg. The Hazel Grove position was excellent ground however it was forward of the defensive line established by the Union Commanding Officer. At Chancellorsville, as he did at Gettysburg, General Sickles would form his corps into a salient forward from the main body of the Federal line. Sickles wanted to advance on Jackson’s column and he wanted to hold on to Hazel Grove. Both times he was restricted by the more conservative thinking of General Hooker. Sickles, along with most of the Generals following the Battle of Fair Oaks, unsuccessfully urged General McClellan to authorize an advance on Richmond. The similarities in the tactical circumstances cannot be ignored as it becomes clear that at Gettysburg General Sickles reflected on his experience in Chancellorsville when deciding to advance his corps to the higher ground he felt was better suited for threat that was developing to the front of his line.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 271.

## Chapter 2

### The Road to Gettysburg

General Sickles was destined to become one of the most famous political generals in the Union Army. Author Edwin Coddington would describe Daniel Sickles as, “flamboyant, impulsive, and brave though some would wonder about his sense of discipline and military judgment.”<sup>63</sup> James Hessler would provide a critique that was commonly applied to most political generals of the war, “he was being given increasingly higher levels of responsibility without the commensurate experience. In assessing the performance of “amateurs” such as Dan Sickles, many “professionals” complained that these newcomers lacked the theoretical applications necessary to master the art of warfare.”<sup>64</sup> At Gettysburg, Sickles would prove many of the assertions to be true and in doing so would fix the reputation of Dan Sickles in the history books as the general that disobeyed orders and nearly lost the Battle of Gettysburg. However, there is a viewpoint that when examined provides a much different insight into the controversial General and the deliberate action he took on July 2<sup>nd</sup> that in he felt was necessary and vital.

Significant changes in the army hierarchy had occurred as a result of the Federal failure at Chancellorsville. General Sickles, along with General Butterfield, had been a part of an “axis” with General Hooker and the appointment of Meade as the new commander of the army, “a sober Christian and West Pointer with a bias against men like Sickles and Butterfield,”<sup>65</sup> would

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<sup>63</sup> Coddington, Edwin, B. *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, 45.

<sup>64</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 35.

<sup>65</sup> Keneally, Thomas. *American Scoundrel: The Life of the Notorious Civil War General Dan Sickles*. 275.

contribute to the concern and restlessness Sickles must have felt that late June of 1863. The new Commanding Officer of the Federal Army, General Meade, was struggling with the heavy burden of responsibility and leadership that had been unexpectedly placed on his shoulders. General Meade had begun the monumental task of organizing the movement of seven Union corps consisting of over 90,000 men spread out over three separate roads all converging on Gettysburg. Stephen Sears writes of Meade's unease in the first few days' of command, "July 1<sup>st</sup>, started his fourth day of command – he had with the position of affairs ... no time to learn the condition of the army as to its morale ... he knew nothing of the nature of the country there whether it was best suited to offense or defense. The commanding general could not decide whether it was his best policy to defend or to attack until he knew more about the enemy."<sup>66</sup> In the days leading up to Gettysburg, numerous dispatches issuing orders and directives coordinating the Union response to Lee's Northern advance would make their way via courier and staff officers through the roads of Maryland and Pennsylvania. The instructions contained within those critical communications would be indicative of the confusion, anxiety, alarm, and at times the desperation, being experienced by the command structure of the Union Army. General Sickles would be both the recipient, and generator of several messages that upon inspection would provide evidence that he responded appropriately during times of crises and made sound tactical decisions based on the rapidly changing circumstances as he perceived them.

General Sickles, who had spent the month of June on leave after the Battle of Chancellorsville, joined Third Corps in route to Taneytown and was not long in receiving a rebuke from his new Commanding Officer. According to James Hessler, Meade was not satisfied with the progress of

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<sup>66</sup> Sears, Steven. *Gettysburg*, Barnes And Nobel: New York, NY, 2004, 159.

Sickles Corps along the Taneytown Road and through his adjutant general sent the following message to Sickles:

Commanding Officer Third Corps: The commanding general noticed with regret the very slow movement of your corps yesterday. It is presumed you marched at an early hour, and up to 6 p.m. the rear of your column had not passed Middleburg, distant from your camp of the night before some 12 miles only. This, considering the good condition of the road and the favorable state of the weather, was far from meeting the expectation of the commanding general, and delayed to a very late hour the arrival of troops and trains in your rear. The Second Corps in the same space of time made a march nearly double your own. Situated as this army now is, the commanding general looks for rapid movements of the troops.<sup>67</sup>

Sickles inexperience with the command and logistics requirements needed to coordinate the movement of thousands of men, their equipment, supply trains and artillery units, surely played a part in the delay and the ensuing reproach from Meade that followed. However, other corps had an equally difficult time in getting their commands up and moving towards Gettysburg that late June. General Hancock, a good friend and colleague of Meade's, was experiencing delays out of Uniontown but Hancock, the embodiment of the professional soldier, communicated with Meade as to the problems he was facing and provided assurances that he would make up for lost time. Active and efficient communications with his senior officers are crucial to the commander so that he can best coordinate the movements of his army to avoid chokepoints and delays. According to James Hessler there is no evidence that Sickles sent any regular correspondence to Meade's headquarters. Hessler writes, "The relationship between Meade and Sickles continued to deteriorate. Sickles had enjoyed a close relationship with Hooker's army headquarters. Under Hooker, he could compensate for his relative inexperience through open communications that kept him in tune with the commanding general's objectives. Now he was entering into Pennsylvania without the benefit of a headquarters that welcomed his presence, and as the

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<sup>67</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 79.

campaign progressed his anxiety and indecision increased.”<sup>68</sup> Indicative of the deference that was allowed to West Pointers, Twelfth Corps commander General Henry Slocum was having his own issues with moving his command northward. However, he managed to avoid a reprimand by blaming his delay on someone else’s trains preventing his corps from reaching the day’s objectives. This incident, seemingly minor in the scope of what was to come, is representative of how Sickles must have perceived his place in the command hierarchy. Having lost the inside track he enjoyed with Hooker, he was now essentially an outsider and was being deprived of the deference he felt deserved as a corps commander.

One of Meade’s first directives as Commanding Officer, and possibly his most significant, was to dispatch General Buford’s cavalry to Gettysburg to scout and obtain intelligence on the exact movements of Lee’s Confederate Army. Additionally, he assigned the very able General John Reynolds to assume command of the three corps forming the left wing of the army, a move that gave him oversight of Sickles’ Third Corps, Oliver Howard’s Eleventh, and his own First Corps. Placing General Reynolds at Gettysburg and giving him authority over Sickles Corps would create a conflict of leadership that Sickles would resolve in his own indomitable style. Over the course of the morning on July 1<sup>st</sup>, Sickles would receive orders from General Reynolds, his “wing” commander, and from Major General Meade that would be inconsistent in their directives. Meade was still unsure as to the exact location of much of the Confederate forces and was concerned with the westward approaches on his armies left flank. With this in mind Meade prudently ordered Sickles to proceed to Emmitsburg and secure the roads there;

The major-general commanding directs that you move your corps up to Emmitsburg. You will take three days’ rations in haversacks, 60 rounds of ammunition, and your ambulances. Your trains will remain parked here until

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<sup>68</sup>Ibid., 79.

further orders. General Reynolds' First Corps, and General Howard's Eleventh Corps, are between Emmitsburg and Gettysburg. General Reynolds will command the left wing, consisting of the First, Eleventh, and Third Corps. The enemy is reported to be in force in Gettysburg. You will move without delay. You will report to General Reynolds, and throw out strong pickets on the roads from Emmitsburg to Greencastle and Chambersburg. Mechanicstown, on your left, is occupied by a brigade of cavalry, with whom you will communicate.<sup>69</sup>

At the same time Sickles had received a verbal directive from General Reynolds that in effect countermanded the order given by Meade, directing Sickles to a different location that would have allowed him to better support First and Eleventh Corps in the developing situation at Gettysburg. Sickles, due to a lack of formal training or more likely due to his desire to not to be left out of the fight, chose to ignore the standard military protocol that Meade's orders as Major General of the army superseded Reynolds. Sickles attempted to get clarification from Meade requesting specific guidance as to how he should proceed:

He sent a request (written from Third Corps headquarters at Bridgeport) to Williams asking for clarification: GENERAL: Enclosed please find communication from Major-General Reynolds. It is in accordance with my written orders, received from headquarters Army of the Potomac at 1 P.M., but in conflict with the verbal order given me by the general commanding while on the march. Shall I move forward? My First Division is about a mile this side of Emmitsburg.<sup>70</sup>

In addition to receiving a set off countermanding orders from Meade and Reynolds, General Humphreys, one of Sickles division commanders, had received orders directly from Meade to scout Emmitsburg, "to examine the ground and see whether it would do to fight a battle there."<sup>71</sup> Sickles would have been made aware of this directive by Humphrey who would have informed Sickles as to the important task Meade had ordered him personally to perform. To Sickles this must have been seen as another slight to his capabilities because Meade had gone directly to

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 89.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 82.

Humphreys, the only “professional trained West Pointer” in Sickles Corps bypassing Sickles and the more senior Birney, who as was discussed earlier in this paper had his own adverse encounter with Meade at Fredericksburg. Additionally, having his subordinate tasked by his Commanding Officer with surveying his current location as a possible defensive or fallback position must have added to Sickles confusion as to the grand plan for the army. Sickles clearly struggled with the dilemma as to how he should respond to the conflicting directives. This type of situation is exactly what a professional military education prepares an officer to deal with. A professional officer would have deferred to the directive issued by the senior officer, in other words, a “West Pointer” would have secured Emmitsburg and prepared for a defense of that ground as was the intent of his commanding officer. Sickles, in his own indomitable manner, would respond to the situation with the astuteness born of a politician.

To understand the rift that was developing between commander and subordinate, it is important to have a fundamental understanding of the dynamics involved in the professional relationship between General Sickles and Major General Meade. The means in which the two men obtained their rank and position could not be more different. As was addressed in the previous chapter of this paper, Sickles obtained his rank primarily by recruiting troops into the army. He had no formal military education and no combat experience prior to the Civil War. Meade, on the other hand, entered the United States Military Academy (West Point) in 1831, finishing 19<sup>th</sup> in his class of 56 cadets in 1835. He had experience in the Mexican-American War though primarily as a staff officer. As a cadet at West Point he was instructed by one of the greatest American military theorist and tacticians of his time, Professor Dennis Hart Mahan. Douglas Freeman in his biography of Robert E. Lee described the rigorous curriculum that Lee as a cadet experienced at WestPoint. Grand tactics comprised of strategy as well as the

organization of armies, the conduct of marches, the preparation of orders of battle, combat, the review of the general maxims of war deduced from the most important operations of history, and the study of castrametation, or the art of laying out a camp.<sup>72</sup> Meade, who entered West Point just a few years after Lee had graduated, received similar training in military engineering and the science of war to include the tactical application of Artillery, Cavalry, and Infantry, and Equitation. W.J. Wood writes, “The officers of the antebellum U.S. Army who would be directly affected by military theory were West Point graduates whose thought, in widely varying degrees, was shaped by three major influences: their all-too-brief exposure to the ‘‘military art’’ as cadets in the classroom, their own reading on military theory, and their combat experience in the Mexican War (1846– 1848).<sup>73</sup> Meade would have studied the works of important military theorists such as Jomini. Most importantly at West Point, Meade would have been exposed to the West Point system of character building and conformity that was strictly enforced by a code of honesty and obedience to superiors in which breaches of discipline could result in expulsion from the venerated school. Sickles of course would have no exposure to this military culture of obedience and discipline, and his time spent as a congressman in Washington may have instilled in him a completely different perspective as to an adherence to a military chain of command.

The importance of a military education such as was offered at West Point, and its impact on the overall conduct of the War has long been debated. A military education was an asset to officers when it came to equipping, training, disciplining, and organizing armies during the war.

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<sup>72</sup> Freeman, Douglass Southall. *R.E. Lee: A Biography*. New York, NY: Charles Scribners’ Sons, 1934,77. [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/People/Robert\\_E\\_Lee/FREREL/home.html](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/People/Robert_E_Lee/FREREL/home.html)

<sup>73</sup> Wood, W. J.. *Civil War Generalship: The Art of Command*. Westport, CT, USA: Greenwood Press, 1997, 9. <http://site.ebrary.com/lib/apus/detail.action?docID=10017934>

Much of the tactics taught were based on the Napoleonic models of warfare that would eventually become outmoded in this new “modern” war. W.J. Wood writes of the education provided by West Point, “Actually the curriculum was devoted principally to engineering, mathematics, and the natural sciences (in that order); and, as James L. Morrison’s studies have revealed, “71 per cent of the total number of classroom hours in the four-year program was devoted to these three subjects, compared to 29 per cent for all the others, including military tactics.”<sup>74</sup> However, the arduous and demanding life style of the academy would create a cadre of officers that regardless of what side they fought on had an innate understanding of loyalty and devotion between them as a unique group of selected leaders. Sickles was more than likely exposed to this cliquish behavior and due to his dubious background and having the tag of being a politically appointed officer would never feel a part of the specialized bond the existed among the professional officer corps. Therefore Sickles, when questioned as to his lack of progress on the Taneytown road, would not appreciate the importance that a commanding general would place on having a concern promptly responded to in the positive as did Hancock.

Early morning on July 1<sup>st</sup>, the first units of Sickles Third Corps were arriving at Emmitsburg, unsure as to how he should proceed. Sickles directed his aid Henry Tremain, to ride to Gettysburg, locate General Reynolds, and obtain clarification as to his intention for the disposition of his command. Tremain located Reynolds who at the time was actively engaged in directing troops of First Corps towards the sound of battle that as Tremain reported, “could be clearly heard coming from the West of Gettysburg.”<sup>75</sup> Tremain did not personally observe the fighting during this brief encounter and he stated that the demeanor of Reynolds indicated that an

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>75</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 86.

extreme sense of urgency existed in the man. Hessler writes that in his memoirs, Tremain claimed to have overheard Reynolds directing Wadsworth to the west and instructed his division leader, “You had better turn off here.” As the sounds of gunfire increased to the northwest of town, Reynolds, turning his attention to Tremain said, “Tell General Sickles I think [emphasis in original] he had better come up.”<sup>76</sup> At issue with the account is that Reynolds did not write an order for Tremain to take back to Sickles, what Tremain delivered to Sickles was a verbal “request” for Sickles to bring up his Corps. Keneally writes that upon receiving the verbal communication from Reynolds, “Sickles would spend an anxious hour deciding what to do, given that Meade had told him to hold his position at Emmitsburg at all hazards.”<sup>77</sup> It was no help to Sickles and his understanding of what was being expected of him that one of his division commanders was out scouting the Emmitsburg countryside, by personal order from Meade, as a potential defensive fallback position for the Army. Sickles had determined to his own satisfaction that there was no enemy in the area that posed an immediate threat to Emmitsburg and dispatched a second courier to Gettysburg to clarify the situation there. James Hessler writes that, “as Sickles saw it; he had received at least three conflicting orders from Meade and Reynolds. Was Sickles to hold Emmitsburg, should he be prepared to execute the Pipe Creek Circular, or should he rush to Reynolds’ support? The deadlock was broken shortly after 3:00 P.M. when an urgent message from Major Charles Howard arrived with the news that Reynolds was dead and that he wanted the Third Corps to march to Gettysburg.”<sup>78</sup> At that moment General Sickles had reasons to be tentative, his mentor and friend General Hooker had been removed

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<sup>76</sup>Ibid., 86.

<sup>77</sup> Keneally, Thomas. *American Scoundrel: The Life of the Notorious Civil War General Dan Sickles*, 275.

<sup>78</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 89.

from command and replaced by someone that had demonstrated little confidence in his abilities. General John Reynolds was one of the most respected commanders in the Union Army who had once come to the defense of General Birney now a division commander under Sickles, when his integrity was challenged by Meade. Reynolds would be temporarily replaced by General Howard, a temperate man with whom Sickles felt little kinship with. As to the original request from General Reynolds for Sickles to reposition his Corps closer to Gettysburg, "I, of course, considered the question very anxiously," Sickles later told the Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War:

My preliminary orders in going to Gettysburg [Emmitsburg] were to go there and hold that position with my corps, as it was regarded as a very important flanking position, to cover our rear and line of communication. Then on the other hand was this order of General Meade which I had received that morning, contemplating another and entirely different line of operations. Then there was this new fact which I assumed was not known to General Meade, who was ten miles or so distant. I therefore determined to take the principal part of my corps and move as promptly as possible to Gettysburg.<sup>79</sup>

Sickles faced a dilemma of leadership; Reynolds had been killed while directing troops on Seminary Ridge. General Howard had now taken command and had sent this urgent dispatch to Meade:

First, Reynolds attacked the enemy as soon as he arrived, with one division, about 10:45 A.M. He moved to the front of town, driving the enemy's advance for about half a mile, when he met with a strong force of A.P. Hill's corps. I pushed up as fast as I could by a parallel road; paced my corps in position on his right. General Reynolds was killed at eleven and a quarter A.M. I assumed command of the two corps and sent word to Slocum and Sickles to move up. I have fought the enemy from that time to this. The first Corps fell back, when outflanked on its left, to a stronger position, when the eleventh Corps was ordered back also, to a stronger position. General Hancock arrived at 4 P.M., and communicated his intentions'

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<sup>79</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 89.

am still holding on at this time. Slocum is near, but will not come up to assume command.<sup>80</sup>

O.O. Howard.

The message that Howard sent to Sickles had a much greater sense of urgency, “General Reynolds is killed, For God’s Sake come up.”<sup>81</sup> To Sickles credit, and perhaps due to him not being psychologically locked into blind obedience that military doctrine sometimes requires of its officers, sent his lead division up the Emmitsburg road towards Gettysburg. It is important to point out that Sickles actions stand in stark contrast to General Slocum, a graduate of West Point, who refused to come up on General Howards orders even though he was a scant five miles from Gettysburg. Stephen Sears writes that, “Henry Slocum’s Twelfth Corps, the closet reinforcements to Gettysburg when the fighting started that morning, had only begun reaching the scene by late afternoon thanks to a belated start. He had paid no attention to the pleas for help from his junior, Howard, nor had he displayed soldiery initiative by hurrying to the sounds of guns; he was waiting instead for orders from headquarters.”<sup>82</sup> Slocum even refused a personal plea from General Howard’s brother, one of Howard’s aids, who were also rebuffed by Slocum, stating that, “he considered the general’s conduct on that occasion, anything but honorable, soldierly or patriotic.”<sup>83</sup> Sickles on the other hand used sound and reasonable judgment in not waiting for confirmation from headquarters and put Birney’s division, along with two brigades of Humphrey’s, on the road to Gettysburg. Additionally, being mindful of Meade’s standing orders to, “hold Emmitsburg at all cost”, Sickles left two brigades of infantry and some artillery at

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<sup>80</sup> Meade, George Gordon. *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade, Vol II.*: New York: Charles Scriber’s Sons, 1918, 55. <https://archive.org/search.php?query=creator%3A%22George+Gordon+Meade%22>

<sup>81</sup>Keneally, Thomas. *American Scoundrel: The Life of the Notorious Civil War General Dan Sickles*,76.

<sup>82</sup>Sears, Steven. *Gettysburg*, Barnes And Nobel: New York, NY, 2004, 241.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 241.

Emmitsburg to cover the western flank of the army. Stephen Sears provides a sensible perspective of Sickles actions and describes his decision, “as showing initiative to (in effect) march to the sound of the guns.”<sup>84</sup> Sears also writes that, “It was the one non-professional soldier in the quartet of Meade, Howard, Slocum and Sickles who displayed the one spark of soldiery initiative in this situation.”<sup>85</sup> Harry Pfanz in his book, *Gettysburg: The Second Day*, writes that, “Daniel Sickles had acted promptly ... the threat of their approach would have intimidated the Confederates and stiffened the spines of the Federals at Gettysburg had the fighting continued... General Howard gave him a warm welcome, saying, “Here you are, general, always reliable, always first.”<sup>86</sup> Hessler writes that, “Many Third Corps veterans accepted this aggressive portrayal of their leader. Thomas Rafferty of the Seventy First New York wrote this,”

Here was a dilemma which might have perplexed a weaker man. In fact, another of our corps commanders, and one of the best of them, too, on receiving the same dispatch, refused to move his corps without an order from General Meade, an apparent reference to Henry Slocum. However, it did not trouble Sickles long. He obeyed the dictates of common sense, and at once hurried his corps forward to place it where it would do the most good . . . thus flatly disobeying the orders of his commander.<sup>87</sup>

Even though Sickles had never met, and probably never heard of, Professor Dennis Hart Mahan who taught military tactics to virtually every West Pointer in the Civil War, he did, at that moment, abide by one of Mahan’s favorite musings regarding military leadership, “*Knowledge*,

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<sup>84</sup>Ibid.,191.

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 190.

<sup>86</sup> Pfanz, Harry W.. *Gettysburg: The Second Day*. (NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 46.

<sup>87</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*. 91.

*book-learning, study, strategy and tactics, all combined are of little worth. Common sense is worth them all, and is that one quality without which no man could hope to win.*<sup>88</sup>

An interesting contrast to Stephen Sears's and Harry Pfanz' description of Sickles actions on July 1<sup>st</sup> are that of Edwin Coddington. Coddington is extremely critical of the Third Corps as to its arrival at Gettysburg. He particularly focuses on the movement of the two brigades that followed Third Corps up the Emmitsburg Road to Gettysburg. Coddington states that these two brigades and two attached batteries, "finally reached Gettysburg between 9:00 A.M. and 10:00 A.M. July 2<sup>nd</sup> Instead of at daylight as Meade had directed."<sup>89</sup> He goes on to chastise these brigades as "exemplifying the undistinguished record of the whole Third Corps in its march from Frederick to Gettysburg."<sup>90</sup> He describes Third Corps staff and its senior officers as "wrongheaded, cavalier in its treatment of Meade's orders, and slovenly in their habits of command."<sup>91</sup> Coddington takes care to exclude General Humphreys, at the time in command of Sickles Second Division, from his rant as he was a graduate from West Point and had made the army his career. Coddington is also remiss in that he does not acknowledge the fact that the bulk of Third Corps was already at Gettysburg, having arrived the night before on Sickles initiative in response to the desperate plea for assistance from General Howard. By many accounts, not only was Third Corps on the field at Gettysburg the night of July 1<sup>st</sup>, but was likely stationed up on Cemetery Ridge on the existing defensive line. No doubt the arrival of Sickles Third Corps provided a much needed moral boost to a battered and exhausted First and Eleventh Corps early that evening on July 1<sup>st</sup>. Additionally, Coddington fails to mention that General Slocum,

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup>Coddington, Edwin, B. *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, 335.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 336.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 336.

another West Point graduate, flat out refused to provide assistance despite a personal request for assistance from General Howard's brother even though he was probably within ear shot of the sounds of battle. Coddington seems to infer that only Third Corps was remiss in its movements during the period in question and that no other units, all of which led by "professionally trained" officers, were in any way "unprofessional" in their conduct. Samuel Drake, while recording Slocum's reluctance to respond as professional discretion on his part, seems to imply that Sickles on the other hand is at fault for the rout of Federal troops on July 1st, "Sickles, who might have been at Gettysburg inside of three hours with the greater part of his corps, appears to have lingered in a deplorable state of indecision until between two and three o'clock in the afternoon, before he could make up his mind what to do. It was then too late."<sup>92</sup> The cynical representation of Third Corps leadership by Drake and Coddington is generally representative of the bias often reflected in the writing of some historians towards the cadre of non-professional officers within the Union Army.

The series of events that preceded Third Corps arrival at Gettysburg had already generated considerable acrimony between the military staffs of Meade and Sickles. However, it seems that these problems became magnified in relation to the positioning of Third Corps on Cemetery Ridge upon its arrival at Gettysburg. Most historians accept the given historiography that on the morning of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, Hancock's Second Corps was in place on Cemetery Ridge, its right on the left of Howards Eleventh Corps, with Sickles Third Corps taking up position on Hancock's left extending the Federal Line North to the Little Round Top. When subjected to close scrutiny this version of the deployment of Third and Second Corps is suspect. General Sickles testified before

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<sup>92</sup>Drake, Samuel A.. *Battle of Gettysburg 1863*, 71.

Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War about the disposition of his troops upon his initial arrival at Gettysburg the evening of July 1<sup>st</sup>, he stated:

Soon after my arrival I met there General Hancock and General Slocum. In the evening General Slocum, being the senior officer present, assumed command, although there were no troops of his Corps or of Hancock's Corp there; but he assumed command by virtue of his seniority of rank. By his orders my troops were massed on the left of Cemetery Ridge.<sup>93</sup>

General Sickles indicates that upon his arrival at Gettysburg his corps took up position on Cemetery Ridge. There are other indications that Sickles original position on Cemetery Ridge was further north along Cemetery Ridge than the one he was ultimately assigned to by General Meade. In his report to the Joint Committee of the Conduct of the War, Sickles states that General Geary's Division of the Twelfth Corps whom he was directed to relieve "were massed a little to my left, and which had taken position during the night. I did so, reporting, however, to General Meade that that division (Geary's) was not in position, but merely massed in my vicinity; the tenor of his order seemed to indicate a supposition on his part that the division was in position."<sup>94</sup> Considering the immediate threat that the Confederate Army posed to the beleaguered Union troops on Cemetery Hill, it can assumed that General Slocum would have ensured that there were no gaps in the defensive line as it existed the night of July 1<sup>st</sup>. With the Confederate Army occupying the town of Gettysburg in significant numbers and massing to the immediate north and west, it is most likely that Third Corps was directly linked up to the immediate left of the remnants of First and Eleventh Corps along Cemetery Ridge. There are several eyewitnesses who have written verified accounts of the battle that support this claim.

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<sup>93</sup> Sickles, Daniel E., *Army of The Potomac, General Meade, March 7, 1864. Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War at the Second Session Thirty-eighth Congress*, 329-351. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1865, 298.

<sup>94</sup> Sickles, Daniel E., *Army of The Potomac, General Meade, March 7, 1864. Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War at the Second Session Thirty-eighth Congress*, 297.

Professor Michael Jacobs was one of seven professors at Pennsylvania College (now Gettysburg College) during the Battle of Gettysburg and wrote the first book about the battle: *Notes on the Rebel invasion of Maryland and Pennsylvania, and the battle of Gettysburg, July 1st, 2nd and 3rd, 1863*. Professor's Jacobs provided a first person version of events as they played out, "Soon after the arrival of the Twelfth Corps came the Third, under General Sickles; and at 6 A.M., (the following morning on the 2<sup>nd</sup>) came Hancock, with the Second Corps and the reserve Artillery. Sickles at first took position on our left center, but when Hancock came he took the place of Sickles, whilst the latter moved his Corps to our extreme left, resting on the rocky ridge immediately north of Round Top."<sup>95</sup> This eyewitness places Third Corps on or in close proximity to Cemetery Ridge prior to the arrival of Second Corps on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. Another witness to the arrival of Union troops to Gettysburg, Jacob Hooke, in his book, *The Battle of Gettysburg*, states that, "upon arrival at 6 o'clock in the morning, of the Second Corps, General Hancock was directed to take the position to the left center occupied during the night by that part of the Third Corps which had reached the field the evening previous, and Sickles was ordered to move his Corps down below Hancock Corps, and occupy the ground where Geary's Division of the Twelfth Corps had been sent the previous evening."<sup>96</sup> Stephen Sears writes that on the evening of the 1<sup>st</sup>, that Sickles, arriving at about 6 P.M., "was posted on the northern end of Cemetery Ridge, just in the rear of Howard's and Doubleday's position on Cemetery Hill."<sup>97</sup> According to

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<sup>95</sup> Jacobs, Michael. *Notes on the Rebel invasion of Maryland and Pennsylvania, and the battle of Gettysburg, July 1st, 2d and 3d, 1863*. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott & Co., 1864.,30.<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/moa/ABY0035.0001.001/1?cite1=gettysburg;cite1restrict=subject;rgn=full+text;view=image;q1=gettysburg>

<sup>96</sup> Hoke, Jacob. *The Great Invasion of 1863 or, General Lee in Pennsylvania*, Dayton OH, W.J. Shuey, 1887., 317. <http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=loc.ark:/13960/t0cv55b08;view=1up;seq=1>

<sup>97</sup> Sears, Steven. *Gettysburg*, Barnes And Nobel: New York, NY, 2004, 485.

Coddington, “Second Corps did not arrive at Gettysburg until sometime between 5:30 and 6:30 A.M. on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, “and took some time before it got into position.”<sup>98</sup> Colonel Franklin Aretas Haskell, Aide-de-camp to General John Gibbon, also confirms the position of Third Corps as being on Cemetery Ridge the evening of July 1<sup>st</sup>. In his book, *The Battle of Gettysburg*, he writes, “the rout was at an end—the First and Eleventh Corps were in line of battle again—not very systematically formed perhaps—in a splendid position, and in a condition to offer resistance, should the enemy be willing to try them. These formations were all accomplished long before night. Then some considerable portion of the Third Corps—Gen. Sickles—came up by the Emmetsburg road, and was formed to the left of the Taneytown road, on an extension of the line that I have mentioned.”<sup>99</sup> There is ample evidence that most of Third Corps was on the scene and in position along and behind Cemetery Ridge from the early evening of July 1<sup>st</sup> through the early morning of July 2<sup>nd</sup>. General Meade would have known this as he had inspected the whole of the line around 1 A.M. on July 1<sup>st</sup>. There is every indication that Meade, irrespective of the threat posed to the left flank of the army, moved Sickles from his existing position on the defensive line, the more elevated portion of Cemetery Ridge, down into the low swale at the end of Cemetery Ridge below the Round Tops. Finally Guelzo states, “Already in his short tenure as Commander of the Army of Potomac, Meade had been cuttingly abrupt with Sickles and if there was any corps commander he would gladly have cashiered on the spot, the self-important New York solon was it. Although Slocum had originally given orders for Sickles to move up and link with the left flank of Eleventh Corps on Cemetery Hill, Meade issued

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<sup>98</sup> Coddington, Edwin, B. *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, 333.

<sup>99</sup> Haskell, Frank Aretas. *The Battle of Gettysburg*. Democrat Printing Co., State Printer, Wisconsin History Commission, 1908. Release Date: July 10, 2010, 17. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/33121/33121-h/33121-h.htm>

different instructions when he arrived on scene ... The less George Meade saw of Sickles, the happier he was, and he was more than content to place Sickles out of sight and out of mind on the far left ..." <sup>100</sup> Guelzo's statement bears scrutiny as a reflection of Meade's professionalism as an officer. However, it is an accurate indication of the mood that existed between the two men on the field that early morning on the 2<sup>nd</sup>. Most officers would have taken the repositioning as merely part of the military protocol, but to Sickles sensibilities, it would be perceived as preferential treatment to a West Point alumnus and that it was a political move designed to deny him the glory of battle and a place in the history books.

Having an understanding of an enemy's strategic tendencies can be critical to the success of an army in battle. No other general in the Civil War was as adept as General Robert E Lee in assessing the strengths and weaknesses of his opponents. Lee used his experience and knowledge of human nature to outwit and outfight most every Major General in the Union Army. Lee, as did Meade, studied works of established military philosophers in West Point. Sun Tzu's, *The Art of War*, provides the fundamental lessons of every aspect of warfare including the nature of a sound defense and proper application of the successful attack. To improve the chance for a successful attack Sun Tzu writes, "Attack weak points, and appear in unexpected places," <sup>101</sup> "strike before the enemy is ready; and attack his unpreparedness from an unexpected quarter." <sup>102</sup>. Lee was an adherent to the basic philosophy of the attack and his propensity to target the enemy's weak flank should have been a serious concern to Meade on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. Michael Korda writes that late that night on July 1<sup>st</sup>, his army having successfully forced the Federals from the

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<sup>100</sup> Guelzo, Allen C.. *Gettysburg, The Last Invasion*, 229.

<sup>101</sup> Tzu, Sun. *Art of War*. Boulder, Co: Westview Press Books, 1994, 20.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

battlefield and the enemy retreating through the streets of Gettysburg, “Lee had decided on his favorite tactic, the same as was performed by General Stonewall Jackson at Chancellorsville, the swift the unexpected flank attack.”<sup>103</sup>

Meade was at Chancellorsville and experienced the suddenness and violent effect of Stonewall Jackson’s assault on the Union’s unprepared flank. If for no other reason than this alone, Meade should have been wary of just such a tactic being used against him at Gettysburg. Meade did take care to guard the western approaches to his army as it moved north, shadowing Lee’s Confederates as they moved north through the Shenandoah Valley. However, once he decided to take up a defensive position at Gettysburg he focused on the threat to the immediate west and north of Cemetery Hill. Meade had arranged for Fifth Corps, who arrived on the field via the Baltimore Pike around 4 P.M. that day, to be repositioned on the Army’s left and along the Taneytown Road. However, for most of the morning and the afternoon on July 1<sup>st</sup>, only the partial command of General Sickles Third Corps, two brigades under Colonels Burling and Trobriand, General Graham commanding, arriving between 9-10 A.M., were left guarding the entire left flank of the Union Army.<sup>104</sup> The cavalry screen, led by General Buford which had fought so valiantly the day before, stationed to the west of Cemetery Ridge to shield the left of Sickles position. According to Coddington, Buford’s cavalry was allowed to retire, without relief to Emmitsburg to refit, “as though Third Corps had no need of cavalry screening.”<sup>105</sup> General Buford in his report on the status of his unit on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, states that, “ his division had become engaged with the enemy's sharpshooters on our left, and held its own until relieved by General

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<sup>103</sup> Korda, Michael. *Clouds Of Glory, The Life And Legend Of Robert E. Lee*. 513.

<sup>104</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg : The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 109.

<sup>105</sup> Coddington, Edwin, B. *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command*, 245.

Sickles' corps, after which it moved to Taneytown, and bivouacked for the night.”<sup>106</sup> Buford was given permission to retire from the field without relief from another cavalry unit. Steve Sears writes that this error, committed by General Pleasonton, ”left General Meade exceedingly annoyed and General Sickles exceedingly nervous.”<sup>107</sup> Thanks in part to Buford’s untimely withdrawal of the cavalry screen, General Lee’s belief that the left flank of the enemy was open and vulnerable to attack was correct. Lee’s uncanny intuition as to the vulnerability of his opponent would prove to be accurate once again.

It was well known that General Meade had professional and personal concerns about General Sickles’ ability to lead his Corps. Hessler raises the question when he writes, “There is a possibility that Meade chose Sickles to guard the left flank because he considered it to be the least likely to receive an attack. Hooker had placed Howard on the right flank at Chancellorsville partially because he lacked confidence in the Eleventh Corps and believed that flank immune from an assault. Was Sickles deployed on the left at Gettysburg for the same reason?”<sup>108</sup> Meade had doubts as to the quality of leadership that had been displayed by both Sickles and Birney in past engagements and still carried those concerns with him at Gettysburg. Curiously, General Meade seemed to have discounted the fact that General Sickles had disobeyed his direct and written orders to maintain Third Corps at Emmitsburg just the previous day. If he had serious doubts about Sickles leadership, Meade, as a prudent commander should have kept Sickles close at hand to provide more direct supervision over his unpredictable subordinate. Also, General Meade should have been aware of Lee’s inclination for attacking his enemy’s flank. Meade did

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<sup>106</sup> Buford, John. *Report of Brig. Gen. John Buford, U.S. Army, commanding First Division. Battle of Gettysburg.* August 27, 1863. <http://www.civilwarhome.com/buford.html>

<sup>107</sup> Sears, Steven. *Gettysburg*, 249.

<sup>108</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg : The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 109.

redirected Fifth Corps to the left of his fishhook defensive line indicating that he was at the very least concerned about that area of the battlefield. However, had Meade placed General Hancock's larger and better led Second Corps on the far left of the Union defensive line there would be no doubt that his classic fishhook would have remained intact as he had intended, anchored on the North by Culp's Hill and on the South by the Round Tops on July 2<sup>nd</sup>, when Longstreet's Corps crossed the Emmitsburg Road.

## Chapter 3

### STORM AT THE PEACH ORCHARD

Early on the morning of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1863, Major Gen. George G. Meade ordered General Sickles' and his Third Corps to take up defensive positions on the southern end of Cemetery Ridge. His assigned post was anchored on the north by the left flank of General Hancock's Second Corps and on the south at Little Round Top. The Third Corps was composed of two divisions, each with three brigades, and an artillery brigade with five batteries, General Humphrey's Division of Sickles Corps was placed on the right (north) of the line and General Birney's Division on the left. Sickles' initial position was to the left of the Second Corps with his right touching the Second Corps' left in the vicinity of the George Weikert farmhouse on the southern end of Cemetery Ridge. From there the Third Corps line ran south for 1,300 yards to the base of Little Round Top. While both of his flanks were on good defensible terrain, the center of Sickles' line was located in less desirable low ground that paralleled Plum Run. Sickles and his staff reviewed the position and were displeased to see that a key part of the line they were to occupy included ground they felt unsuitable for the placement of infantry. Sears writes, "That of all the corps commanders, Sickles found himself defending the least defensible ground in the Union line."<sup>109</sup> Much of Sickles defensive line consisted of a low, marshy area that was strewn with large boulders and covered by dense woods to the front and side. In his testimony before the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, Major General Andrew A. Humphreys in command of Third Corps, Second Division repeatedly referred to the ground that he occupied as

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<sup>109</sup>Sears, Steven. *Gettysburg*, 249.

a “hollow” from which the ground slopped up in my rear to the ridge called Round Top Ridge, and also up towards the Emmitsburg Road to my front.”<sup>110</sup> Additionally, the view beyond Emmitsburg Road to Seminary Ridge where the enemy was believed to be located was completely obstructed. James Hessler recorded the observation of Lt. Col. Thomas Rafferty of the Excelsiors’ Seventy First New York, who described the terrain in Birney’s immediate front, “as so faulty that it was impossible to occupy with any prospect of being able to hold it. The low ground was quite springy and marshy, and was covered thickly with a growth of stunted bushes . . . and masked by the woods and the broken and rocky ground in our front, affording most excellent positions and covers for the rebels to take possession of without risk, and attack us with every advantage in their favor.”<sup>111</sup> Sickles primary concern was that enemy troops massed along the heights to the west of his assigned position would have the advantage of a downward sloop to his position in addition the higher ground along the Emmitsburg Road provided an excellent platform for enemy artillery. Sickles felt strongly that if attacked, the position he now held would be unsuitable for defense.

Perhaps the most important feature of Sickles position was Little Round Top, a slight hill at the southern end of Cemetery Ridge. Although it was part of Sickles assigned position the only documented account that Sickles, or any troops from Third Corps ever climbed little Round Top to scout the position, was by General Humphreys who related a conversation he had with an aide-de-camp of General Birney, Captain Briscoe. He stated that, “we discussed the importance of the position on our left, a high hill which he thought we ought to occupy- an opinion in which

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<sup>110</sup>Humphreys Andrew A..*Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War at the Second Session Thirty-eighth Congress*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1865, 391.  
<https://archive.org/details/reportjointcomm00googooog>

<sup>111</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 109.

I concurred from his description of it, and so told him.”<sup>112</sup> From this reported conversation it can be assumed that a staff officer from General Birney’s Division had ascended Little Round Top and assessed its importance to the line of defense Third Corps now occupied. There are no indications that this information was ever relayed to Sickles, or, that Sickles himself ever considered the significance of the hill to his South which is unfortunate. As fixated as Sickles seemed to be on the high ground to the West along Emmetsburg Road it is inexplicable that he ignored the commanding view of the terrain to the west that was afforded by Little Round Top. A quick trip up to the crest of the hill may have alleviated much of Sickles apprehension over his assigned position on Cemetery Ridge.

There has been historical speculation that while reviewing the position, Sickles and his staff recalled their recent experience at Chancellorsville just a few months earlier. During the battle of Chancellorsville Third Corps had moved into Catharine Furnace to occupy Hazel Grove, an action that prevented the two wings of the Confederate Army from coming together. Concerned about his exposed position forward of the Federal line, Major General Hooker directed Sickles to relinquish this key ground and fall back to a position within the Union defensive line closer to Chancellorsville. The Confederates wanted to close the gap between the two halves of the army and prepared for an all-out assault on Hazel Grove. But as the Southerners approached the crest of the heights they witnessed Sickles' men retiring towards Chancellorsville. Stuart immediately exploited the opportunity by placing several artillery batteries on the heights and proceeded to shell the Union lines with devastating effect on Sickles Corps.

Sickles had good reason to be troubled about the tenuous nature of his current position. Throughout the morning he would receive warnings that there was considerable enemy activity

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<sup>112</sup>Humphreys Andrew A..*Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War at the Second Session Thirty-eighth Congress*, 391.

occurring to the west within the woods along Seminary Ridge. At 9 A.M. the remaining Third Corps brigades under General Graham, began to arrive marching north along the Emmitsburg Road towards Cemetery Ridge. According to Hessler, General Graham reported that as they approached Gettysburg local citizens warned him, “that the enemy was advancing in heavy force on my flank.”<sup>113</sup> The astute Graham had also noted that nearby fences had been cleared away as if to prepare for an assault and Union pickets were uneasy keeping up a “desultory fire.”<sup>114</sup> Colonel, then Lt. Frank Haskell, was at Gettysburg and was in the thick of the fighting on July 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>. In his account of the battle he makes mention of the persistence and aggressiveness of the Confederate skirmishers north and west of town. This action was particularly heavy on the morning of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, so much so that Union artillery batteries opened fire on them. Haskell states that:

These skirmishers soon engaged those at the right of the Second Corps, who stood their ground and were reinforced to make the line entirely secure. The Rebel skirmish line kept extending farther and farther to their right—toward our left. They would dash up close upon ours and sometimes drive them back a short distance, in turn to be repulsed themselves—and so they continued to do until their right was opposite the extreme left of the Third Corps. By these means they had ascertained the position and extent of lines.<sup>115</sup>

The signal station on Little Round Top had begun to send reports that Confederates were massing in large force opposite the Round Tops and to the left of Third Corps. Sickles, already concerned about the poor ground of his defensive position and the growing activity to his front, rode to General Meade’s Headquarters seeking an audience with him to discuss the situation. According to Hessler, Meade dismissed Sickles concerns and reiterated his directive for Sickles

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<sup>113</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 110.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>115</sup> Haskell, Frank Aretas. *The Battle of Gettysburg*, 34-35.

to extend Hancock's Second Corps line and place his left on Little Round Top. Meade did give Sickles "discretion in the positioning of his men, according to his good judgment within the limits of the general instructions given him."<sup>116</sup> Sickles was not completely satisfied with the response and requested that Meade accompany him to his position. Meade stated that he was too busy to leave the Headquarters at that time and directed his Chief of Artillery, General Hunt, to accompany Sickles back to his position to examine his proposed Peach Orchard positioning.

As an experienced artillery officer General Hunt could appreciate the advantage of the higher ground on the Peach Orchard and its command of the woods along Seminary Ridge. During an inquiry after the war Hunt stated, "The salient line proposed by General Sickles, although much longer, afforded excellent positions for our artillery; its occupation would cramp the movements of the enemy, bring us nearer his lines, and afford us facilities for taking the offensive. It was in my judgment tactically the better line of the two, provided it was strongly occupied, for it was the only one on the field from which we could have passed from the defensive to the offensive with a prospect of decisive results."<sup>117</sup> Hunt did concur with Sickles that the new position had distinct tactical advantages. However, he noted a major problem with Sickles suggested positioning. The 10,000 troops of Third Corps alone would not be able to cover the nearly 1 and 1/2 miles of field and Hunt concluded that Fifth Corps would have to be brought up in support. As Fifth Corps had just arrived on the field and was designated as the army's reserve, Hunt had neither the authority nor the inclination to order the move. After the war, Hunt stated that when they rode direct to the Peach Orchard, Sickles pointed out the Emmitsburg Road ridge that included Sherfy's Peach Orchard as his proposed line. He felt that Sickles proposed front for

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<sup>116</sup> Hessler, James. *Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg*, 114.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

Third Corps, as ultimately deployed later in that afternoon, posed problems in both length and shape. The essentially straight line along Cemetery Ridge, which Meade intended Sickles to occupy, was approximately 1,300 yards long. The Third Corps had roughly 10,675 effectives on the morning of July 2<sup>nd</sup>. The new position proposed by Sickles, however, was nearly twice as long (roughly 2,700 yards flank to flank).<sup>118</sup> Hunt was also concerned that Sickles right flank would no longer connect to the Second Corps left and that his forward position would negate the advantages of Meade's interior lines. Hunt returned to Meade's headquarters with the decision left unresolved thus leaving the Army of the Potomac's left flank in the hands of a corps commander who neither liked, nor understood his position.

Around 12:00 P.M., Sickles would dispatch Colonel Berdan and his First U. S. Sharpshooters, approximately 100 men, and an additional 210 men of the Third Maine Infantry, across the Emmitsburg Road to scout the woods along Seminary Ridge. About this time Sickles learned that Buford's Calvary, believed to be stretched out along the Emmitsburg Road to the Peach Orchard performing picket duty had been withdrawn leaving his left flank and the elevated ground to his front without a cavalry screen. Berdan's reconnaissance force soon became heavily involved with three Alabama regiments of General Wilcox's brigade west of Emmitsburg Road. Berdan and subsequently withdrew back to Cemetery Ridge with heavy losses. He immediately reported to General Birney and Sickles that the enemy skirmishers were one mile away, advancing to the east and that the rebels were there in force. With the earlier reports from General Graham and the Signal Corps still fresh in his mind, Sickles was convinced that the enemy was moving against him in strength. Thomas Keneally writes that an impatient Sickles, fearful of a repeat of Chancellorsville stated that, "It was impossible to wait longer

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 116.

without giving the enemy serious advantages in his attack; I advanced my line toward the highest ground to my front, occupying the Emmitsburg Road at the very highest point.”<sup>119</sup> Shortly after 1:00 P.M., Third Corps began its march west towards Emmitsburg Road. Just as Sickles was advancing his Corps, Meade summoned all of his corps commanders for a “council of war.” Sickles ignored the first request and after receiving a second order he considered it prudent to attend and galloped to Meade’s headquarters. He was met by Meade at the door who calmly stated, “You need not dismount, General. I hear the sound of cannon on your front. Return to your command, I will join you there at once.”<sup>120</sup> Meade confronted Sickles and expressed his concern over the position he now occupied. “General Sickles, this is neutral ground, our guns command it, as well as the enemy’s. The very reason you cannot hold it applies to them.”<sup>121</sup> At this time Sickles must have realized the tenuousness of his position and offered to return his Corps to Cemetery Ridge at which Meade replied, “I wish to God you could, but the enemy will not let you”<sup>122</sup> The Confederate brigades of Barksdale and Kershaw were quickly approaching from the west and south threatening to overrun the weak salient Sickles had created on the left flank of his line.

To understand the reasoning behind Sickles actions the professional relationship between General Sickles and General Meade should be examined closely. There were persistent problems with communications between Sickles and Meade that began several days prior to his arrival at Gettysburg. Sickles was given conflicting orders from Meade as early as June 30<sup>th</sup> as Third

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<sup>119</sup> Keneally, Thomas. *American Scoundrel: The Life of the Notorious Civil War General Dan Sickles*, 279.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

<sup>121</sup> Sears, Steven. *Gettysburg*, 263

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*, 263.

Corps was moving from Taneytown to Emmitsburg. At that time, much of the Union Army was shadowing General Lee as he led the Confederate Army north through the Shenandoah towards Cashtown. On July 1<sup>st</sup> Sickles received orders from General Reynolds, which were subsequently reissued by General Howard, to move his Corps towards Gettysburg to support the developing military action. On that same day, Sickles was ordered by General Meade to guard Emmitsburg because it would become a vital location if Lee decided to move east. Sickles attempted to clear up the conflicting orders then, after getting word of the battle, decided to disregard the order from Meade and marched north arriving at Gettysburg the night of July 1<sup>st</sup>. Problems were to persist at Gettysburg as Sickles was unsure of the field he was to occupy and his attempts to address his confusion were snubbed by Meade. Another factor that may have contributed to the tension between the two was that General Sickles was the only one of Meade's corps commanders who was not a professionally trained soldier. Sickles had been a Congressman representing New York State before the War. Author Edward Stackpole writes that Sickles "did not always think along the same well-charted lines as those of his colleagues in the Army of the Potomac who had been trained and indoctrinated in military theory at West Point."<sup>123</sup> As Sears would put it, Sickles had an, "elastic notion of military practices and protocols."<sup>124</sup> There is good reason to believe that Meade did not have full confidence in Sickles judgment and that he did not offer him the same value and audience that the other professional officers received.

Late on the afternoon of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1863, two Confederate divisions under the command of Generals Hood and McLaws, would mount a fierce and unrelenting assault on Sickles Third Corps taking up position along the Emmitsburg Road. As General Hunt had feared, the thin line

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<sup>123</sup> Stackpole, Edward J.. *They Met At Gettysburg*, 216.

<sup>124</sup> Sears, Steven. *Gettysburg*, 250.

along the intersection of Emmitsburg and Wheatfield Roads proved to be the weak point. Union regiments manning the salient along Emmitsburg Road on the west and the Wheatfield Road on the south collapsed from determined attacks by the Confederate brigades under Generals Barksdale and Kershaw. For three hours the battle for control of the Peach Orchard raged on, Meade rushed troops from the Fifth, Second, Twelfth and Sixth Corps into the battle eventually giving the Federals numerical superiority at the point of the attack. After heavy fighting, the Peach Orchard was taken by the Confederates and the focus of the battle shifted to the Wheatfield and Little Round Top. James McPherson writes that on that day Union Officers from Meade down to regimental colonels acted with initiative and coolness.<sup>125</sup> As the afternoon wore on the confederate attack became more disorganized and confused. The attack slowed and faltered against what can be described as heroic and at times desperate actions by the Union troops. Eventually they were able to break the Confederate assault and by nightfall Federal lines were firmly in place along the defensive line where Meade had originally intended it should be. As for Third Corps, the day's actions would mean the end of the unit as a fighting force and Sickles himself would be seriously wounded bringing an end to his military career.

While it is difficult to measure the effect Sickles advanced line had on the Confederate attack an examination of several factors will lead to the conclusion that there was significant advantage for the Union forces to have their defensive line extended  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile to the West. The observations of Confederate Commanders, General Longstreet and his artillery chief General Alexander, provide an interesting perspective of the battle that is surprisingly supportive of General Sickles. Longstreet believed that his troops would have easily occupied Little Round Top and flanked the entire Union position had the circumstances of Sickles actions been

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<sup>125</sup> McPherson, James. *Battle Cry for Freedom: The Civil War Era*, 660.

different. In his memoirs Longstreet writes, “At the opening of the fight, General Meade was with General Sickles discussing the feasibility of moving Third Corps back to the line originally assigned for it, but the discussion was cut short by the opening of the Confederate battle. If the opening had been delayed thirty or forty minutes the corps would have drawn back to the general line, and my first deployment would have enveloped Little Round Top and carried it before it could have been strongly manned, and General Meade would have drawn off to his line selected at Pipe Creek. The point should have been that the battle was opened to soon.”<sup>126</sup>

The bravery and professionalism of the Union officers and soldiers that rushed into the field that day was unparalleled and the individual heroism displayed in battle was extraordinary. However, there was a mitigating factor that also played an important role in the defeat of the Confederates. The primary effect of Sickles advanced position upon the enemy was, over the course of the battle, to cause disorder and confusion amongst the tightly held ranks of the Confederate infantry. Every officer on the field that day had been drilled and trained in the practice of handling infantry by what would become one of the most widely used infantry tactics books of the Civil War, Hardee’s *Rifle and Light Infantry Tactics*. The manual was in place at West Point and many other military schools and set the standard for officers both North and South in the handling and maneuvering of infantry formations. Both Union and Confederate forces used the handbook for teaching the infantryman's battlefield maneuvers.<sup>127</sup> The manual stressed the need for strict and orderly compact formations of disciplined soldiers insuring that any advance upon an enemy is made with alacrity and overriding force. In their book *Attack And*

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<sup>126</sup> Longstreet, James. *From Manassas To Appomattox, Memoirs Of The Civil War In America*, 322.

<sup>127</sup> Hardee, W.J.. *Hardee's Rifle And Light Infantry Tactics*. Memphis: E.G. Kirk & C0, 1861.  
[http://www.cof14thcvi.com/Readings/Hardees\\_Tactics.pdf](http://www.cof14thcvi.com/Readings/Hardees_Tactics.pdf)

*Die, Civil War Tactics And The Southern Heritage*, authors McWhiney and Jamieson discuss the significance of unit cohesion in a typical Civil War era unit and the goal of delivering its full devastating effect upon the enemy, “Tactical theory recognized that individual musket fire was inaccurate and tried to compensate for this by keeping infantrymen in close-order lines to concentrate their fire power. Attack tactics were designed to compress men together, keep them well ordered during the advance, and bring them to the opposing line ready for a concentrated volley or bayonet charge.”<sup>128</sup> General McLaws had expressed his belief that having to fight through Third Corps to reach the flank of the federal position caused significant confusion among the brigades and regiments during the attack and that the cohesion needed for a mass attack was lost. That statement by General McLaws is strongly supported by an examination of the official reports submitted by brigade and regimental commanders of The Confederate units involved in the attack on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. “Colonel Van H. Manning July 8, 1863, Third Arkansas Infantry reported:

After marching in line of battle at a brisk gait for about 1, 000 yards, all the time exposed to a destructive fire from artillery, we engaged the enemy at short range, strongly posted behind a rock fence at the edge of woods. We drove him back with but little loss for a distance of 150 yards, when I ascertained that I was suffering from a fire to my left and rear. Thereupon I ordered a change of front or the rear on first company, but the noise consequent upon the heavy firing then going on swallowed up my command, and I contented myself with the irregular drawing back of the left wing.<sup>129</sup>

The ripple effect of the Third Arkansas halting its movement and changing facing was that it left uncovered the left flank of the First Texas as it moved forward. In his report Lieutenant

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<sup>128</sup> McWhiney, Grady, Perry D. Jamieson. *Attack And Die, Civil War Tactics And The Southern Heritage*. Tuscaloosa AL: The University Of Alabama Press, 1982, 31.

<sup>129</sup> Manning, Van H.. Army of The Potomac, General Meade, July 8, 1863. *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War at the Second Session Thirty-eighth Congress*, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1865,407. <https://archive.org/details/reportjointcomm00goocgoog>

Colonel P. A. Work, First Texas Infantry, describes that problems that he had along with what the Third Arkansas and the Fourth Texas regiments encountered as they attacked Birney's Division anchoring the left flank of Sickles' Third Corp at the base of the Round Tops:

Owing to the failure of the troops that were assigned to the position on the left of this (Robertson's) brigade to arrive promptly, neither this nor the Third Arkansas Regiment was able to advance, without advancing against a vastly superior force, and with the left flank of the Third Arkansas (protecting my left) exposed to attack. After the lapse of several minutes, Benning's brigade made its appearance, but instead of occupying the ground to the left of Robertson's brigade, so as to enable the latter to move forward with its left flank secured from attack, it occupied the ground still occupied by a portion, at least, of this brigade, the Fifteenth Georgia Regiment falling in and reaming with the First Texas Regiment. After several ineffectual efforts upon the part of both the commanders of the Fifteenth Georgia and myself to separate the men of the two regiments, we gave the order to move forward, when both regiments, thus commingled, moved forward and occupied the crest of the hill.<sup>130</sup>

The awkward positioning of Third Corps that created the salient along Millerstown Road, coupled with the inventive placement of artillery along the southern line of Sickles salient forced many Confederate regimental commanders to make time consuming turning movements to face withering artillery fire that pummeled their flanks. Sickles, perhaps unintentionally, had created a defense line amongst some of the most difficult terrain on the battlefield. Sickles divisions now occupied the heavy woods, deep runs and rock outcroppings that he and his staff worried over as being "excellent cover for advancing enemy troops." Now occupied by Third Corps, these natural formations proved to be obstacles that hindered and frustrated the Confederate's causing a great amount of confusion within the ranks of the Rebel brigades. Paddy Griffith, a lecturer in war studies, in his book, *Battle Tactics Of The Civil War*, writes of the advantage gained in the

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<sup>130</sup> Work, P.A. Lieutenant Colonel. Report of July 9, 1863 in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, War of the Rebellion: Serial 044 Page 0408 N. C., VA., W. VA., MD., PA., ETC. Chapter XXXIX*. Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1891.  
<http://ehistory.osu.edu/books/official-records/044/0408>

attack by maintaining a cohesive formation, “the important thing, however is to get a continuous line of men into place facing the enemy. Once the line has been formed they will be able to deliver their full fighting power. The deployment of a sound battle line is thus the principle upon which all tactics are ultimately based. Commanders at every level will seek to align their men onto neighboring units and onto the terrain.”<sup>131</sup> Brigadier General Robertson in his official report recalls the confusion caused when Law re-directed two of his regiments to his left in order to address the artillery fire that was raking his brigade;

For an hour and upward, these two regiments maintained one of the hottest contests, against five or six times their number that I have witnessed. The moving of Colonel Work to the left, to relieve Colonel Manning while the Fourth and Fifth Texas were closing to the right on General Law's brigade, separated these two regiments from the others. They were steadily moving to the right and front, driving the enemy before them, when they passed the woods or ravine to my right. After finding that I could not move the First and Third to the right to join them, I sent to recall them, ordering them to move to the left until the left of the Fourth should rest on the right on the First; but my messenger found two of General Law's regiments on the left of my two (the Fourth and Fifth Texas), and did not find these regiments at all. About this time my aide, Lieutenant Scott, reported my two regiments (the Fourth and Fifth Texas) in the center of General Law's brigade, and that they could not be moved without greatly injuring his line. I sent a request to General Law to look to them. At this point, my assistant adjutant and inspector general reported from the Fourth and Fifth that they were hotly engaged, and wanted re-enforcements.<sup>132</sup>

Matt Spruill in his book *Decisions at Gettysburg: The Nineteen Critical Decisions That Defined the Campaign*, writes, “When Law’s brigade moved forward, it received artillery fire from Captain James E. Smith’s Fourth New York Battery, located on the rocky plateau above Devil’s Den, which was to the brigade’s left front. To stop this fire, Law ordered his two right regiments— the Forty-fourth and Forty eighth— to pull out of line, pass to the left behind the

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<sup>131</sup> Griffith, Paddy. *Battle Tactics Of The Civil War*. U.K: Yale University Press, 1989, 60.

<sup>132</sup> Robertson, J.B. Brig General. *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War at the Second Session Thirty-eighth Congress*, 405.

other three regiments, and attack Smith's battery. While carrying out this maneuver, these two regiments went too far to the left and reentered the battle line in the middle of Robertson's Brigade, which was on Law's left. The immediate consequence of this was the mixing of Robertson's and Law's Brigades, which brought on a breakdown of command and control, and coordination."<sup>133</sup> Mat Spruill goes on to explain the seriousness of Law's decision to shift the Forty Fourth and Forty Eighth regiments to the left his brigade. As Brigadier Benning brought his brigade forward out of the woods, he saw troops in front of him moving in an attack. What he saw was the Forty Fourth and Forty Eighth regiments of Laws brigade, believing this to be Law's entire brigade he decided to follow in a supporting role. Spruill writes, "That when Benning followed these two regiments, he placed his brigade behind the attack moving on Devil's Den. There he added the weight of his brigade to the capture of Devil's Den. In the meantime, the regiments of Law's Brigade now on the right fought themselves to exhaustion in attacks against the left-flank Union regiments on Little Round Top. These two unsupported regiments had insufficient strength to break the Union left on Little Round Top."<sup>134</sup> Two additional regiments supported by Benning's entire brigade would have provided the extra emphasis needed to overcome the Union troops on Cemetery Hill who were themselves fatigued and very low on ammunition.

Guelzo writes, "Once engaged in combat, the noise of battle was absolutely impenetrable by the voice to any distance, and orders have to be so multiplied and repeated. Officers on the line of battle responded to situations by herding their men within earshot of drums, bugles and their officers own voices rather than dispersing them. Hence in the context of nineteenth century

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<sup>133</sup> Spruill, Matt. *Decisions at Gettysburg: The Nineteen Critical Decisions That Defined the Campaign*, 70.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

battle, the elbow-to-elbow line was still the best way to concentrate fire or coordinate movement.”<sup>135</sup> Maintaining communications and contact with the different units of an advancing brigade or even the attached regiments, is a challenging exercise even for the most seasoned officers. The advance of Sickles Third Corps was made all the more difficult by the unconventional placement of artillery in Sickles salient. Edward Porter Alexander in his memoir writes of how the confusion created by Sickles deployment caused serious consequences in the ranks of the Confederates. He relates the story of Brigadier General Kershaw of McLaws Division and the disaster that befell the South Carolina regiments in his brigade;

The 2nd and 8th South Carolina regiments and James's (Third) battalion constituted the left wing of the brigade, and were then moving majestically across the fields to the left of the lane leading to Rose's. With the steadiness of troops on parade, they were ordered to change direction to the left, and attack the batteries in rear of the Peach Orchard, and accordingly moved rapidly on that point. In order to aid this attack, the direction of the 3rd and 7th regiment was changed to the left, so as to occupy the stony hill and wood. After passing the buildings at Rose's, the charge of the left wing was no longer visible from my position; but the movement was reported to have been magnificently conducted until the cannoneers had left their guns and the caissons were moving off, when the order was given to "move by the right flank," by some unauthorized person, and was immediately obeyed by the men. The Federals returned to their guns and opened on these doomed regiments a raking fire of grape and canister, at short distance, which proved most disastrous, and for a time destroyed their usefulness. Hundreds of the bravest and best men of Carolina fell, victims of this fatal blunder.<sup>136</sup>

Paddy Griffith makes an observation on how the maneuvering of sizable units within the “fog of war” on a battlefield created tactical miscues that had a dramatic impact on the outcome of the entire battle. Griffith writes, “The trouble with mass assault was that they became disorganized by their own inner mechanisms, almost independently of enemy action. Hence the supposed

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<sup>135</sup> Guelzo, Allen C.. *Gettysburg, The last Invasion*, 37.

<sup>136</sup> Kershaw, J.B. Report of October 1, 1863, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, War of the Rebellion*, 334.

advantage of superior numbers actually became a disadvantage, because no one left free to fight in a controlled manner.”<sup>137</sup>

The after action reports of the Confederate brigade and regimental commanders provide testimony to the devastation reeked upon the officers and men as they fought their way through the Wheatfield, Peach Orchard, Devils Den, and the Round Tops Major P. Bane of the Fourth Texas reported, “Many of the officers and men had been kill and wounded up to this time. Finding it impossible to carry the heights by assault with my thinned ranks, I ordered my command to fall back in the skirt of timber”<sup>138</sup> ... Major J.C. Rogers of the Fifth Texas, “From the exhausted condition of the men, it was deemed necessary to remain here for a few moments... it was discovered for the first time that nearly two-thirds of our officers and men had been killed and wounded,”<sup>139</sup> Captain George Hillyer of the Ninth Georgia reported that, “The whole line now again pressed forward, and, though entirely without support, dispersed and scattered against a fresh line of the enemy who came up against us ...our little band, now thinned and exhausted by three and a half hours` constant fighting, made a gallant attempt to storm the batteries, but the enemy being again heavily re-enforced, we were met by a storm of shot and shell, against which, in our worn-out condition, we could not advance.”<sup>140</sup> Lieutenant Colonel L. H. Scruggs, Fourth Alabama Infantry, reported “We advanced up the mountain under a galling fire, driving the enemy before us until we arrived at a second line, where a strong force

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<sup>137</sup>Griffith, Paddy. *Battle Tactics Of The Civil War*, 153.

<sup>138</sup> Bane, P..Major of July 9, 1863, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, War of the Rebellion: Serial 045*.

<sup>139</sup> Rogers, J. C.. of July 8, 1863, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, War of the Rebellion, Serial 457*.

<sup>140</sup> Hillyer, George, Captain, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, War of the Rebellion*, 449.

was posted behind another stone fence. Owing to the exhausted condition of the men and the roughness of the mountain side, we found it impossible to carry this position, Colonel William Oates of the Fifteenth Alabama wrote,”<sup>141</sup> The Report of Colonel William C. Oates, Fifteenth Alabama Infantry stated, ““there was great difficulty in accomplishing the maneuver at that moment, as the regiment on my left (Forty-seventh Alabama) was crowding me on the left, and running into my regiment, which had already created considerable confusion.... Having become exhausted from fatigue and the excessive heat of the day, I turned the command of the regiment over to Captain B. A. Hill, and instructed him to take the men off the field, and reform the regiment and report to the brigade.”<sup>142</sup> Brigadier General J.B. Robertson who lost a leg during the battle would report on the devastation suffered to the leadership of his brigade during the battle;

I learned of the fall and dangerous wounding of Colonel R. M. Powell, of the Fifth, who fell while gallantly leading his regiment in one of the impetuous charge of the Fourth and Fifth Texas on the strongly fortified mountain. Just after the arrival of General Anderson on my left, I learned that the gallant Colonel Van H Manning, of the about the same time I received intelligence of the wounding and being carried from the field of those two able and efficient officers, Lieutenant Colonels K. Bryan, of the Fifth, and B. F. Carter, of the Fourth, both of whom were wounded while bravely discharging their duty. Captain J. R. Woodward, acting major of the First Texas, was wounded near me while gallantly discharging his duty, carried from the field. Robertson received a wound above the knee and was removed from the battle.<sup>143</sup>

At the leadership level, an important aspect that can determine a battle’s outcome is the continuity of a general’s intentions and the translation of that objective into a coordinated action

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<sup>141</sup>Scruggs ,L.H..Lieutenant Colonel, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, War of the Rebellion.*

<sup>142</sup>Oates, William, C.. Colonel, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, War of the Rebellion.*

<sup>143</sup> Robertson, J.B. Brig General..*Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War at the Second Session Thirty-eighth Congress.* Washington: Government Printing Office, 1865, 391.

that results in success. Allen Guelzo provides an excellent description of what can be best described as the controlled chaos of the typical Civil War battlefield, “the effect that thousands of men firing their weapons in volley firing ...cannon-balls decimating the ranks, shells and bullets whistling their infernal tune overhead ... the battlefield blanketed in rolling clouds of smoke, officers having to get down on all fours to peer under the smoke bank to confirm enemy positions”<sup>144</sup> There are times the only indication of an enemy position was the flash of the muzzle fire, the men behind the rifles seen only as a hazy shape with his weapon held in the horizontal. For a frontal assault to be effective on a static enemy the attacking force must present an organized and interconnected mass that deliver wave upon wave of charging soldiers directly into the midst of defenders lines. Guelzo writes, “The theory is to rupture the enemy by concentrating a succession of attacks in line, one after the other, against a relatively narrow sector of his position. Each attack would weaken the enemy, even if it failed to break him. If the process was repeated enough he surely crack in the end.”<sup>145</sup> Longstreet’s attack had broken down into individual units of varying sizes moving forwards, backwards, and at time sideways relative to the overall attack, many without orders, their officers killed or wounded, their alignments had dissolved and units became intermingled with other commands, their original orders disregarded or never fully understood. General Meade on the other hand was able to present onto the battlefield intact commands with timely and specific orders as to their positioning and purpose.

Meade, thanks to Sickles advance position, had the advantage of knowing the nature and extent of the enemy’s attack early in the battle and thus was to calmly order up his troops to

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<sup>144</sup> Guelzo, Allen C.. *Gettysburg, The last Invasion*, 37.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

cover the field. Stephen Sears writes, “George Meade was watching the maelstrom intently, anticipating the needs of his generals, then acting decisively to meet them.”<sup>146</sup> Meade ably directed the placement of his reserve, pointing them to specific hotspots in the battle stemming what had degenerated into a clumsy and unsupported assault by the exhausted Confederates. Sears describes Meade as “being in the saddle most of the afternoon and evening, making many decisions based on what he saw personally, at one point riding close enough to the fighting that his horse was wounded.”<sup>147</sup> This is the major advantage Sickles had inadvertently provided his commanding officer, time, time to assess the strategic goal of the attacking force and to coordinate the appropriate response adjusting as necessary to meet each threat as it developed.

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<sup>146</sup> Sears, Steven. *Gettysburg*, 305.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 305.

## CONCLUSION

The goal of General Lee's battle plan on July 2<sup>nd</sup> was to gain the left flank of the Union defensive position. This action was to be coordinated with an attack on the Union right flank that would cause the entire defensive position of the Union to collapse and turn it in on itself. Lee had also intended for the advance to be supported by artillery posted on the high ground at the Peach Orchard from which it could be brought to bear with considerable effect on the Union Lines.<sup>148</sup> These batteries, commanded by General E.P Alexander, would have had a devastating effect on Federal infantry posted along Cemetery Ridge particularly that part occupied by Sickles' Third Corps. By occupying that position, the Peach Orchard, Sickles prevented Alexander's artillery from providing close support to the Confederate attack at a decisive moment that could have made the difference in the battle.

Shelby Foote addresses the "what if" scenario of Sickles staying on Cemetery Ridge as directed by Meade. Foote states that "Sickles position in the Peach Orchard discouraged Longstreet's Corps from marching up the Emmitsburg Road, which probably would have meant utter destruction if Sickles Corps had stayed back on the ridge to tear into their flank as they went by."<sup>149</sup> Shelby Foote's reflection is a strict interpretation on the intent of Lee's directives for the battle that day. General Lee had directed General McLaws to place his division across the Emmitsburg Road and attack northeast so as to, "to strike and crumple the Union flank on

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<sup>148</sup> Trudeau, Noah Andre. *Robert E. Lee, Great Generals Series*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, 143.

<sup>149</sup> Foote, Shelby. *The Civil War: A Narrative, Volume Two, Fredericksburg to Meridian*, 507.

Cemetery Ridge.”<sup>150</sup> Given those circumstances it is very unlikely that an experienced tactician such as General Longstreet would have allowed his entire Corps to present its right flank to the enemy in an open field maneuver. Foote discounts the fact that standard advancement tactics would have had two or three regiments of Confederate skirmishers, accompanied by sharpshooters, preceding the division by two to three hundred feet as it crossed the Emmitsburg Road. This action would have encountered the Union pickets stationed there and forced them back towards their defensive line. This movement to the rear would alert the Confederates as to the actual position of Union troops stationed on Cemetery Ridge. General Longstreet would have ordered a change in the alignment of McLaws and Hoods divisions for a westerly attack. Matt Spruill has a slightly different interpretation of events had Sickles not moved forward. Spruill believes that, “Longstreet could have continued to move forward, deploying McLaws’ Division as it reached the area of the Rose Farm and the Wheatfield. Hood’s Division might have been deployed to the right of McLaws’ or ordered to follow in a supporting role, thereby adding depth to the attack. Deploying to the right would have resulted in Hood advancing through Devil’s Den, then making contact with the left of the Sickles’ line as he approached Little Round Top. The result of this deployment would have been a more compact battle line for the Confederates. It would have also given Longstreet the possibility of flanking Little Round Top on the south as his attack moved east and northeast.”<sup>151</sup>

General Meade bears considerable responsibility for the tactical situation that developed on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. As has been addressed in this paper, poor communication protocols existed between General Sickles and General Meade that served to increase the anxiety felt by Sickles over his

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<sup>150</sup> Ibid., 590.

<sup>151</sup> Spruill, Matt. *Decisions at Gettysburg: The Nineteen Critical Decisions That Defined the Campaign*, 64.

position. Throughout the morning of July 2<sup>nd</sup>, Meade ignored the concerns expressed by Sickles that the enemy was concentrating on his front. Meade's brusque response to Sickles concerns may have been due to his not being a West Point bred officer, or, that Meade, until the arrival of Fifth Corps late in the afternoon, had entirely dismissed the possibility that his left flank could be targeted for attack. Sickles had already disobeyed one clear and direct order from Meade to hold his Corps at Emmitsburg, it is reasonable to think that left on his own accord Sickles would be inclined to do so again.

Major General Warren at the time of the battle was the chief of Engineers of the Army of the Potomac and a trusted advisor to General Meade. When General Meade was promoted to command of the Army he wanted to make General Warren his chief of staff but heeded Warren's advice not to make significant changes to the existing staff at this crucial time. The Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War requested that General Warren give his professional opinion on General Sickles' leadership capabilities to which Warren replied, "General Sickles would not be a good man to fight an independent battle which a corps commander would often have to do ...if he had been an educated soldier he might have stood very high ....when you come down to all the details of a battle, General Sickles has not had the same experience which others have had."<sup>152</sup> By most historians' accounts, it was Warren who first noted the importance of Little Round Top as the battle began. Warren was an inner member of Meade's staff and he asserts that Sickles, by the expected standards of military leadership, was viewed as not being a competently trained or experienced corps commander. Yet Sickles was posted in the exact position where those attributes could be the most problematic. Guelzo's assertion that Meade applied the "out of sight out of mind," stance when dealing with Sickles, and placed what was to

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<sup>152</sup> Warren, Gouverneur K.. Army of the Potomac, General Meade, March 7, 1864. *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War at the Second Session Thirty-eighth Congress*. 384.

him his least trusted Corps Leader on what would become the most critical point on his defensive line where he was unable to keep watchful eye on his impulsive subordinate.

The unilateral action Sickles took that afternoon of the second day was clearly in disobedience of orders properly delivered to him by his Commanding Officer. Sickles can also be accused of poor tactical judgment in that he did not accurately assess the ground he was to occupy in relation to the size of his Corps. General Humphrey, when questioned about the advanced position agreed with the panel that Third Corps was too far advanced from the main line and that the initial position, Cemetery Ridge, was “undoubtedly” superior to the one they subsequently took up along the Emmetsburg Road.”<sup>153</sup> It is disconcerting to say the least that General Humphreys, the only West Point trained officer on Sickles staff, failed to give his opinion on two critical points that in hindsight would have better served his Corps Commander. The first being the advantaged of the high ground on Little Round Top and second, the strategic disadvantage of the advanced line at the Emmitsburg Road.

Sickles, however, did accurately judge the extreme nature of the threat that was developing to his front. While Meade and his staff were focused on the Confederate troops to the right of the Federal line, Sickles was warning anyone who would listen that an attack was about to commence through the Peach Orchard and on the extreme left flank of the Union Army. Sickles warnings fell on deaf ears right up to the moment the Confederate artillery barrage opened up on Third Corps. Even the Confederate commanders gave Sickles credit for providing early warning of Longstreet’s movement and then effectively delaying and blunting the force of the attack. If Sickles had remained at his assigned position the entire Corps of Longstreet, 14,000 men supported by artillery, would have fully engaged the extreme left flank of the Union line

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<sup>153</sup>Humphreys Andrew A.. in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, War of the Rebellion*,393.

unabated. Colonel William C. Oates, on his reflection of the battle to gain control of Little Round Top stated that Longstreet, “ in exercising that vigilance and sagacity which his high position and duty required, the moment that his troops got possession of Round Top, he would have reinforced them and have sent at least a portion of his artillery to occupy it, and thus have secured the position which General Meade admits would have rendered it impossible for him to have held the ground he then occupied ... It would have won the battle, or at least forced Meade to have abandoned his position.”<sup>154</sup> With all the high ground on the southern end of the Union line in Confederate control, and only the route of retreat (the Baltimore Pike) vulnerable to attack, the whole of the Union Army would be threatened with destruction. Therefore it is plausible to assert that Sickles action, though completely unauthorized and tactically unsound, strongly influenced the outcome of the battle in the favor of the Union Army and possibly the course of the Civil War.

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<sup>154</sup> Oates, Williams, C.. Colonel. *Gettysburg: The Battle on the Right*.

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