



PROJECT MUSE®

---

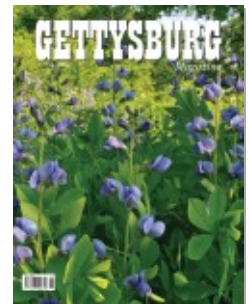
## James Longstreet and the Famous “Order to Attack”

Harrison Florence

Gettysburg Magazine, Number 55, July 2016, pp. 58-70 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/get.2016.0016>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/627390>

# James Longstreet and the Famous “Order to Attack”

HARRISON FLORENCE

In the months leading to the Battle of Gettysburg, Gen. Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia enjoyed considerable success on the battlefield. In December 1862 Lee repelled the Federal assault at Fredericksburg in decisive fashion. Of Fredericksburg, one participant wrote that the Federal soldiers melted “like snow coming down on warm ground” as they rushed the well-fortified Confederate line.<sup>1</sup> A few months later, in April and May 1863, Lee’s army defeated the Army of the Potomac at Chancellorsville. Here, considered his greatest victory, Lee, outnumbered by two to one, delivered a crushing defeat to the better-equipped and better-supplied enemy.<sup>2</sup> With these victories in mind, an optimistic Lee, believing his army nearly invincible, planned his invasion.<sup>3</sup> Intending to transfer hostilities to the North, free Virginia from enemy presence, break up the Federal’s summer campaign plan, and achieve a decisive Confederate victory on Union soil, Lee’s army crossed the Potomac in early June 1863.<sup>4</sup> Upon locating the Federal army, Lee crossed his troops into Pennsylvania, hoping similar results awaited him.

However, the Battle of Gettysburg proved to be

the turning point of the war. Following three days of conflict, the Confederate retreat on July 4, 1863, marked the beginning of the end for Lee’s army. The Army of Northern Virginia never regained the prowess, strength, and effectiveness that it possessed immediately following its victory at Chancellorsville. In fact, the army never again entered Union territory, and Lee’s surrender at Appomattox Court House in April 1865 disbanded his army and effectively ended the American Civil War.

Lee’s army lost the battle for a number of reasons, perhaps. However, one particular aspect of Gettysburg that has fostered much debate is the timing of Gen. James Longstreet’s July 2 attack on the Federal left. Some say Lee ordered Longstreet to attack at sunrise, while others argue Lee ordered Longstreet’s attack well into the morning. Underpinning this debate—which might otherwise appear a pedantic point devoid of practical consequence—is the historical inquiry concerning who remains responsible for the Confederate defeat on July 2. That is, the assignment of blame might shift from Longstreet to Lee, or vice versa, depending on the time at which Lee issued his attack orders to his subordinate, Longstreet. Many find Longstreet at fault, while others blame Gen. J. E. B. Stuart and the absence of his cavalry as the primary reason. Moreover, some contend that General Lee’s wanting generalship was paramount to all other errors. Of course, it is also quite possible that there is plenty of blame to go around, with each candidate contributing, to different degrees, to the Confederacy’s battlefield demise at Gettysburg.

Upon review of official records and numerous contemporaneous accounts, the historical record

- <sup>1</sup> Ethan S. Rafuse, “Battle of Fredericksburg,” in *Encyclopedia Virginia* (Charlottesville, VA: Virginia Foundation for the Humanities), last modified April 5, 2011, [http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/fredericksburg\\_battle\\_of#start\\_entry](http://www.encyclopediavirginia.org/fredericksburg_battle_of#start_entry), The Battle.
- <sup>2</sup> Edward J. Stackpole, *Chancellorsville: Lee’s Greatest Battle*, 2nd ed. (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1988), 361.
- <sup>3</sup> Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg: The Second Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 4.
- <sup>4</sup> General Robert E. Lee to General S. Cooper, Headquarters Army of Northern Virginia, July 31, 1863, in U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, e-book ed. (Columbus: The Ohio State University, n.d.; originally published Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901), ser. 1, vol. 27, part 2, 305, <http://ehistory.osu.edu/osu/sources/records/> (hereafter cited as OR [online] and followed by the volume, part, and page numbers, with all subsequent citations referencing series 1); James Longstreet, “Lee’s Right Wing at Gettysburg,” in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, vol. 3 (New York: Century, 1887), 350; Jefferson Davis, *The Fall of the Confederate Government* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2010), 407.

indicates that Lee did order Longstreet to attack at the earliest possible moment on the morning of July 2. Since Longstreet attacked well into the afternoon that day, his attack was late. Additionally, Longstreet's tardiness and subsequent delays greatly decreased his chances of success. *Late* means Longstreet's attack occurred later than Lee intended and ordered for the attack. *Success* means occupying Little Round Top at the conclusion of the day's fighting, thereby controlling the southern portion of the battlefield. However, Longstreet is not to be wholly blamed for the tardiness and failure. Although he and Stuart each deserve a share of the blame, the burden of responsibility falls primarily on Lee. Lee's overconfidence and his toleration of his subordinate's shortcomings remain the paramount reasons for the attack's failure and, subsequently, the Confederacy's defeat.

### Attack as Early as Practicable

In 1887 Longstreet argued that his attack was not late because General Lee never ordered him to attack in the early morning of July 2. Instead, Longstreet claimed he received orders to march his corps to battle position in the late morning of July 2.

After making the examination and talking to General Ewell, he [General Lee] determined to make the attack by the right, and, returning to where I was, announced his intention of doing so. . . . About 11 o'clock on the morning of the second he ordered the march, and put it under the conduct of his engineer officers, so as to be assured that the troops would move by the best route and encounter the least delay in reaching the position designated by him for the attack on the Federal left.<sup>5</sup>

Whether or not Lee and Longstreet met after Lee's visit to Ewell's headquarters remains unclear. Perhaps Longstreet's account is accurate. However, there are also good reasons to be skeptical. Perhaps Longstreet wrote it in an attempt to rescue his waning reputation in Southern society. Following Lee's death in 1870, former Confederates blamed Longstreet for the defeat at Gettysburg and attacked him for criticizing Lee, becoming a Republican, accepting a political appointment from President Grant,

5 Longstreet, "Lee's Right Wing at Gettysburg," 340.

suggesting the South should recognize defeat and accept the terms of Reconstruction, and proposing that African Americans be allowed to vote.<sup>6</sup> Whatever the case may be, the validity of Longstreet's claim is unverifiable and contested by contending postwar accounts. However, a preponderance of evidence suggests that Lee gave Longstreet the order to march and, subsequently, attack earlier than 11:00 a.m. Lt. Col. William Allan, ordnance officer on General Lee's staff, stated,

On the night of the 1st (not the forenoon of the 2d, as General Longstreet has it) he [General Lee] decided, after conference with Ewell and his division commanders, to make the attack early next day from his right with Longstreet's two divisions that were within reach. . . . General Longstreet would have us infer that he was not ordered by General Lee to attack early on the second; but that his memory is at fault.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise, Gen. Jubal Early, a division commander under Ewell who was present at the conference, recalled,

I was soon given to understand that Gen. Lee's purpose was to ascertain our condition, what we knew of the enemy and his position, and what we could probably do next day. It was evident from the first that it was his purpose to attack the enemy as early as possible the next day—at daylight, if practicable. This was a proposition the propriety of which was so apparent that there was not the slightest discussion of difference of opinion upon it. . . . We were then given to understand that the attack should begin from our right at daylight in the morning, or as soon thereafter as practicable.<sup>8</sup>

Colonel Long, Lee's military secretary, recalled a meeting between Generals Lee, Longstreet, and A. P. Hill the night of July 1. Long, present at the meeting, reiterated the words Lee directly spoke to Longstreet and Hill: "Gentlemen, we will attack the enemy in

6 Glenn W. LaFantasie, *Twilight at Little Round Top: July 2, 1863, the Tide Turns at Gettysburg* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley and Sons, 2005), 249.

7 William Allan, "A Reply to General Longstreet," in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, vol. 3 (New York: Century, 1887), 355–56.

8 Jubal Early, "Causes of the Confederate Defeat at Gettysburg," in *Southern Historical Society Papers*, vol. 4 (Richmond, VA: Southern Historical Society, 1877), 271, 275.

the morning as early as practicable.”<sup>9</sup> Correspondingly, Major Maffett’s South Carolinians, a part of McLaws’s division, moved forward to take up position in the line of battle at an early hour on July 2.<sup>10</sup>

The morning of July 2, Lee was with Longstreet and his division commanders on Seminary Ridge. Gen. John Bell Hood, division commander under Longstreet, noticed that Lee was visibly anxious, waiting for Longstreet to attack. Lee then left Longstreet’s corps to meet Ewell on the opposite end of the Confederate line. Lee communicated to Ewell that he intended the First Corps to conduct the main attack and ordered him not to engage until Longstreet’s guns opened fire.<sup>11</sup> About this time, Longstreet, now seated under a tree, told Hood, “The General is a little nervous this morning; he wishes me to attack. I do not wish to do so without Pickett.”<sup>12</sup>

At 9:00 a.m. Colonel Long met Lee at Ewell’s headquarters. Upon arrival, he found the general greatly dissatisfied at Longstreet’s delay. Lee expected to hear the opening of his attack at any moment.<sup>13</sup> Riding off, an irked Lee reconnoitered enemy positions and found them strengthening with the arrival of fresh troops. “Lee’s impatience increased after this reconnaissance,” Colonel Long later wrote, “and he proceeded in search of Longstreet, remarking, in a tone of uneasiness, ‘What *can* detain Longstreet? He ought to be in position now.’ This was about 10 A.M.” In his official battle report, Longstreet admits, “Fearing that my force was too

weak to venture to make an attack, I delayed until General Law’s brigade joined its division. As soon after his arrival as we could make our preparations, the movement was begun.”<sup>14</sup> Law’s brigade joined Hood’s division at approximately noon on July 2.<sup>15</sup> Later Lee, finally locating Longstreet, found Hood’s division at a halt and McLaws’s division incorrectly positioned some distance up the road after taking a wrong turn. Together, Lee and Longstreet corrected the error. It was now 1:00 p.m.

Further interruption ensued when Longstreet

paused to seek a more concealed route of advance.<sup>16</sup> General Law recalled the movement being very slow, “with frequent halts” and “many vexatious delays.”<sup>17</sup> These delays, according to Confederate Lt. Col. William Allen, lost the “first and great opportunity of that day.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, E. Porter Alexander, Longstreet’s artillery commander, later noted,

Through some blunder, part of our infantry had been marched on a road that brought in sight of Round Top, and instead of taking to the fields and hollows, they had been halted for an hour, and then had been counter-marched and sent around by a circuitous road, via Black Horse Tavern, about five miles

out of the way, thereby losing at least two hours.<sup>19</sup>

Furthermore, the First Corps waited for Pickett up until 3:00 p.m., when Longstreet finally decided



Lt. Col. William Allan. Courtesy of the U.S. Army Heritage and Education Center.

<sup>9</sup> Armistead Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee* (New York, 1886), 277.

<sup>10</sup> Major R. C. Maffett to Captain C. R. Holmes, Culpeper Court-House, VA, July 31, 1863, in *OR* (online), 17:2:372.

<sup>11</sup> Lieutenant General Richard Ewell to Colonel R. H. Chilton, Hagerstown, MD, in *OR* (online), 27:2:446.

<sup>12</sup> John B. Hood, “Letter from General John B. Hood,” in *Southern Historical Society Papers*, vol. 4 (Richmond, VA: Southern Historical Society, 1877), <http://www.gdg.org/Research/OOB/Confederate/July1-3/shhood.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 281.

<sup>14</sup> Lieutenant General James Longstreet to Colonel R. H. Chilton, Near Culpeper Court-House, VA, July 27, 1863, in *OR* (online), 17:2:358.

<sup>15</sup> Longstreet to Chilton, in *OR* (online), 17:2:358; Evander Law, “The Struggle for Round Top,” in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, vol. 3 (New York: Century, 1887), 319.

<sup>16</sup> Longstreet to Chilton, in *OR* (online), 17:2:358.

<sup>17</sup> Law, “Struggle for Round Top,” 320.

<sup>18</sup> Longstreet, “Lee’s Right Wing at Gettysburg,” 351; Allan, “Reply to General Longstreet,” 356.

<sup>19</sup> E. Porter Alexander, “The Great Charge and Artillery Fighting at Gettysburg,” in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, vol. 3 (New York: Century, 1887), 359.



to proceed and attack without the division.<sup>20</sup> He ordered the advance at 3:30 p.m., finally getting into position at 4:00 p.m.<sup>21</sup> Longstreet's men then opened fire between approximately 4:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m.<sup>22</sup>

Commencing a few hours before dusk, Longstreet's attack was considerably late. After the war, many Confederate officers incorrectly argued that Lee clearly ordered Longstreet to attack the Federal left at sunrise. Gen. William Pendleton, chief of artillery on General Lee's staff, stated the following:

He [General Lee] informed me that he had ordered Longstreet to attack on that front at sunrise the next morning . . . the extreme desirableness of immediate attack there was at once reported to the commanding general; and, according to his wish, message was also sent to the intrepid but deliberate corps commander [General Longstreet], whose sunrise attack there had been ordered.<sup>23</sup>

Jefferson Davis, endorsing Pendleton's account, wrote that "preparations for a general engagement were unfortunately delayed until the afternoon instead of being made at sunrise."<sup>24</sup> However, Lee never ordered a sunrise attack. Gen. Cadmus Wilcox, brigade commander under Gen. A. P. Hill, wrote, "It has been asserted that General Longstreet was ordered to attack at daylight or early the next morning. Of this I have no knowledge personally, but am inclined to believe that he was so ordered."<sup>25</sup> Responding to Wilcox with a tone of disdain, Longstreet replied,



Gen. William N. Pendleton. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

General Wilcox confesses want of personal information of the order for daylight or early attack, but expresses his confidence that the order was given. That is, he, occupying our extreme right on the 1st, on picket at a point considerably west of the Emmitsburg road, believes that General Lee ordered troops some fifteen or twenty miles off, and yet on the march, to pass his picket guard in the night to the point of attack, east of the Emmitsburg road, through the Federal lines, in order to make a daylight attack east of the road. While I am prepared to admit that General Lee ordered at times, desperate battles, I cannot admit that he, blindfold, over led or ordered his next in rank, also blindfold, into night marches through the enemy's lines to gain position and make a battle at daylight next morning.<sup>26</sup>

In his official battle report submitted on July 27, 1863, Longstreet wrote, "On the next day [July 1], the troops set out for Gettysburg. . . . McLaws'

20 Hood, "Letter from General John B. Hood"; Longstreet, "Lee's Right Wing at Gettysburg," 341.

21 Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 282.

22 Ewell to Chilton, in *OR* (online), 27.2:446; Major General R. E. Rhodes to Colonel A. S. Pendleton, Orange Court-House, VA, September 30, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27.2:555; Major General Richard H. Anderson to Major William H. Palmer, Orange Court-House, VA, August 7, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27.2:614; Brigadier General A. R. Wright to Major Thomas S. Mills, September 28, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27.2:622; General Robert E. Lee to President Jefferson Davis, Near Gettysburg, PA, July 4, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27.2:319; Brigadier General Andrew A. Humphreys to Colonel O. H. Hart, August 16, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27.1:532; Major General Winfield S. Hancock to Brigadier General S. Williams, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27.1:369; Colonel William R. Brewster to Captain Carswell McClellan, August 15, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27.1:559; Brigadier General John Gibbon to Major General W. G. Mitchell, Baltimore, MD, August 7, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27.1:416; Major General David B. Birney to Lieutenant Colonel O. H. Hart, August 7, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27.1:483.

23 Longstreet, "Lee's Right Wing at Gettysburg," 351.

24 Davis, *Fall of the Confederate Government*, 406.

25 Longstreet, "Lee's Right Wing at Gettysburg," 351.

26 Longstreet, "Lee's Right Wing at Gettysburg," 339-54.



Col. Armistead L. Long. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

division, however, reached Marsh Creek, 4 miles from Gettysburg, a little after dark, and Hood's division got within nearly the same distance of the town about 12 o'clock at night.<sup>27</sup> Gen. J. B. Kershaw, under McLaws's division, stated that on July 1 they "marched to a point on the Gettysburg road, some 2 miles from that place, going to camp at 12 a.m."<sup>28</sup> Brigadier General Alexander, Longstreet's artillery commander, recalled being a mile west of the Confederate line on Seminary Ridge at 7:00 a.m.<sup>29</sup>

In *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, Col. Armistead Long, Lee's military secretary, reiterated Longstreet's July 1 location, recalling that "Longstreet arrived in advance of his corps, which was a few miles behind . . . near Cashtown, but bivouacked for the night on Willoughby's Creek, about four miles from the battlefield."<sup>30</sup> General Lee's official battle report validated Long's account. "It was decided not to at-

tack until the arrival of Longstreet," concurred Lee, "two of whose divisions (those of Hood and McLaws) encamped about 4 miles in the rear during the night."<sup>31</sup> Hood marched his division through the night from the first to the second of July, only allowing his men two hours of rest time. Hood's division, part of the main assault for the day, arrived at Gettysburg shortly after daybreak. Following his arrival, Hood, while his men rested with their weapons stacked, met with Generals Lee, Longstreet, and Hill to converse on the enemy position.<sup>32</sup>

As previously mentioned, General Early stated that Lee's purpose was to attack the enemy as early as possible the next day—"at daylight, if practicable." However, a sunrise attack was not practicable, and Lee never ordered it. McLaws's and Hood's divisions were not "all up," or in battle position, until after sunrise on July 2. Furthermore, the man in charge of Longstreet's artillery, General Alexander, did not arrive with his men until 7:00 a.m. Alexander, like General Hood, testified to meeting with Lee and Longstreet early in the morning shortly after 7:00 a.m. and being told the plan of attack for the day.<sup>33</sup> These testimonies, as well as the locations of Longstreet's divisions on the night of July 1 and the morning of July 2, show that a sunrise attack was not only impractical but impossible. Nevertheless, Lee's order was still to attack "as early as practicable" the morning of July 2, and Longstreet delayed his attack until the late afternoon. Regardless of the sunrise-attack argument, Longstreet's attack was still undoubtedly late.

### Little Round Top: Significance and Cost of Longstreet's Delay

Both the Federal and Confederate armies considered Little Round Top the key position (i.e., a necessary terrain feature to possess) in the southern region of the battlefield. As Lee noted, "It is very rough and rugged, covered with massive boulders, and rendered difficult of ascent by its steepness and its outcropping granite ledges. Yet it was the key-point of that whole section of the battlefield."<sup>34</sup> General Law recognized that "Round Top rose like a

<sup>27</sup> Longstreet to Chilton, in *OR* (online), 27.2:358.

<sup>28</sup> Brigadier General J. B. Kershaw to Major J. M. Goggin, Near Chattanooga, TN, October 1, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27.2:366.

<sup>29</sup> Alexander, "Great Charge and Artillery Fighting at Gettysburg," 358.

<sup>30</sup> Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 276–77.

<sup>31</sup> General Robert E. Lee to General S. Cooper, Headquarters Army of Northern Virginia, January 1864, in *OR* (online), 27.2:318.

<sup>32</sup> Hood, "Letter from General John B. Hood."

<sup>33</sup> Alexander, "Great Charge and Artillery Fighting at Gettysburg," 358.

<sup>34</sup> Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 284.

huge sentinel guarding the Federal left flank, while the spurs and ridges trending off to the north of it afforded unrivaled positions for the use of artillery.”<sup>35</sup> As Law saw it, Little Round Top was “really the key to the whole position at Gettysburg.”<sup>36</sup> In concurrence, General Alexander flatly stated that “the two Round Tops looked over everything.”<sup>37</sup> Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren and Gen. Henry Hunt, chief engineer and chief of artillery of the Army of the Potomac, respectively, also saw the height as the key of the whole position.<sup>38</sup> It commanded almost an entire view of the plateau held by the U.S. Army.<sup>39</sup> So long as Little Round Top was in Federal hands, the Federals’ position was secure. However, if the Confederates took control of the height, the Federals would have to abandon their position.<sup>40</sup>

From the morning to roughly 4:00 p.m. on July 2, Federal troops did not hold an adequate position on the rocky ridge.<sup>41</sup> At 4:00 p.m. a Confederate scout reported to General Law “that there was no Federal force on the summit.”<sup>42</sup> Federal general Hunt acknowledged that at the time Longstreet’s attack commenced, Little Round Top was unoccupied except by a signal station. General Warren, sent by Meade to scout the condition of the extreme left, testified, “Just before the action began in earnest, on July 2d . . . I reached Little Round Top. There were no troops on it, and it was used as a signal station.”<sup>43</sup>

In addition to Little Round Top’s defenseless situation, Federal troops were not all up until the early afternoon of July 2. The Federal’s Fifth and Sixth Corps, the corps positioned on and around Little Round Top at the time of Longstreet’s attack, were not battle ready until 2:00 p.m. Hancock’s corps, which had camped three miles from Gettysburg, reached the field by 6:00 or 7:00 a.m. Sickles’s two brigades that had been left at Emmitsburg came

35 Law, “Struggle for Round Top,” 320.

36 Law, “Struggle for Round Top,” 319.

37 Alexander, “Great Charge and Artillery Fighting at Gettysburg,” 358.

38 Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 205; Henry Hunt, “The Second Day at Gettysburg,” in *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, ed. Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, vol. 3 (New York: Century, 1887), 307.

39 Major General George Sykes to General S. Williams, Camp near Warrenton, VA, July 31, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27:1:592.

40 Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 205.

41 Sykes to Williams, in *OR* (online), 27:1:592–93; Lieutenant General George G. Meade to Major General H. W. Halleck, October 1, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27:1:116; Cadmus M. Wilcox, “General C. M. Wilcox on the Battle of Gettysburg,” in *Southern Historical Society Papers*, vol. 6 (Richmond, VA: Southern Historical Society, 1878), <http://www.gdg.org/Research/SHSP/shwilcox.html>.

42 Law, “Struggle for Round Top,” 320.

43 Hunt, “Second Day at Gettysburg,” 307.



Col. E. Porter Alexander. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

up by 9:00 a.m. The rear of the Fifth Corps arrived by midday; and the Sixth Corps, after a march of thirty-two miles in thirty hours, by 2:00 p.m. Had Longstreet attacked not later than 9:00 or 10:00 a.m., as Lee certainly expected, Sickles’s and Hancock’s corps would have been defeated before part of the Fifth and Sixth Corps arrived. Little Round Top (which, as it was, the Fifth Corps barely managed to seize in time) would have fallen into Confederate possession.<sup>44</sup> General Hunt added, “There seems to have been no good reason why [Longstreet’s] attack should not have been made by 8 or 9 a.m. at the latest, when the Federal Third Corps was not yet all up, nor Crawford’s division, nor the Artillery Reserve, nor the Sixth Corps, and our lines were still very incomplete.”<sup>45</sup>

However, because Longstreet delayed until the

44 Allan, “Reply to General Longstreet,” 356.

45 Hunt, “Second Day at Gettysburg,” 301.



late afternoon, the Army of the Potomac was able to seize adequate control of Little Round Top just as the attack commenced.<sup>46</sup> As Longstreet's guns opened, General Warren stood atop Little Round Top and immediately acted.

Noticing the approach of Fifth Corps, Warren rode to meet it, caused Weed's and Vincent's brigades and Hazlett's battery to be detached from the latter and hurried them to the summit . . . the eagerness of the men to get into action with their comrades . . . brought them without delay to the very summit, where they went immediately into battle. They were barely in time, for the enemy were also climbing the hill. A close and bloody hand-to-hand struggle ensued, which left both Round Tops in our [the Federals] possession.<sup>47</sup>

From an unoccupied signal station, Warren had transformed Little Round Top, as General Longstreet put it, "as if by magic, into a Gibraltar."<sup>48</sup> General Lee, later illustrating the battle, wrote,

Longstreet's corps moved to the attack at 4:30 p.m. . . . Hood's extreme right thrust itself unperceived by the Federals, and made a dash for Little Round Top, which . . . was at the moment quite unoccupied by any portion of Meade's army. . . . It was at this critical moment that the Federals discovered their error and hastened to amend it. The prompt energy of a single officer, General Warren, chief engineer of the army, rescued Meade's army from imminent peril. He had reached Little Round Top at the point of time in which Hood's men penetrated the undefended space between Sickles's left and Round Top. . . . Warren hastened away in search of some available force to hold the hill. . . . [H]e detached from [Sickles's command] Vincent's brigade, which he hurried to the threatened summit. . . . It was a desperate rush from both sides for possession of the important point, and the Federal brigade reached the crest just as the gallant Texans of Hood's division were swarming up the rocky slope with shouts of triumph. There ensued a desperate

struggle for the contested summit. . . . For half an hour the contest continued. But the advantage of the Federals in their possession of the summit was not to be overcome.<sup>49</sup>

Noting the unready Federal force and weak defenses on Little Round Top in the morning and early afternoon, General Longstreet's tardiness and subsequent delays greatly decreased his chances of success. Realizing the missed opportunity the situation presented, General Early, years later, concluded, "I believe all now agree, that the fullest success would have attended the effort if the blow had been struck in the morning of the 2nd, as it should have been, and as was General Lee's purpose."<sup>50</sup> Unfortunately for Early and the Confederates, Longstreet delayed his attack well after morning; and since the Federals occupied Little Round Top at the day's end, General Longstreet's attack failed.

### Where Does the Fault Truly Lie? Scapegoats and Responsibility

After the war, many Southerners and former Confederate officers looked for a scapegoat. Some blamed Stuart for the handicap his absence cost Lee's ability to shape the battle. Many saw Longstreet's tardiness as the principle reason for defeat. Although both made mistakes deserving a fraction of the blame, much fault lies squarely on the shoulders of General Lee. Lee, accepting the burden of responsibility immediately, told his men, following Pickett's charge on July 3, "It is all my fault."<sup>51</sup> He repeated the same sentiment on July 4 to General Longstreet, "If I only had taken your counsel even on the 3d, and had moved around the Federal left, how different all might have been."<sup>52</sup> Even when his friends, years after the war, blamed others, Lee resisted and repeatedly pointed the blame at himself.

Although limited, General Stuart still deserves a share of the blame because of his absence from Gettysburg until the afternoon of July 2. On June 24 Stuart found the Army of the Potomac widely distributed between his cavalry and Lee's right

<sup>46</sup> Meade to Halleck, in *OR* (online), 27.1:116.

<sup>47</sup> Hunt, "Second Day at Gettysburg," 308–9.

<sup>48</sup> James Longstreet, "General James Longstreet's Account of the Campaign and Battle," in *Southern Historical Society Papers*, vol. 5 (Richmond, VA: Southern Historical Society, 1878), <http://www.gdg.org/Research/People/Longstreet/shlong1.html>.

<sup>49</sup> Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 284–85.

<sup>50</sup> Early, "Causes of the Confederate Defeat at Gettysburg," 269.

<sup>51</sup> Fitzhugh Lee, "A Review of the First Two Days' Operations at Gettysburg and a Reply to General Longstreet by General Fitz. Lee," in *Southern Historical Society Papers*, vol. 5 (Richmond, VA: Southern Historical Society, 1878), <http://www.gdg.org/Research/OOB/Confederate/July1-3/shf123.html>; see also Longstreet, "Lee's Right Wing at Gettysburg," 347.

<sup>52</sup> Longstreet, "Lee's Right Wing at Gettysburg," 349–50.



flank. With communications severed, Stuart's cavalry, "the eye of the army," left Lee blind to enemy movements, strength, and intentions. Lee later wrote, "[A]s soon as the Federal Army should cross the Potomac, General Stuart would give notice of its movements, and nothing having been heard from him since our entrance into Maryland, it was inferred that the enemy had not yet left Virginia." Inferring incorrectly, Lee only became aware of the Union's Potomac crossing from a scout on the night of June 28.<sup>53</sup> Casting a light on Stuart's faults, General Law wrote, "It is useless to speculate upon the turn affairs might have taken if the Confederate cavalry had been in communication with the rest of the army, and if General Stuart had kept General Lee informed, as he should have done, on the movements of the Federal Army."<sup>54</sup> Lt. Col. G. Moxley Sorrel blatantly stated, "[M]y opinion is already given that the loss of the campaign was due to the absence of Stuart's cavalry."<sup>55</sup> Adding to Sorrel's assessment, General Heth claimed to voice "the opinion of almost all the officers of the Army of Northern Virginia," when he argued, "The failure to crush the Federal army in Pennsylvania in 1863 . . . can be expressed in five words—the absence of our cavalry."<sup>56</sup>

The absence of Stuart undoubtedly left Lee with little potential for maneuver. However, Lee, ignorant of the enemy's motives and strength, still ordered the assault on July 2. Lee appeared to have realized his ambitious attack was founded on lack of intelligence when he asked his military secretary on July 1, "Colonel Long, do you think we had better attack without the cavalry? If we do so, we will not, if successful, be able to reap the fruits of victory." Answering at the time in the affirmative, Long later wrote, "This battle was precipitated by the absence of info which could only be obtained by an active cavalry force. General Lee had previously considered the possibility of engaging the enemy in the vicinity of Gettysburg, but the time and position were to have been of his own selection. This could have



Lt. Col. G. Moxley Sorrel. From James Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1896).

been easily effected had not the cavalry been severed from its proper place with the army."<sup>57</sup> Longstreet provided further clarity: "All of our cavalry was absent, and while that has been urged by some as a reason why the battle should have been made at once, to my mind it was one of the strongest reasons for delaying the battle until everything was well in hand." Longstreet could scarcely have provided a better summary of the battle's precipitation when he wrote, "The cause of the battle was simply General Lee's determination to fight it out from the position in which he was at that time."<sup>58</sup>

Longstreet earned his place as a scapegoat primarily because of his late attack. Additionally, Longstreet plays culprit partly because of his general demeanor as a subordinate on July 2. Three weeks after the Battle of Gettysburg, Longstreet wrote his uncle: "I consider it part of my duty to express my views to the Commanding-General. If he approves and adopts them, it is well; if he does not, it is my duty to adopt

<sup>53</sup> Lee to Cooper, in *OR* (online), 27:2:316.

<sup>54</sup> Law, "Struggle for Round Top," 322.

<sup>55</sup> Gilbert M. Sorrel, *Recollections of a Confederate Staff Officer* (New York: Neale, 1905), 167.

<sup>56</sup> Henry Heth, "Letter from Major-General Henry Heth, of A. P. Hill's Corps, A.N.V.," in *Southern Historical Society Papers*, vol. 4 (Richmond, VA: Southern Historical Society, 1877), <http://www.gdg.org/Research/Authoried%20Items/shheth2.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 277.

<sup>58</sup> Longstreet, "Lee's Right Wing at Gettysburg," 350.



Gen. James Longstreet. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

his views, and to execute his orders as faithfully as if they were my own.” As admirable as this subordinate philosophy is, Longstreet seemingly chose not to adopt it on July 2. After Lee gave the order for attack, McLaws noticed Longstreet was annoyed and irritated, and another observer saw Longstreet gravely shake his head openly at Lee’s plan.<sup>59</sup> According to his own chief of staff, Longstreet was unwilling to fight according to General Lee’s plan and failed to visibly conceal his anger. Longstreet’s unenthusiastic attitude prompted an “apparent apathy in his movements. They lacked the fire and point of his usual bearing on the battlefield.”<sup>60</sup>

Nevertheless, General Longstreet did suggest that Lee maneuver the army around the Federal left thereby interposing itself between the enemy and Washington.

We can get a strong position and wait, and if they fail to attack us we shall have everything in condition to move back to-morrow night in the

direction of Washington. . . . Finding our object is Washington or that army, the Federals will be sure to attack us. When they attack, we shall beat them, as we proposed to do before we left Fredericksburg, and the probabilities are that the fruits of our success will be great.<sup>61</sup>

According to Longstreet, Lee responded, “No, the enemy is there, and I am going to attack him there. . . . I am going to whip them or they are going to whip me.”<sup>62</sup> In his official after action report, Lee stated,

It had not been intended to deliver a general battle so far from our base unless attacked, but coming unexpectedly upon the whole Federal Army, to withdraw through the mountains with our extensive trains would have been difficult and dangerous. At the same time we were unable to await an attack, as the country was unfavorable for collecting supplies in the presence of the enemy, who could restrain our foraging parties by holding the mountain passes with local and other troops. A battle had, therefore, become in a measure unavoidable, and the success already gained gave hope of a favorable issue.<sup>63</sup>

Although certifying that the original campaign plan intended the Army of the Potomac to initiate battle, Lee’s overconfidence interfered. The Confederate commander in chief, President Jefferson Davis, reasserted that “the Army of Northern Virginia was considered sure to win a victory,” and the Confederacy in general viewed Lee’s army as indomitable.<sup>64</sup> However, Lee recognized that the enemy occupied a strong position with its right “upon two commanding elevations” and its line extended to high ground with a steep ridge in the rear, noting that the “ridge was difficult of ascent” and “also occupied.”<sup>65</sup> Nonetheless, Lee, in his self-assuredness, ordered the offensive.

Lee’s belief that battle was “unavoidable” blinded him to the original campaign plan and Longstreet’s logic for obeying it. On the eve of July 2, Longstreet argued,

<sup>59</sup> Pfan, *Gettysburg*, 26; Lafayette McLaws, “Gettysburg,” in *Southern Historical Society Papers*, vol. 7 (Richmond, VA: Southern Historical Society, 1879), <http://www.gdg.org/Research/OOB/Confederate/July1-3/shmclaws.html>.

<sup>60</sup> Sorrel, *Recollections of a Confederate Staff Officer*, 166–67.

<sup>61</sup> Longstreet, “Lee’s Right Wing at Gettysburg,” 339.

<sup>62</sup> Longstreet, “Lee’s Right Wing at Gettysburg,” 339–40; Hood, “Letter from General John B. Hood.”

<sup>63</sup> Lee to Cooper, in *OR* (online), 27.2:318.

<sup>64</sup> Davis, *Fall of the Confederate Government*, 407; see also Pfan, *Gettysburg*, 19.

<sup>65</sup> Lee to Cooper, in *OR* (online), 27.2:318.

If we could have chosen a point to meet our plans of operation, I do not think we could have found a better one than that upon which they are now concentrating. All we have to do is to throw our army around by their left, and we shad interpose between the Federal army and Washington. We can get a strong position and wait, and if they fail to attack us we shall have everything in condition to move back to-morrow night in the direction of Washington, selecting beforehand an odd position into which we can place our troops to receive battle next day.<sup>66</sup>

However, a reluctant, overconfident Lee did not adopt his subordinate's argument. He was willing to risk everything on ground Longstreet referred to as "worth no more to us than the ground we were on."<sup>67</sup> Even Jefferson Davis stated, "The position of Gettysburg would have been worth nothing to us if our army had found it unoccupied."<sup>68</sup> However, blind to his enemy's intention and strength, Lee focused on that idea that "the enemy is there, and I am going to attack him there."<sup>69</sup>

Besides the share of blame Lee's other aforementioned attributes deserve, his detached leadership and tolerance of his subordinate's shortcomings on July 2 principally account for the Gettysburg defeat. As historian Harry W. Pfanz concluded, "The extent to which General Lee delegated authority and his reluctance to be abrupt with his subordinates permitted problems to develop on 2 July. . . . [H]e allowed both corps commanders [Longstreet and Hill] to conduct their assaults without interference. Perhaps he saw no cause for alarm, but his toleration of the shortcomings of his subordinates that day lessened the chances of Confederate success."<sup>70</sup> On the night of July 1, Lee painfully expressed, "Longstreet is a very good fighter when he gets in position and gets everything ready, but he is *so slow*."<sup>71</sup> However,



Gen. Cadmus Wilcox. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Lee, understanding the importance of an early attack, remained detached on Seminary Ridge while Longstreet slowly moved into position. Although Lee met Longstreet during his corps' movement, there is no evidence of Lee instructing Longstreet to speed up movement or ordering the attack to commence immediately. Longstreet, in his voluminous (and characteristically defensive) writing after the war, never once mentioned Lee interfering with or directing his command in anyway. With the opportunity to seize a relatively undefended Little Round Top slipping away with each passing minute, the gravity of the situation arguably warranted Lee's direct involvement and active leadership. Instead, Lee waited on Longstreet. Lee later said, "If I had had Stonewall Jackson at Gettysburg, we should have

66 Longstreet, "Lee's Right Wing at Gettysburg," 339.

67 Longstreet, "Lee's Right Wing at Gettysburg," 349.

68 Davis, *Fall of the Confederate Government*, 410.

69 Longstreet, "Lee's Right Wing at Gettysburg," 339.

70 Pfanz, *Gettysburg*, 426–27.

71 Early, "Causes of the Confederate Defeat at Gettysburg," 274.



won a great victory. . . . I had such implicit confidence in Jackson's skill and energy that I never troubled myself to give him detailed instructions—the most general instructions were all that he needed.”<sup>72</sup> This was not the case with Longstreet, and Lee's patience on July 2 cost him success.

Additionally, Lee's tolerance for Gen. A. P. Hill's shortcomings handicapped the Confederate attack. Lee ordered Hill to threaten the enemy's center; prevent reinforcements from being drawn to either wing of the Confederate line; and coordinate Anderson's division, located to the immediate left of the First Corps, with Longstreet's attack.<sup>73</sup> Anderson's brigades, just like Longstreet's brigades, would attack as soon as the brigade on their right advanced. However, Hill did not communicate these orders to Anderson until after his division was set.<sup>74</sup> Shortly thereafter, Longstreet's line arrived on his right in practically the direction of a right angle from Anderson's brigade.<sup>75</sup> Why Anderson, his men attacking en echelon with Longstreet's, did not adjust his line in the coordinating direction of Longstreet's is unknown. However, Lee himself had the opportunity to correct the error prior to the assault. Following Longstreet's corps' arrival, Lee rode down the line to Wilcox's brigade on Anderson's right flank. Here, Lee simply reiterated the orders for Wilcox's attack. He said nothing to Wilcox of McLaws's positioning.<sup>76</sup> Furthermore, there is no record of Lee ever making an attempt with any of his subordinates, whatever level they might be, to correct the error.

Lee's lack of generalship resulted in a discom-bobulated attack. As Hood's men opened the attack, they soon found the enemy aggressively exposing their left flank.<sup>77</sup> General Robertson wrote, “On discovering this heavy force on my left flank, and seeing that no attack was being made by any of our forces on my left, I at once sent a courier to Major-General Hood, stating that I was hard pressed on

my left; that General McLaws' forces were not engaging the enemy to my left . . . and that I must have re-enforcements.”<sup>78</sup> When McLaws's division did reconnect with White's brigade on Hood's extreme left, White's men were already exhausted. Shortly thereafter, White deemed it impracticable to fight the enemy further.<sup>79</sup>

McLaws's advance, too, suffered disorientation when his left flank soon became exposed and underwent heavy fire.<sup>80</sup> The reason for this was that Wilcox, commanding Anderson's right, was never made aware to move in echelon with McLaws or protect McLaws's left flank.<sup>81</sup> Consequently, Anderson's division engaged the enemy farther north than Longstreet's area of attack.<sup>82</sup> Of the disjointed, disoriented attack, Longstreet wrote, “We received no support at all, and there was no evidence of co-operation on any side. To urge my men forward under these circumstances would have been madness, and I withdrew them in good order to the peach orchard that we had taken from the Federals early in the afternoon.”<sup>83</sup> Colonel Long summed up the July 2 attack when he wrote that Lee's “plan had been skillfully laid, and had it been carried out in strict accordance with his instructions would probably have led to a very different result. . . . [T]he disregard by corps commanders of the express intentions of their superiors had changed the conditions of the battle.”<sup>84</sup> But a grand plan is only as practical as its implementation according to wartime conditions, and a general proves only as successful as his lieutenants. Thus, much fault remains with Lee. His detached generalship and toleration of Longstreet's and Hill's shortcomings set the Confederates on the path to failure.

## Conclusion

Following his relatively recent victories at Frederickburg and Chancellorsville, Lee believed his army was nearly invincible. Consequently, at Gettysburg, an overconfident Lee abandoned his

<sup>72</sup> Lee, “Review of the First Two Days' Operations at Gettysburg and a Reply to General Longstreet by General Fitz. Lee.”

<sup>73</sup> Lee to Cooper, in *OR* (online), 27.2:318.

<sup>74</sup> Anderson to Palmer, in *OR* (online), 27.2:614; Brigadier Cadmus M. Wilcox to Major Thomas S. Mills, Bunker Hill, VA, 17 July 1863, *OR* [online] 27 (2), 617.

<sup>75</sup> Anderson to Palmer, in *OR* (online), 27.2:614.

<sup>76</sup> Larry Tagg, *The Generals of Gettysburg: The Leaders of America's Greatest Battle* (Campbell, CA: Savas, 1998), 305; Wilcox, “General C. M. Wilcox on the Battle of Gettysburg.”

<sup>77</sup> Colonel W. W. White to Major William H. Sellers, Headquarters Anderson's Brigade, August 8, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27.2:397.

<sup>78</sup> Brigadier General J. B. Robertson to Major William H. Sellers, Near Bunker Hill, VA, July 17, 1863, in *OR* (online), 27.2:404.

<sup>79</sup> White to Sellers, in *OR* (online), 27.2:397.

<sup>80</sup> Longstreet, “General James Longstreet's Account of the Campaign and Battle.”

<sup>81</sup> Wilcox, “General C. M. Wilcox on the Battle of Gettysburg.”

<sup>82</sup> David Powell, “Advance to Disaster: Sickles, Longstreet, and July 2nd, 1863,” *Gettysburg Magazine* 28 (2003), <http://www.gdg.org/Gettysburg%20Magazine/sicklesdisaster.html>.

<sup>83</sup> Longstreet, “General James Longstreet's Account of the Campaign and Battle.”

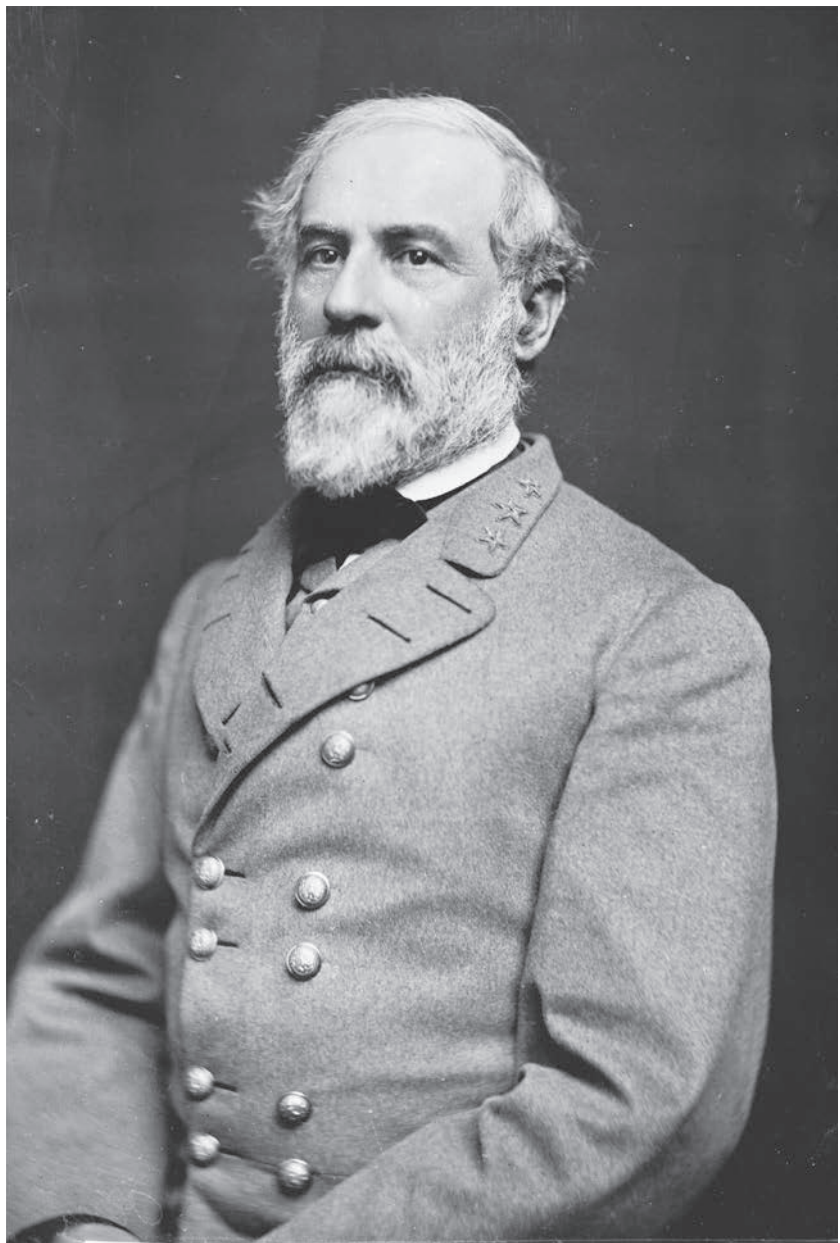
<sup>84</sup> Long, *Memoirs of Robert E. Lee*, 286.



plan to avoid general battle in the North, and he decided to go on the offensive. However, Lee, without Stuart's cavalry, was knowingly unaware of the enemy's strength, position, and intentions. Yet though handicapped, the Army of Northern Virginia was in no way predestined for defeat at Gettysburg.

Early in the morning of July 2, although operationally blind without Stuart, Lee ordered Longstreet to attack the Federal left. At this time, Little Round Top was unoccupied except for a Federal signal station. Unfortunately for the Confederates, Longstreet delayed. Commencing well after Lee's intention, Longstreet's guns opened at approximately 4:00 p.m. just as two Federal brigades and a battery reached the all-important height. Unfortunately for the Confederates, the Federals held Little Round Top after an intense bloody contest. Longstreet, his attack late, failed.

Although Longstreet, for his tardiness, and Stuart, for his absence, deserve fractions of the blame, the burden of responsibility falls primarily on General Lee. Lee's overconfidence and his toleration for his subordinate's shortcomings are the paramount reasons for the attack's failure and, by extension, the Confederacy's defeat. His overconfidence made him reluctant to obey his original campaign plan, and instead it made him focus unwaveringly on attacking the enemy. Lee's toleration for Longstreet's characteristic tardiness and habitual delays, when the situation required his interjection and leadership, cost the Confederates Little Round Top. His toleration of General Anderson's faulty positioning on Hill's right flank, as well as Lee's toleration for Hill's lack of communication with his subordinates, encouraged a discombobulated and disjointed attack. As commanding general, the fault lies on Lee's shoulders. When his lead-



Gen. Robert E. Lee. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

ership and generalship were needed in the utmost, Lee was found wanting.

Although the ultimate responsibility for the defeat rests with Lee, his sequentially designed battle plan on July 2 shows the risk of interdependency and interconnectivity in military operations. Lee's en echelon attack left his subordinate commanders dependent on their counterpart's attacks. Without the authorization to assume the initiative, brigade and regimental commanders could not take a risk and operate independently. Thus, the attack oc-

curred late when the initiative had vanished. The results on July 2 provide an adequate lesson, historically and contemporaneously, on the inherent risks of an interdependent and interconnected force structure.

However, as July 2 came to a close, General Lee still pronounced the day a success and declared that “The result of this day’s operations induced the belief that . . . we should ultimately succeed.”<sup>85</sup> General Longstreet more accurately portrayed the situa-

---

<sup>85</sup> Longstreet, “Lee’s Right Wing at Gettysburg,” 341; Lee to Davis, in *OR* (online), 27.2:320.

tion when he stated, “When the battle of the 2d was over . . . we had accomplished little toward victorious results.”<sup>86</sup> While the fight continued on July 3 with the “hopeless slaughter” of Pickett’s division, Lee had already lost the Battle of Gettysburg, and the War between the States, the day prior.

.....  
**Harrison Florence** is a graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point. Upon graduation, he received his commission and is currently serving as an aviation officer in the U.S. Army.

---

<sup>86</sup> Longstreet, “Lee’s Right Wing at Gettysburg,” 341.