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“I Cannot Think What Has Become of Stuart”

The Impact of Stuart’s Absence on Confederate Operations, June 25 to July 2, 1863

CHARLES R. NORVILLE

Brig. Gen. James Ewell Brown “Jeb” Stuart commanded the cavalry of the Army of Northern Virginia. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

On June 28, 1863, Gen. Robert E. Lee received a shocking piece of intelligence at his headquarters near Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. The Federal Army of the Potomac, now under the command of Maj. Gen. George G. Meade, was north of its namesake river in the vicinity of Frederick, Maryland, instead of south of it as Lee had assumed. Worse, Lee had received that information from a

spy, not from his trusted cavalry chief, Maj. Gen. J. E. B. Stuart. Stuart had ridden off with three cavalry brigades on June 25 and had not been heard from since, leaving Lee to wonder where he was, what the Federals were up to, and why he had not heard from his cavalry. In the absence of detailed information concerning Union troop movements, Lee’s tactical options immediately narrowed, forcing him to radically change his plans and compelling him to operate in an information vacuum that would grow worse in the coming days.

Entire volumes and countless articles have already minutely examined the question of the responsibility for Stuart’s absence.¹ Rather than re-treading that ground, this brief article examines the implications of Stuart’s absence on Lee’s decision-making process and how his tactical options were both limited and hindered during the critical period from June 25, when Stuart began his ride around the Union army, to July 2, when Stuart rejoined the Army of Northern Virginia, which was already engaged at Gettysburg.

Preparations for an Offensive

May 1863

As Lee planned for another incursion north of the Potomac, he took the opportunity to reorganize his army into three infantry corps of three divisions

¹ For example, John S. Mosby, *Stuart’s Cavalry in the Gettysburg Campaign* (New York: Moffat, Yard, 1908; repr. Gaithersburg, MD: Olde Soldier Books, 1987); Eric Wittenberg and J. David Petrucci, *Plenty of Blame to Go Around: Jeb Stuart’s Controversial Ride to Gettysburg* (New York: Savas Beatie, 2006); Mark Nesbitt, *Saber and Scapegoat: Jeb Stuart and the Gettysburg Controversy* (Mechanicsburg, PA: Stackpole, 1994); Warren C. Robinson, *Jeb Stuart and the Confederate Defeat at Gettysburg* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Paul R. Gorman, “J. E. B. Stuart and Gettysburg,” *Gettysburg Magazine* 1 (1989): 86–91.

each, commanded, respectively, by Lt. Gens. James Longstreet, Richard S. Ewell, and Ambrose P. Hill.² Each division comprised four or five infantry brigades and a battalion of artillery. Each corps also had a reserve of two additional artillery battalions. With three big, powerful infantry corps amply supported by artillery, Lee had optimized the Army of Northern Virginia for massing quickly on the battlefield and delivering sledgehammer blows.

Neither did Lee ignore his mounted arm. With offensive operations in hostile territory pending, Lee recognized the need for additional mounted units to perform the cavalry's primary roles of reconnaissance and counterreconnaissance—that is, scouting and patrolling to gather intelligence on the enemy's location, strength, and movements, and protecting the army's movements from the prying eyes of the Federal cavalry. Mounted units would also be needed for myriad other tasks, including flank security, mounting a pursuit of a defeated enemy, conducting raids into the enemy's rear, harassing and hindering enemy movements, gathering supplies for use by the army, courier duty, providing escorts, and guarding supply trains and prisoners.

Lee's mounted arm had become depleted by combat and hard usage, and he sought additional units to bolster its strength. Following the victory at Chancellorsville, Brig. Gen. William E. Jones's cavalry brigade was recalled to the army from the Shenandoah Valley, and an additional brigade under the command of Brig. Gen. Beverly H. Robertson was reassigned from North Carolina. These joined the brigades of Brig. Gens. Wade Hampton, Fitzhugh Lee, and W. H. F. "Rooney" Lee and the horse artillery battalion commanded by Maj. R. F. Beckham to constitute Stuart's enlarged division. In addition, the cavalry and mounted-infantry brigades of Brig. Gens. Albert G. Jenkins and John D. Imboden, each accompanied by a horse artillery battery, were ordered to cooperate, screening

Brig. Gen. William E. "Grumble" Jones. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

Ewell's advance and the army's left flank, respectively. These lastly named brigades would not come under Stuart's command until the disparate forces joined in Pennsylvania, where they temporarily augmented Stuart's strength to seven cavalry brigades plus artillery.³

Initial Movements

June 3 to June 25

In late May, Stuart's division assembled near Culpeper, Virginia. Always the showman, Stuart staged a grand cavalry review on June 5, followed by another for the army commander on June 8.⁴ The Battle of Brandy Station ensued the next day. Stuart was initially surprised but rallied to repulse an attack by the Federal Cavalry Corps supported by infantry. Maj. Gen. Alfred Pleasonton, commanding the Union cavalry, afterward claimed to have

² Longstreet's First Corps now comprised the divisions of Maj. Gens. Lafayette McLaws, John B. Hood, and George E. Pickett. Ewell's Second Corps included the divisions of Maj. Gens. Jubal A. Early, Robert E. Rodes, and Edward Johnson. Hill's Third Corps contained divisions commanded by Maj. Gens. Henry Heth, William D. Pender, and Richard H. Anderson. United States War Department. U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1880–1901; repr., Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot, 1985), ser. 1, vol. 27, part 2, 283–91 (hereafter cited as *OR* and followed by the volume, part, and page numbers, with all subsequent citations referencing series 1).

³ Douglas S. Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command*, 3 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1943), 2:708–10; Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (New York: Charles Scribner and Sons, 1968; repr., Dayton, OH: Morningside Bookshop, 1979), 15–17.

⁴ Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants*, 3:1–5.

detected Lee's infantry on the move, but his reports at the time make it clear that he did not.⁵

Meanwhile, Lee's infantry, spearheaded by Longstreet's corps followed by Ewell's corps, had begun moving westward on June 3 and 4, respectively. Stuart's mission during this phase of the operation was to screen the advance and right flank of the army, protecting it from Federal reconnaissance probes and providing Lee with a steady stream of intelligence on Federal movements. The counterreconnaissance mission was successfully accomplished in the engagements at Brandy Station on June 9, Aldie on June 17, and Upperville on June 21. Stuart's horsemen bent under the combined weight of the Federal cavalry and infantry probes but did not break. To this point in the campaign, Stuart had done all that had been asked of him.

The Army of the Potomac under the command of Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker did not begin moving in earnest until June 12—nine days after Lee's men had started. Hooker initially moved slowly northward by stages, unsure of Lee's intentions and whether he was dealing with a raid by a portion of the Confederate army or a full-blown incursion by Lee's entire force. By June 24, Hooker's army still lay south of the Potomac River. On the same day, Ewell's corps crossed the Maryland line into Pennsylvania headed for Greencastle; Hill's corps crossed the Potomac at Shepherdstown; and Longstreet's corps, now bringing up the rear, moved toward Williamsport in preparation for crossing on June 25.⁶

On June 22 Stuart received provisional permission from army headquarters to pass behind the Federal army with three of his brigades if he thought his two remaining brigades could successfully cover the gaps in the Blue Ridge Mountains. In the same order, Lee expressed the prescient fear that the Union army would "steal a march on us, and get across the Potomac before we are aware." Lee also informed Stuart what his mission was to be once he crossed the Potomac River into Maryland. The order told him to "take position on Ewell's right, place yourself in communication with him, guard his flank, keep him informed of the enemy's movements, and collect all the supplies you can for

Brig. Gen. Beverly H. Robertson. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

use by the army."⁷ An additional note sent on June 23 elaborated on the proviso stated in the first: "If Hooker remains inactive, you can leave two brigades to watch him and move with the three others." Lee added, "In either case, after crossing the [Potomac] river, you must move on and feel the right of Ewell's troops, collecting information, provisions, &c."⁸ Lee clearly expected a union of Stuart with Ewell as soon as possible after June 25 that would place his cavalry between his army and the Army of the Potomac.⁹ There, Stuart would be ideally situated to monitor Federal movements and to screen and provide security for Lee's.

Stuart issued an order on June 24 that made clear to Brig. Gen. Beverly Robertson, the senior of the two brigadiers left behind to watch the Blue Ridge, what was expected of him: "Your object will be to watch the enemy. . . . Be always on the alert; let nothing escape your observation." Robertson was

⁵ Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, 60–66.

⁶ Bradley M. Gottfried, *Roads to Gettysburg: Lee's Invasion of the North, 1863* (Shippensburg, PA: White Mane, 2001), 133–39.

⁷ OR, 27:3:913.

⁸ OR, 27:3:923.

⁹ Charles Marshall, *Lee's Aide-de-Camp* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1927; Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), 201–24, citations refer to the University of Nebraska Press edition, edited by Frederick Maurice.

The operations of Stuart's cavalry from June 9 through June 28. Courtesy of Phil Laino.

instructed that if the Federals retired from his front, he was to “leave sufficient pickets in the mountains . . . place a strong and reliable picket to watch the enemy at Harpers Ferry, cross the Potomac, and follow the army, keeping on its right and rear.”¹⁰ The sequel would show that Robertson did none of these things. It would appear that Robertson needed a firm guiding hand; and in Stuart’s absence, he was largely ineffectual.

On June 25 Stuart set out from Salem Depot with three brigades at about 1:00 a.m.¹¹ By late morning, he had encountered the Federal Second Corps near Haymarket, Virginia, as it marched northward. Stuart dispatched a courier to Lee, informing him that the Federals were on the move—a message Lee never received.¹² After a brief skirmish, Stuart was diverted southward and then eastward—away from the army—onto what became his ill-fated ride. He would not rejoin Lee’s army until the afternoon of the second day of battle at Gettysburg.

Lee Operates in an Information Vacuum

June 25 to 28

From June 25 to 28 Lee continued his northward advance without any word from Stuart or the two brigades left behind to screen the Blue Ridge. By June 28 Lee’s army was widely scattered, with Ewell’s corps at Carlisle and York, Hill’s corps in the vicinity of Fayetteville, and Longstreet’s corps and Lee’s headquarters at Chambersburg. Stuart, meanwhile, had only just crossed the Potomac at Rowser’s Ford, seventy-five miles from his commanding general and with the entire Union army between them.¹³ Lee issued orders for June 29 calling for Longstreet and Hill to continue their northerly march toward the Susquehanna where Ewell, with Jenkins’s cavalry brigade in the advance, was already seeking a crossing site for operations against Harrisburg.¹⁴

It was at that moment that fate intervened. In early June, Longstreet had dispatched a spy, a Mississippi actor named James Harrison, to learn what

he could behind Union lines and report back to Longstreet in late June. Now Harrison rode into Confederate lines bearing information that the Army of the Potomac had crossed its namesake river on June 25 and 26; that at least two, and probably three, Federal corps were near Frederick; that two more corps were near South Mountain; that Hooker had been relieved; and that Meade now commanded the Army of the Potomac. Furthermore, Harrison expressed the belief that the Federals were preparing to cross the mountains to threaten Lee’s communications in the valley beyond. Immediately recognizing the importance of Harrison’s information, Longstreet sent Maj. John W. Fairfax of his staff with the spy in tow to Lee, who questioned Harrison minutely. Assured that Longstreet placed great confidence in Harrison’s bona fides and having received no word from his own cavalry, Lee had no recourse but to act on the spy’s information.¹⁵

Harrison’s information placed two Federal corps near the eastern slopes of South Mountain. Should they cross over into the Cumberland Valley, they would threaten Lee’s communications with Virginia. To avoid this, Lee issued a new set of orders superseding the first. He ordered his own army to cross South Mountain and concentrate in the Cashtown area. Lee believed that moving his army east of the mountains would pose a threat to Baltimore and Washington that Meade could not ignore, thereby forcing the Federals to respond in kind and abandon any notions of interdicting Lee’s lines of communication in the valley.¹⁶ Orders were also sent to Robertson’s and Jones’s cavalry brigades to join the army in Pennsylvania.¹⁷ The latter order was necessitated by the failure of those brigades to follow their orders and to move to join the army once the Federal threat was removed from their front.

Without having his cavalry in close contact with the Federals, Lee could not know that Washington had vetoed Hooker’s proposed movement west of the mountains. The threat to Lee’s lines of commu-

¹⁰ OR, 27:3:927–28.

¹¹ Stuart took with him the brigades of Hampton, Fitzhugh Lee, and W. H. F. Lee, the latter under the command of Col. John R. Chambliss Jr. since Rooney Lee had been wounded at Brandy Station. The two brigades left to guard the Blue Ridge were those of Robertson and Jones. OR, 27:2:692.

¹² OR, 27:2:692–93.

¹³ OR, 27:2:693; Wittenberg and Petrucci, *Plenty of Blame*, 23–29; Coddington, *Gettysburg Campaign*, 113; Gottfried, *Roads to Gettysburg*, 176–77.

¹⁴ Charles Marshall, “Events Leading up to the Battle of Gettysburg,” *Southern Historical Society Papers* 23 (1895): 226–27; Gottfried, *Roads to Gettysburg*, 177.

¹⁵ G. Moxley Sorrel, *Recollections of a Confederate Staff Officer* (Neale, 1905; Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot, 1987), 155, citations refer to the Broadfoot edition, edited by Bell I. Wiley; Walter H. Taylor, *General Lee: His Campaigns in Virginia 1861–1865 with Personal Reminiscences* (1878; repr., Dayton, OH: Morningside Bookshop, 1975), 184–85; James Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America* (Philadelphia, PA: J. B. Lippincott, 1903; repr., New York: Mallard Press, 1991), 346–48; Douglas S. Freeman, *R. E. Lee: A Biography* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1935), 3:60–62.

¹⁶ OR, 27:2:307, 316; Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox*, 348.

¹⁷ OR, 27:2:307; OR, 27:3:943–44; Gottfried, *Roads to Gettysburg*, 176–83.

The operations of Stuart's cavalry from June 29 to July 2. Courtesy of Phil Laino.

nication was nonexistent. The faulty intelligence on which Lee based his decision to cross the mountains had needlessly placed his army on a collision course with the Army of the Potomac before Lee was ready.

Early on June 28, as Harrison had reported, Hooker was relieved and Meade was ordered to take command of the Army of the Potomac. June 28 saw the Federal First, Second, Fifth, Eleventh, and

Twelfth Corps and the army's Artillery Reserve near Frederick, Maryland. The Third Corps was near Walkersville and Woodsboro, six miles from Frederick; and the Sixth Corps was near Hyattstown. The army's trains were at Westminster.¹⁸ Meade issued orders for June 29 that called for rapid marches northward—orders that put his army on the roads that would lead to Gettysburg.

¹⁸ Gottfried, *Roads to Gettysburg*, 185.

Forewarned Is Not Always Forearmed

June 29

The Army of Northern Virginia began moving toward Gettysburg on June 29, but it did so without a sense of urgency. With only Harrison's sketchy report to go on and his own cavalry out of contact, Lee did not know whether the Federals at Frederick were stationary or moving; and if they were moving, he didn't know how fast or in which direction. Lee reported that "the absence of the cavalry rendered it impossible to obtain accurate information." Lee added, "The march toward Gettysburg was conducted more slowly than it would have been had the movements of the Federal Army been known."¹⁹

By day's end, only Heth's division of Hill's corps had crossed South Mountain and reached Cashtown. Hill's other two divisions, followed by Longstreet's troops, were still west of South Mountain. Ewell, initially ordered to Chambersburg, had started Johnson's division, accompanied by the reserve artillery and Second Corps trains, west of the mountains and now found it too late in the day to recall him. Rodes's division, originally to start for the Susquehanna at noon, remained in camp at Carlisle, while Early's division remained at York and Wrightsville. Meanwhile, Stuart made it as far as Union Mills, still five miles short of the Pennsylvania line.²⁰

The Army of the Potomac was not stationary. The left wing (the First, Third, and Eleventh Corps, with Brig. Gen. John Buford's First Cavalry division operating in support) under Maj. Gen. John Reynolds marched toward Emmitsburg and Taneytown, only twelve and fourteen miles from Gettysburg, respectively. The other Federal corps were also making hard marches, and most would cover twenty to twenty-five miles that day. Had Lee realized this, he could have ordered greater haste and taken measures to effect a more rapid concentration of his combat units in the Cashtown-Gettysburg area.

The problem was the limited road network and especially the bottleneck created by the single road through the Cashtown Gap. Due to the steep slopes and narrow defiles, only one unit could use the pass at a time. The routes of march taken to this point in the campaign meant that seven of Lee's nine

divisions would have to pass through the choke-point formed by the gap.²¹ Had Lee understood the proximity of the Federal columns and the speed at which they were approaching, the need for celerity would have been more apparent to him and orders could have been issued that only ammunition wagons accompany the marching troops. As it was, the division and corps trains nearly doubled the length of the moving columns, delaying the passage of additional units and slowing the concentration east of the gap. In addition, had the need for haste been understood, some units could also have been diverted south to the Fairfield Gap, thereby easing the congestion west of Cashtown.

The Die Is Cast

June 30

The Confederate march toward Gettysburg and its vicinity continued on June 30. Rodes's and Early's divisions of Ewell's corps started south and southwest, respectively, while Johnson's division continued south toward Chambersburg. Pender's division of Hill's corps passed through Cashtown Gap, joining Heth's division at Cashtown. Anderson's division of Hill's corps remained west of the mountains. Hood's and McLaws's divisions of Longstreet's corps closed on the base of South Mountain, except for Brig. Gen. Evander Law's brigade of Hood's division, which was detached and diverted to New Guilford to guard against a potential Union thrust from the direction of Emmitsburg—a task the cavalry should have performed. Pickett's division was assigned to provide security for the army's trains at Chambersburg, pending relief from that duty by the arrival of Imboden's tardy cavalry brigade. Meanwhile, Stuart, attempting to strike westward to effect a junction with Lee, collided with Federal cavalry that were screening the right flank of the Union army at Hanover. Stuart's lead brigade (commanded by Chambliss) was repulsed and expelled from the town, forcing the cavalry chief to divert his weary column, encumbered by prisoners and captured wagons, toward Carlisle.²²

Already at Cashtown on the morning of June 30, Maj. Gen. Henry Heth ordered a brigade un-

¹⁹ OR, 27.2:307.

²⁰ Gottfried, *Roads to Gettysburg*, 191–94.

²¹ Only Early's and Rodes's divisions of Ewell's corps, approaching from the north and already being east of the mountains, avoided the congestion at the Cashtown Gap.

²² Gottfried, *Roads to Gettysburg*, 201–3.

Brig. Gen. John D. Imboden. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

der Brig. Gen. James J. Pettigrew to move toward Gettysburg, eight miles away, to collect supplies.²³ Pettigrew had his men on the road at an early hour and were approaching McPherson's Ridge west of Gettysburg by midmorning just as Buford's Federal cavalry was entering the town.²⁴ Seeing the Federal column, Pettigrew, under orders to avoid engaging the enemy until the army was concentrated, counter-marched to Cashtown, where he reported what he had seen to his division commander. Heth relates that Pettigrew told him

that there was evidently a cavalry force occupying the town, the strength of which he could not tell; that some of his men reported the beat of drums (indicating infantry) on the further side of town. . . . General Hill rode up just then, and I directed General Pettigrew to repeat to Hill what he had told me. Hill said, as I had done, that he did not believe that there was any force

at Gettysburg, except possibly a small cavalry vidette. I said to Hill, "If there is no objection, I will march my division to-morrow, go to Gettysburg and secure those shoes." Hill replied, "Do so." . . . The next morning, July 1, 1863, I moved out at five o'clock.²⁵

Pettigrew's June 30 march to Gettysburg was as much a reconnaissance as it was a foraging expedition. In fact, information gathering may have actually been the primary reason for the expedition. Heth's division alone was east of South Mountain on June 30. Like any good commander, Heth wanted to know what lay in his front. Isolated as he was and with a narrow mountain pass at his back, he could not afford to be surprised by an undetected Federal force. By ordering Pettigrew forward with orders not to engage but to fall back in the face of an enemy force, Heth was gathering information on the road net, the terrain, and any threats posed by Federal troops. This is a job that cavalry should have been performing and probably would have if any had been present.

With Pettigrew's report in hand, Hill faced a dilemma. A force of unknown strength and composition occupied Gettysburg. He simply could not afford to remain in ignorance as to the nature and strength of the enemy at Gettysburg with the entire army converging on that point. Previously, on June 26 Early's division had skirmished with Federal militia, including some cavalry, just outside Gettysburg. Perhaps the militia had returned, or could it be the advance guard of the Army of the Potomac? Lee had to be sure. So when Hill proposed on the evening of June 30 to take two divisions (Heth's and Pender's) to Gettysburg the following day, Lee concurred.

To make matters worse, both aspects of the Confederate cavalry failure were in evidence on June 30. Not only had the cavalry failed to keep tabs on Federal movements, but it had also failed to protect the army from Federal cavalry reconnaissance probes. Thus, on the evening of June 30, John Buford was able to dispatch a message from Gettysburg containing the location of every major component of

²³ OR, 27.2:307, 317, 606-7, 637.

²⁴ Gottfried, *Roads to Gettysburg*, 201-3.

²⁵ The "shoes at Gettysburg" fable has its origins in Heth's memoirs. Early's division had passed through Gettysburg on June 26, and it can be assumed that had any shoes actually been present, they would have been taken by his command. James L. Morrison, ed., *The Memoirs of Henry Heth* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1974), 173.

The locations of Meade's army and Stuart's cavalry on June 28 when Lee received his report from the spy Harrison and when Meade assumed command. Courtesy of Phil Laino.

Lee's army to Maj. Gen. John Reynolds, who was commanding the Union advance. Buford reported,

I am satisfied that A.P. Hill's corps is massed just back of Cashtown, about 9 miles from this place. Pender's division of this [Hill's] corps came up today—of which I advised you, saying, "The enemy in my front is increased." The enemy's pickets (infantry and artillery) are within 4 miles of this place, on the Cashtown road. . . . Near Heidlersburg today, one of my parties captured a courier of Lee's. . . . He says Ewell's corps is crossing the mountains from Carlisle, Rodes' division being at Petersburg in advance. Longstreet, from all I can learn, is still behind Hill.²⁶

Buford's information was spot on. His job had been made easier by the absence of a Confederate cavalry counterreconnaissance screen. With no enemy cavalry to contest their efforts, Buford's reconnaissance parties could go pretty much wherever needed to collect the required information on Lee's movements. Thus as Hill's two-division reconnaissance in force moved east on July 1, Reynolds knew exactly what he was up against. In addition, Buford had had time to ascertain the lay of the land, including all defensible positions west of Gettysburg from which he might contest and delay the Confederate advance as well as the key terrain features south of Gettysburg. Conversely, Heth and Pender would be marching in complete ignorance of what lay before them.

That Fateful Day

Morning, July 1

There can be no doubt that Hill's two-division expedition to Gettysburg on July 1 was a reconnaissance in force. Lee stated as much in his second campaign report, written in January 1864:

General Hill arrived [at Cashtown] with Pender's division in the evening, and the following morning (July 1) advanced with these two divisions, accompanied by Pegram's and McIntosh's battalions of artillery, to ascertain the strength of the enemy, whose force was supposed to consist chiefly of cavalry.²⁷

A reconnaissance in force has the collection of intelligence information as its primary mission. Sufficient combat power is provided to enable the reconnoitering force to fight to penetrate the enemy's counterreconnaissance screen in order to determine what main force lies behind it. In such operations, the potential for combat is always present, as is the possibility that a general meeting engagement may ensue as both sides feed in reinforcements to bolster their forces in contact and to exploit any opportunities or successes gained. That is precisely what happened at Gettysburg. Hill's reconnaissance in force escalated into a battle that neither army commander wanted nor was prepared to fight. The major difference was that Reynolds knew exactly what he was up against as he marched north toward Gettysburg. Heth and Pender did not. Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig would later write, "As well let a blind man out without a dog, as infantry without some horsemen to attend and reconnoiter for it."²⁸ Stuart's absence again limited Lee's options and forced a less-than-optimal solution, dictating that the June 30 reconnaissance be conducted by infantry. Had he been preset, Stuart could have probed for the desired information; and if the enemy were found to be present in force, the cavalry could more readily disengage and fall back. Stuart's presence would also have rendered Buford's intelligence collection efforts more difficult.

The result is history. Buford's cavalry fought a classic delaying action on July 1, trading space for time as it fell back from ridge top to ridge top west of Gettysburg. Heth's division, with two of its four brigades in advance, pushed to penetrate the Federal counterreconnaissance screen but failed as Buford fell back when the mounting pressure on his lines became too great.

Buford's delaying action allowed time for the lead division of the Federal First Corps commanded by Brig. Gen. James S. Wadsworth to reach the field, and the counterreconnaissance screen permitted it to do so completely undetected. Normally, once battle is joined, the cavalry provides flank security for the engaged infantry even while it continues to screen and watch for any additional enemy forces approaching the battlefield. In the absence of

²⁶ OR, 27.1:923.

²⁷ OR, 27.2:317.

²⁸ Field Marshall Sir Douglas Haig, 1900, quoted in Peter G. Tsouras, *Warrior's Words: A Dictionary of Military Quotes* (London: Arms and Armor Press, 1992).

the Confederate cavalry, Heth's flank was wide open to attack by an undetected force of the enemy. As Brig. Gen. James J. Archer's Tennessee and Alabama brigade pushed across Willoughby Run, the total success of the Federal counterreconnaissance efforts became evident. Archer's men were hit by a bolt out of the blue as Brig. Gen. Solomon Meredith's Iron Brigade attacked in front and in flank, routing the gray brigade and capturing Archer and a number of his soldiers. Up to that point, Archer's men had thought they faced only Federal cavalry. Their surprise at the sudden appearance of Federal infantry was total.

Had Heth known of the Federal infantry advance, he could have deployed his other two brigades to counter the developing threat posed by the arrival of Wadsworth's division. Further, he could have called on Pender's division for additional support and assistance. Heth alone outnumbered Wadsworth's First Division by odds of nearly two to one. Together, Heth and Pender would have nearly doubled that ratio.²⁹

As it was, the sudden and unexpected arrival of one Federal infantry division raised the specter of others lurking nearby. What Heth, Pender, and Hill did not know was that Wadsworth's division was the only one on the field. The remainder of the Federal First Corps and the entire Eleventh Corps were strung out in column of march along the Emmitsburg and Taneytown Roads. If the two Confederate divisions on the field could have massed and launched an immediate attack, they might have swept the Federals from the field and seized the key high ground south of Gettysburg before significant Union reinforcements could arrive. But having received one nasty surprise and not knowing what other Federal units might be nearby, an entirely appropriate caution seized the Confederate commanders, who had also been enjoined by Lee to avoid a general engagement until the army was concentrated.³⁰ Had they known how weak the Federals really were, they may have acted more decisively and aggressively. In the complete absence of information concerning the proximity of additional

Federal units, they had to content themselves with awaiting developments.

Lull and Resumption—Midmorning to Midafternoon

Following the morning Confederate reverse, a lull settled over the field, during which time both sides brought up additional forces. By midafternoon the remaining elements of the Federal First and Eleventh Corps had arrived. Ewell's two Confederate divisions east of the mountains (Rodes's and Early's) were approaching the field, and Anderson's division of Hill's corps had reached Cashtown and was headed for Gettysburg. Under the circumstances, Lee ordered an attack by the four divisions present.

Again, the cavalry's absence limited Lee's options. One of Buford's brigades had assumed the customary position for cavalry in a general engagement on the Union left flank. Their presence precluded a Confederate attempt at a turning movement to flank the successive Union positions on McPherson's Ridge and Seminary Ridge. In the absence of such a maneuver, the Confederates were left with the only remaining option—costly frontal assaults into the teeth of the Union defenses. The mere presence of the Union cavalry hovering on Pender's right flank largely negated one attacking Confederate brigade as Brig. Gen. James H. Lane ordered his North Carolina troops to form squares as a defense against a cavalry charge. As a result, Lane's advance was delayed, his men saw little action, and they contributed virtually nothing to the afternoon assault.

Pender was also deprived of the use of another of his four brigades that afternoon. Having seen Union troops arriving from the south on the Emmitsburg Road all morning, Hill could not afford to permit the right of his frontal assault to be taken in flank by newly arriving Federal troops. As a hedge against this threat, he kept Brig. Gen. Edward L. Thomas's Georgia brigade in reserve. A quick scout by a few gray-clad horsemen would have revealed the roads to the south to be clear of Federals and would have empowered Pender to use Thomas's brigade to bolster his attack.

A similar situation pertained to Early's left flank, where Brig. Gen. William Smith's brigade was employed for flank security. Later, following the rout of the Eleventh Corps, Smith sent word to Early that

²⁹ The best available division strengths are as follows: Heth's division, 7,972; Pender's division, 7,145; Wadsworth's division, 4,065. John W. Busey and David G. Martin, *Regimental Strengths and Losses at Gettysburg* (Hightstown, NJ: Longstreet House, 1986), 20, 172.

³⁰ *OR*, 27.2:444.

“a large force of the enemy consisting of infantry, artillery and cavalry, was advancing on the York Road, and that we were about to be flanked.”³¹ Early dispatched Brig. Gen. John B. Gordon’s brigade to counter what turned out to be an erroneous report. Thus, the absence of Stuart’s cavalry for flank security and reconnaissance and the Federal cavalry’s mere presence near their flanks negated three Confederate infantry brigades (two of Pender’s and one of Early’s) during the afternoon attack and made another of Early’s unavailable for subsequent operations against Cemetery Hill.

After hard fighting, Ewell’s two divisions wrecked the Union Eleventh Corps; and Heth’s two brigades, plus two of Pender’s, savaged the Union First Corps. But these gains came at heavy cost to Confederate forces. Six of Hill’s eight brigades and at least two of Ewell’s had been rendered largely incapable of further offensive action that day due to the heavy losses sustained in making their frontal attacks.³² The two battered Federal corps had been pushed through Gettysburg, having lost fully half their numbers engaged.³³ The disorganized remnants were attempting to rally for another stand on Cemetery Hill south of town. A concerted push by the Confederate units still in condition to fight could have ensured victory and completed the destruction of the two Federal corps.

The Fatal Pause

Late Afternoon

Lee immediately recognized both the magnitude of the Confederate success to that point and the need to complete the victory. Further, he fully understood the commanding significance of Cemetery Hill, now held by the remaining Federals. He ordered Ewell to attack the heights “if practicable.”³⁴ Ewell determined that it was not practicable to go it alone, reporting, “I could not bring artillery to bear on it, and the troops with me were jaded by twelve hours’ marching and fighting.”³⁵

³¹ OR, 27.2:469.

³² All four of Heth’s brigades had suffered heavy losses, as had Scales’s and Perrin’s brigades of Pender’s division. In Rodes’s division, Iverson’s brigade had been savaged and Daniel’s brigade had lost heavily. Busey and Martin, *Strengths and Losses*, 286–93.

³³ The First Corps lost approximately 63 percent of its engaged strength, whereas the Eleventh Corps lost about 49 percent of those engaged. Busey and Martin, *Strengths and Losses*, 239–41, 253–55.

³⁴ OR, 27.2:317–18.

³⁵ OR, 27.2:445.

Ewell’s claim not to have fresh troops for the attack stems from the absence of Maj. Gen. Edward Johnson’s division. That division was back in the Cumberland Valley on the morning of July 1. Ordered forward, it cut into the column of march between Anderson’s division of Hill’s corps and the lead division of Longstreet’s corps. Johnson, encumbered by the lengthy Second Corps trains, the Second Corps reserve artillery, plus his own division trains, moved slowly up and then down the steep slopes of the Cashtown Gap.³⁶ The slow march blocked the road and precluded its use by other units.³⁷

As related above, the need for greater haste and a more rapid concentration east of the mountains based on the proximity of the Federal forces approaching Gettysburg was not known and was therefore not acted on. Johnson could easily have left the Second Corps trains behind in the valley where Pickett’s division had already been detailed to guard the army’s and First Corps’ trains. This would have enabled Johnson to march faster, permitting him to reach the field at Gettysburg at an earlier hour. Furthermore, without the trains in tow, Johnson’s shorter column would have required less road space, and this might have permitted one of Longstreet’s divisions to reach the field in time to replace Anderson’s division of Hill’s corps from army reserve, making that division available for combat operations against Cemetery Hill in conjunction with Ewell.

Returning to Lee’s order to attack Cemetery Hill, Early reported that upon encountering an aide of Pender’s, “I sent word by him to General Hill that if he would send up a division, we could take the hill to which the enemy had retreated; and shortly after meeting with General Ewell, I communicated my views to him.”³⁸ Hill responded that he had no troops available for a joint attack, and Ewell decided to await the arrival of Johnson’s missing division,

³⁶ Longstreet reports the length of the trains accompanying Johnson’s division as fourteen miles. Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox*, 361.

³⁷ Four additional Confederate divisions began July 1 close enough to Gettysburg to have arrived in time to fight there, given an open road: Anderson’s division of Hill’s corps, Johnson’s division of Ewell’s corps, and both McLaws’s and Hood’s divisions of Longstreet’s corps. Thus, the traffic jam at the Cashtown Gap kept as many as four Confederate divisions out of action on the first day of battle.

³⁸ OR, 27.2:469–70.

which was reported to be close. By the time Johnson arrived, it was too late for an assault.³⁹

But was Hill's response accurate? It is true that Heth's and Pender's divisions were probably in no condition to launch a fresh assault. They had suffered heavily in officers and men, and it would have taken precious time to organize them for a renewed assault (Heth, himself, was among the wounded). But what about Hill's other division? Anderson reports that his division marched from Fayetteville at an early hour on July 1 and arrived at Cashtown "early in the afternoon, and halted for further orders." An hour later, Anderson marched toward Gettysburg. Why was he allowed to tarry for an hour at Cashtown with a battle in progress a few miles away? Upon arriving between 4:00 and 5:00, Anderson reports that his division occupied the reserve positions recently vacated by Pender's division, which was then involved in the assault on the final Federal line on Seminary Ridge.⁴⁰ With at least three hours of daylight remaining, was not Anderson's fresh division available for a combined attack with Early? The answer to this question is found in Lee's January 1864 report. Lee states,

It was ascertained from the prisoners that we had been engaged with two corps of the army formerly commanded by General Hooker, and that the remainder of that army, under General Meade, was approaching Gettysburg. Without information as to its proximity, the strong positions which the enemy had assumed could not be attacked without danger of exposing the four divisions present, already weakened and exhausted by a long and bloody struggle, to overwhelming numbers of fresh troops.⁴¹

But as noted above, with Anderson's arrival, there were five divisions present, not four. And to what "overwhelming numbers of fresh troops" does Lee refer?

The answer is simple. In the complete absence of information as to the whereabouts of the rest of the Army of the Potomac, Lee had to assume the worst. Two Federal corps had previously arrived via the Emmitsburg and Taneyton Roads. For all

Lee knew, one or more additional corps were right behind them and might arrive at any moment. Lee feared that if he used his only reserve, Anderson's division, in an eastward assault on Cemetery Hill, a newly arriving Federal corps moving up from the south would be squarely on Anderson's right flank. With no reserves remaining to meet it, a Federal attack on Anderson's right might turn Lee's promising eastward attack into a disaster. Because of that, Lee determined to hold Anderson back rather than commit his only reserve to battle.

As further support for this assessment, Brig. Gen. Cadmus Wilcox, commanding a brigade in Anderson's division, reported that upon arriving near Gettysburg, his brigade, supported by a battery of artillery, were posted "at right angles to the right flank of the remainder of the division."⁴² In other words, Wilcox was deployed facing south to guard against any Federals approaching from that direction.

Lee certainly had no idea what force he faced in the late afternoon of July 1. In a postwar letter to Longstreet, Anderson related that,

About twelve o'clock I received a message notifying me that General Lee wished to see me. I found General Lee intently listening to the fire of the guns, and very much disturbed and depressed. At length, he said, more to himself than to me, "I cannot think what had become of Stuart. I ought to have heard from him long before now. He may have met with disaster, but I hope not. In the absence of reports from him, I am in ignorance as to what we have in front of us here. It may be the whole Federal army, or it may be only a detachment."⁴³

Of course, there was no "overwhelming number of fresh troops" approaching the field. The decision to hold Anderson in reserve was wrong in hindsight. But in fairness to Lee, it was the only reasonable course in light of what he knew and did not know. Not only had Lee stumbled into an engagement he did not want and was not prepared to fight; he also remained blind during the first day of battle, with his tactical options severely limited by a nearly complete absence of intelligence on Federal move-

³⁹ OR, 27.2:318, 445, 470.

⁴⁰ OR, 27.2:613, 622.

⁴¹ OR, 27.2:317-18.

⁴² OR, 27.2:616-17.

⁴³ Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox*, 357.

ments. Had Stuart been present, the empty roads south would have been known to Lee, Anderson could have been committed to a joint attack with Early without fear for his open right flank, and Gettysburg might well have been a one-day battle and an overwhelming Confederate victory.

Longstreet Proposes a Move by the Right Flank

As the fighting was winding down on July 1, Longstreet arrived on the field, having ridden ahead of his troops. After reporting to Lee, Longstreet studied the field and, in particular, the forbidding

heights onto which the Federals had been driven and on which they had rallied. In his memoirs, Longstreet claims to have remarked to Lee, "We could not call the enemy to position better suited to our plans. All that we have to do is to file around his left and secure good ground between him and his capital." Lee rejected the proposal, saying, "If he is there to-morrow, I will attack him." Longstreet replied, "If he is there to-morrow, it will be because he wants you to attack."⁴⁴

Whether the exchange occurred exactly as Longstreet describes it is open to debate. What is not in dispute is that Longstreet did propose a plan to turn Meade's flank, seek defensible ground between Gettysburg and Washington, and go on the defensive.

Brig. Gen. Albert G. Jenkins. Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration.

Had the movement been carried out as stated, the reasoning went, Meade would have no choice but to attack the Army of Northern Virginia on ground of Lee's own choosing. What is also not in dispute is that Lee rejected the plan pretty much out of hand, and he was right to have done so.

A Confederate move by the right flank would have required several things to work. First, Lee would need cavalry to scout ahead of the army and to screen its movements from the Federals. Second, Lee would have to be sure no additional Federal units were approaching from

the south, lest he find himself trapped between two forces of the enemy. Third, Lee would have needed a road net to support the proposed movement. Fourth, Lee would have had to break his connection with his main line of supply and reinforcement—the Chambersburg Pike. And fifth, the plan presupposes a quiescent George Meade who would be content to sit idly on his hills while the entire Confederate army marched across his front.

None of the conditions listed above pertained. First, Lee's cavalry was still not present except for Jenkins's brigade, then operating beyond the Confederate left. A single brigade would hardly have been sufficient for so large a task as screening the entire army, given that three divisions of Federal cavalry—eight brigades—were near at hand to

⁴⁴ Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox* 358, 368–69, 404.

dispute their efforts. Second, in the absence of his cavalry, Lee could not be sure that major elements of the Federal army were not approaching from the south. The First and Eleventh Corps had already arrived from that direction on July 1, and it would have been reasonable to assume that additional elements of the Federal army would still be en route from that direction. Third, the road net that ran south from Gettysburg was already in Federal hands and was therefore unavailable to Lee. Fourth, the army's trains and Pickett's division were still on the western side of South Mountain. To have cut loose from the Chambersburg Pike would have severed connection with them, at least temporarily. Finally, there was no reason to assume that Meade would sit idly by while his flank was turned. It would have been a relatively simple matter to hit Lee's exposed flank while it was in motion southward. The plan was simply unrealistic given the existing conditions.

What the proposal and its inevitable dismissal does make clear is that the dearth of cavalry severely limited Lee's maneuvering options for July 2. As day dawned on July 2, Lee was still not aware of what force lay in his front or of the location of any Federal units still en route to join those already at Gettysburg. As a result, he had not formulated any definite plan of battle and, indeed, could not do so until he had a clearer picture.

Lee had four basic options—the same four available to any commander. He could retreat, ceding the field to his foes. He could revert to the defensive and await an attack by Meade's army. He could maneuver to gain an advantage over his opponent. Or he could attack. In his final report, Lee addressed most of these options:

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, in a mea-

sure become unavoidable, and the success already gained gave hope of a favorable issue.⁴⁵

The first sentence of Lee's report contains a rather blistering indictment of the absent cavalry, as "coming unexpectedly upon the whole Federal Army" reveals the complete absence of timely and accurate intelligence concerning Union troop movements prior to contact. Lee is only partially sincere when he protests that a withdrawal through the mountains would have been "difficult and dangerous," as he was able to do that very thing three days later. Furthermore, many of the army's wagons had not yet crossed to the eastern side of South Mountain on the morning of July 2, so his trains were not then as large as they would later become. However, in the absence of defeat, a withdrawal from the battlefield would not have been understood by his soldiers, and morale might have suffered. Besides, his cavalry was not available to escort and protect those trains present or to race ahead to secure passes, road junctions, and key points.

Lee is also correct in stating that he could not "await an attack" by the Federals. Once the missing elements of Lee's army joined him at Gettysburg, he would be at peak strength. From that point on, he would only grow weaker through combat losses and the consumption of his supplies of food, forage, medical supplies, and ammunition. While Lee's army had been spread out and on the move through untouched parts of the commonwealth, foraging for food for the men and animals had not been a problem. However, once the army concentrated at Gettysburg, the supplies on hand would be insufficient to keep the army fed for more than a few days. Furthermore, Lee could expect neither additional reinforcements nor any ammunition resupply. Conversely, troops released from other areas, hastily formed militia, and other units could be sent in a steady stream to bolster Meade, who would not face any supply shortages and was, after all, under no obligation to attack. Meade could simply wait Lee out, getting stronger as Lee grew weaker.

Lee does not discuss the maneuver option; but in the absence of his cavalry for reconnaissance, counterreconnaissance, and screening, that option was largely unavailable to him. Attack was Lee's only

⁴⁵ OR, 27.2:318.

viable course, and that is the one he chose. From numerous possible options, Lee had been reduced by the absence of his cavalry to one.

Stuart did finally arrive on the afternoon of July 2, with his men and horses exhausted from their 250-mile march. His arrival late in the day did nothing to alleviate Lee's dearth of information or aid in planning for July 3. The course of the first two days' battle largely dictated a renewal of offensive action on the third day.

Following the unsuccessful effort to penetrate into the Federal rear on July 3, Stuart and his cavalry, now increased to seven brigades by the addition of Jones, Robertson, Jenkins and Imboden, performed

admirably during the retreat back to Virginia. But it was a retreat made necessary by his previous absence during the critical phase of the campaign.

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