



WALKING POINT

JOHN BUFORD ON THE ROAD TO GETTYSBURG

Michael Phipps

“By far the most critical job in every platoon was that of point man, a specialty upon which every unit depended for its survival”

James Ebert

A Life in a Year: The American Infantryman in Vietnam

Introduction

The United States Army defines a “Movement to Contact” as follows:

A “movement to contact” is conducted to gain, maintain, or reestablish contact with the enemy. Once contact is made, units move quickly to develop the situation. Contact is made with the smallest possible element to maintain flexibility and security ... scouts are usually employed well forward of the advance guard to conduct reconnaissance for the movement.¹

If one cuts through the tens of thousands of books, articles, and publications that express their plethora of views concerning the reasons that the Battle of Gettysburg was fought around this small south-central Pennsylvania town, the answer is quite simple. Both the Army of Northern Virginia, commanded by Robert E. Lee, and the Army of the Potomac, commanded by George Meade, were conducting a movement to contact, and contact was made at Gettysburg. Both armies “developed the situation” as the commanders saw fit. The result is well known.

This essay concerns itself with the lead scout, or “point man,” if you will, in the movement to contact conducted by the 94,000 men of the Army of the Potomac from June 29 until July 1, 1863, in the Gettysburg campaign. That lead scout was, of course, Union Brigadier General of Volunteers, John Buford, who commanded the 1st Cavalry Division of the Army of the Potomac’s Cavalry Corps. This essay will concern itself with the actual factual role that Buford played in determining that the battlefield

in the summer campaign of 1863 would be Gettysburg. Also examined will be the effect that Buford's movements, deployments of troops, intelligence reports, correspondence, and decision-making had on the decisions made by the commander of the Army of the Potomac, George Meade, and his subordinates. This will not be a tactical treatise on Buford's division at Gettysburg. For a detailed treatment of Buford's troop positioning and actual combat actions, refer to my biography of John Buford, *The Devil's to Pay: General John Buford, USA* or to my essay on Union cavalry leadership at Gettysburg in the Gettysburg National Military Park's *Mr. Lincoln's Army: The Army of the Potomac in the Gettysburg Campaign*.²

The Movement to Contact

For John Buford, the movement to contact that would culminate at Gettysburg began on June 28, 1863. On that day the seven infantry corps of the Army of the Potomac were positioned in and around



Brigadier General John Buford, LC

Frederick, Maryland, while the 12,000-trooper cavalry corps was in Middletown, Maryland, just west of Frederick. On the same day Major General Joe Hooker was relieved as the Army's commander, and Major General George Gordon Meade took charge. That evening a paid spy would deliver vital information to Robert E. Lee in Chambersburg, Pennsylvania. The spy, known as Harrison, informed Lee that the enemy was in Frederick. The Rebel commander, some say unaware that the Union army was that close, ordered his army to move from Chambersburg, Carlisle, and York, Pennsylvania to concentrate in Gettysburg and nearby Cashtown, Pennsylvania. Lee's army began its movement to contact the next day. Note that the Army of Northern Virginia would not have scouts well out in the lead of its advance. General J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry would not join the main body of the Confederate army until late in the day on July 2. By that time the situation on the battlefield was almost fully developed.³

On the other hand, the Army of the Potomac would have one of the most competent scouts in the history of the United States Army leading the way, walking point if you will.

Meade issued the order and objectives of march on June 28 for the next day. The advance guard would be Major General John Reynolds' 1st Corps and Major General O.O. Howard's 11th Corps, which would move twenty miles north to Emmitsburg, Maryland, near the Pennsylvania border. These corps would be backed by Major General Dan Sickles' 3rd Corps and Major General Henry Slocum's 12th Corps, which would trail ten miles behind at Taneytown, Maryland. A general order was given to Major General Alfred Pleasonton for his cavalry corps to "guard the right and left flanks and the rear, and to give the commanding General information of the movements of the enemy in front."⁴

Buford received more detailed orders from his corps commander Alfred Pleasonton on the morning of June 29. Special Orders Number 99 instructed Buford's 1st Cavalry Division to move ahead of Reynolds' and Howard's corps through Emmitsburg and on to Gettysburg, ten miles north of the

Maryland line, where they would “cover and protect the front and communicate all information of the events rapidly and surely.” Pleasonton also detached one of Buford’s three brigades (Brig. General Wesley Merritt’s Reserve Brigade, which consisted mostly of U.S. Regular Army cavalry) to guard the Catoctin mountain passes in Mechanicstown, Maryland (present-day Thurmont). Buford was to be in Gettysburg by nightfall, June 30.⁵

It is important to note that Pleasonton was assigning Buford the toughest and most vital scouting mission in the army. Brig. General Judson Kilpatrick’s 3rd Cavalry Division and Brig. General David Gregg’s 2nd Cavalry Division would scout and screen further to the east of Buford.⁶ The 1st Division would be the closest to both the suspected position of Lee’s army and the advance guard of Meade’s army. Both Meade and Pleasonton were selecting their most reliable scouts to “walk point” for the army. Pleasonton and Buford had been close in the regular U.S. Army prior to the war, and Pleasonton knew Buford’s strengths as a soldier. In 1855, as a captain, he had been First Lieutenant John Buford’s company commander. Both men were members of the U.S. 2nd Dragoon regiment at Fort Kearny in Nebraska Territory. They hunted buffalo together and participated in one of the largest pre-Civil War Indian battles at Ash Hollow, along the Platte River, against the Sioux. And it would be Pleasonton who would write Buford’s eulogy when Buford succumbed to typhoid fever in December 1863.⁷

As for Pleasonton that is the good news. The bad news is that in March of 1864 in his testimony on the Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War, Pleasonton tried to claim credit for the selection of Gettysburg as a battlefield. There he testified that he had ordered Buford to hold Gettysburg “at all costs.” However, there is nothing in the official correspondence to indicate that Buford had those orders when he left Middletown.⁸

My theory is that Pleasonton was letting his large ego exaggerate his role in the campaign. Also, Meade had relieved him as the cavalry corps commander, and he harbored a grudge. The Committee on the Conduct the War gave Pleasonton a chance to pay his old commander back in spades by making it appear that Meade had nothing to do with the battle’s being fought at Gettysburg. Sadly, this is one of the main reasons why Buford remains to this day relatively unknown. Buford was dead and could not write his story. As I like to say, death is not a good career move in the military, or as the pirates say, “dead men tell no tales.”

An interesting footnote here is that Buford would not be the first Union cavalry commander to enter Gettysburg. At 2:00 P.M. on June 28, 1863, Brigadier General Joseph Copeland rode into Gettysburg with his brigade of four Michigan cavalry regiments. He posted his troopers in the town and sent back an accurate intelligence report noting the presence of Early’s Rebel infantry division heading eastward through Gettysburg to York. For some unknown reason, possibly because Copeland had been relieved by the newly appointed Brigadier George Custer on that day, the Michigan brigade was ordered to withdraw from Gettysburg to Emmitsburg, Maryland on June 29. And so Joseph Copeland, a fifty-year-old former judge from Michigan, rode into obscurity.⁹ The stage was set for John Buford’s moment in history. Pause for a moment and consider that it may have been Copeland and the Michigan Brigade who opposed the initial Confederate advance into Gettysburg on July 1. How different might the outcome of the battle have been?

But that was not to be. Buford, minus his reserve brigade, left Middletown, Maryland and began his fateful ride north in the morning of June 29. His force would consist of two cavalry brigades and one horse artillery battery. One brigade consisted of the 8th Illinois and 8th New York Cavalry and a demi-regiment which included the 3rd Indiana and 12th Illinois Cavalry. This brigade’s strength was 1,600 troopers and was commanded by the very capable and competent Colonel William Gamble, a 45-year-old Irish immigrant who had served in the enlisted ranks of the 1st U.S. Dragoons for four years prior to the war. Gamble’s performance at Gettysburg would provide tremendous assistance to Buford two days hence. Buford’s 2nd Brigade counted 1,148 men and consisted of the 6th and 9th New York Cavalry and the 17th Pennsylvania and 3rd West Virginia cavalry regiments. The 3rd West Virginia was actually only a squadron of 59 men. Its commander was Col. Thomas Devin, a 40-year-old former house painter from New York City. Devin would go on to become one of the greatest volunteer cavalry commander of the

war and command the 3rd U.S. Cavalry on the western frontier after the war. In other words, Buford had two of the most able cavalry brigade commanders of the war to assist him in accomplishing his mission at Gettysburg.¹⁰

He also had a highly competent soldier in command of his artillery support, Battery A, 2nd U.S. Artillery. This was 1st Lieutenant John Calef, who had only graduated from West Point the year before. Buford praised the lieutenant's efforts at Gettysburg in the highest terms. Calef would serve thirty-seven years in the regular army artillery and be a keynote speaker at the dedication of the Buford monument on McPherson's Ridge in 1895.¹¹

Buford's 2,823 soldiers spent all day on June 29 moving thirty miles northwest to Fountaindale, Pennsylvania, where they camped for the night. Although rarely discussed by historians, it should be noted that Buford completely ignored the route that Pleasonton had given in Special Orders Number 99. The route to Gettysburg designated was from Middletown, Maryland through Beallsville, Wolfsville, and Emmitsburg, Maryland. Buford instead took a route eight miles to the west, through Boonsboro and Cavetown, Maryland, then on to Monterey Springs and Fountaindale.¹²

Neither Buford nor Pleasonton ever commented on this divergence. A possible explanation is that Buford knew that most of Lee's army was in the Cumberland Valley west of the Blue Ridge (or South Mountain, as it was called in Maryland and Pennsylvania) and he was simply attempting to get closer to the enemy to gather more accurate intelligence. Buford's relationship with his corps commander was such that he knew he could take latitude with his orders.

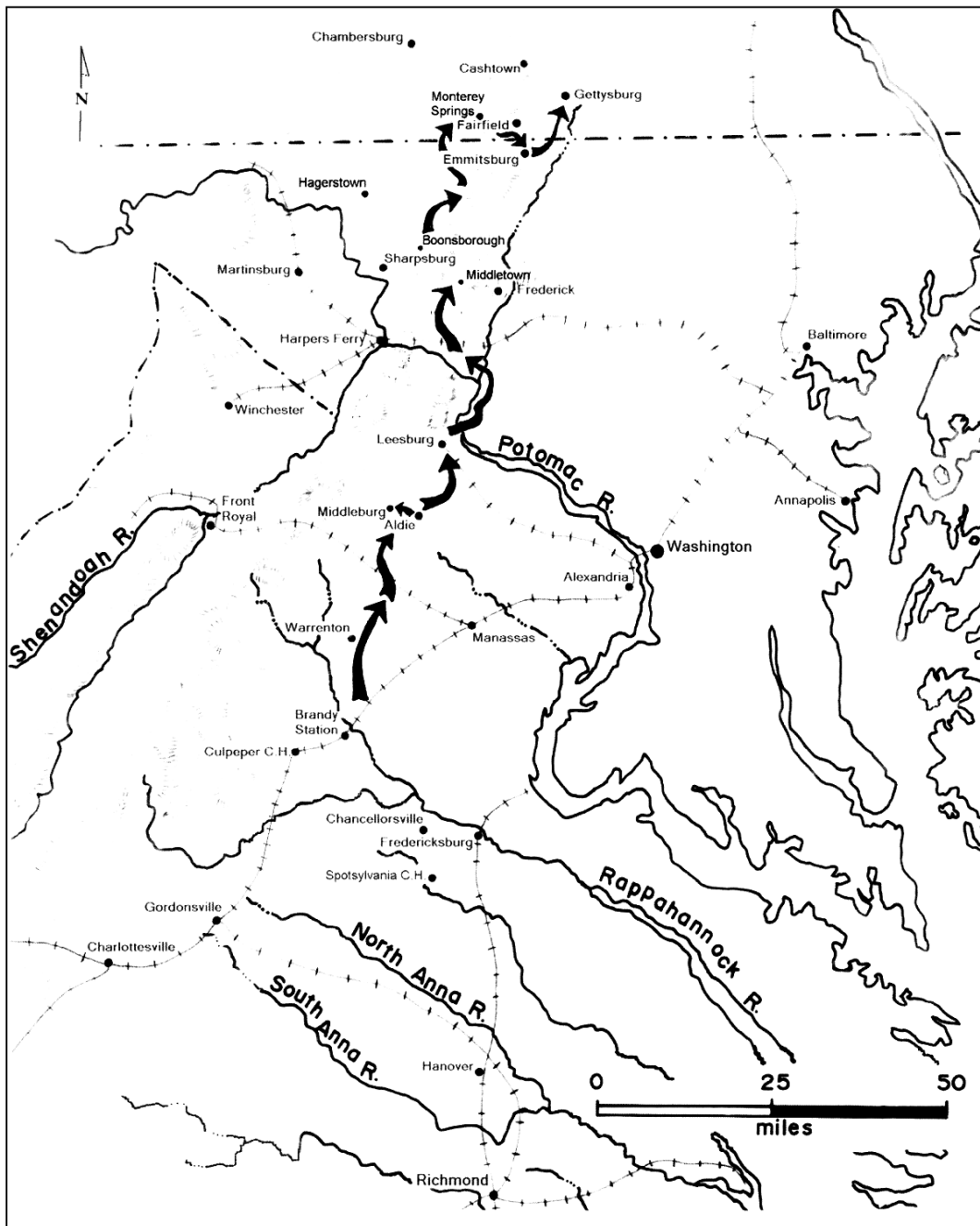
While Buford was shadowing Lee on June 29, Reynolds moved the 1st Corps to Emmitsburg, arriving around 3:00 P.M., where he related intelligence given to him by Edward Hopkins, one of Colonel George Sharpe's scouts, which accurately showed Early's division at York, Robert E. Rodes' division at Carlisle, and Ambrose P. Hill's 3rd Corps near Chambersburg. Howard's 11th Corps was close behind Reynolds' corps, while Sickles' corps lagged behind near Taneytown and Middleburg, which angered Meade. Henry Slocum, commanding the Union 12th Corps, made little headway that day, which Slocum blamed on Sickles' trains blocking the road and the large number of drunken stragglers he encountered in and around Frederick. The Union 2nd and 5th corps reached their objectives of Frizzelburg and Union Mills, Maryland, however, John Sedgwick's 6th Corps failed to reach its goal of New Windsor, Maryland.¹³

Despite the fitful start north from Frederick, Meade's corps were reasonably well placed for an effective movement to contact. Buford's division was a day's march from Lee's main body and ready to make contact with the smallest possible element while the advance guard of Reynolds' and Howard's infantry corps were also in a good tactical position to develop the situation.

Meade continued the movement to contact north that evening with the army's marching orders for June 30. A discussion of Meade's plan to fight on the Pipe Creek is not within the scope of this essay. For an analysis of this, see the essay "*Why Gettysburg*," by Tony Nicastro in this publication. But Meade's order of march for June 30 gives little indication of an intention to fight on Pipe Creek. The movement to contact north would continue, although it was slowed considerably. Reynolds, who would be placed in command of a left wing consisting of the 1st, 11th, and 3rd corps, was ordered to advance the 1st Corps only four miles north from Emmitsburg to Marsh Creek, with the 11th and 3rd corps in support. Slocum's 12th Corps was ordered well north of the Pipe Creek to Littlestown, Pennsylvania. Only the 2nd and 5th corps were positioned on the Pipe Creek. The 6th Corps, acting seemingly as a flank guard, was deployed well to the east, at Manchester, Maryland. Buford's orders were to advance to Gettysburg by that evening.¹⁴

Whatever Meade's intention, the Army of the Potomac was in an excellent position to continue its movement to contact on July 1 or to fight on the Pipe Creek. Meade had Buford as the lead scout and Reynolds' left wing as an advance guard. The 2nd, 5th, and 12th corps were all within supporting distance, and the 6th Corps and Gregg's and Kilpatrick's cavalry divisions protected the army's right flank.

On the evening of June 29, Buford and some of his officers climbed Jack's Mountain, northeast of his camp at Fountaindale, Pennsylvania. The magnificent view still exists today although a modern housing development has partially obscured it. On a clear day some of the monuments on the Gettysburg



The route of Buford's division during the Gettysburg Campaign from Brandy Station to Gettysburg. Map by John Heiser

National Military Park can be seen. Buford could see northeast to Fairfield, Pennsylvania and east to Gettysburg. To the southeast, Emmitsburg and the Pipe Creek line, marked by Parr's Ridge, could be seen. Captain Theo Bean of the 17th Pennsylvania Cavalry, writing after the war, stated that Buford studied the panorama then stated, "within forty-eight hours the concentration of both armies will take place within view and a great battle will be fought."¹⁵

I previously thought from this statement that Buford was predicting a battle would be fought in the Gettysburg area, but I now realize he meant the twenty to thirty square miles encompassing the Pipe Creek line, Emmitsburg, Gettysburg, and Fairfield. Buford was certainly correct in his assessment of

when the battle would take place. He sensed that the movement to contact was imminent, but he was no mystic.

As the last day before the battle, June 30, dawned, Buford marched his division northeast toward Fairfield, seven miles distant by the Jack's Mountain road. Some of his command took a parallel route to the northwest on present day Iron Springs Road. His division was still eight to ten miles northwest of the route that Pleasonton had prescribed. About two miles southwest of the village, at the foot of Jack's Mountain, he ran into two regiments of Lee's army, probably the 2nd and 42nd Mississippi infantry, and a skirmish ensued.¹⁶

How Buford handled this brief skirmish illustrates his competence and value as the lead scout or point man for the Army of the Potomac. A key quality a point man must possess is flexibility. One of the modern U. S. Army Ranger School's mottos is "adapt and overcome." The two men who taught me how to walk point and lead a scouting mission were sergeants first class James E. Magee and Roger Walters. The former served two tours in the central highlands in Vietnam with the U.S. Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade, including the bloody battles around Dak To and Hill 875. The latter served in the 3rd Marine Division in the DMZ area of I Corps in the dreaded Dong Ha valley, where booby traps and ambushes by North Vietnamese army regulars were common. They both agreed on the importance of flexibility. You must get to your objective as ordered, but how you get there is up to you, and your unit should get there with the least number of casualties.¹⁷

This is precisely what Buford accomplished on June 30. After running into the Rebel infantry outside Fairfield he was angered by the cowardice of the locals who, after all, were citizens of a Union state. Buford later wrote:

The inhabitants knew of my arrival and the position of the enemy camp, yet not one of them gave me a particle of information, nor even mentioned the fact of the enemy's presence. The whole community seemed stampeded, and afraid to speak or to act, often offering excuses . . . "the rebels will destroy our houses if we tell anything." Had any one given me timely information, and acted as a guide that night, I could have surprised and captured or destroyed this force.¹⁸

Buford put his anger aside and remained flexible. He had to be in Gettysburg by sunset and had no clear idea of the size of the force that he was in contact with. One of his options was to fight his way through the Rebels and risk a larger engagement that could also, Buford worried, "disarrange the plans of the General Commanding [Meade]."¹⁹ His other option was to break contact and find another route to Gettysburg. Buford wisely selected the second option. The exact route he followed remains unclear to this day, but he diverted his division southeast until it reached the Fairfield road (modern Route 116), then proceeded south and east to Emmitsburg. From here he marched north to Gettysburg. Three miles north of Emmitsburg, Buford passed Moritz Tavern, where Major General John Reynolds had established his headquarters.²⁰

There is no direct evidence that Buford and Reynolds spoke, but it is hard to believe that they did not. Captain James Hall, who commanded Battery B, 2nd Maine Artillery, in the 1st Corps Artillery Brigade, writing some twenty years after the battle, recalled seeing the two generals speaking at the Moritz Tavern on July 1.²¹ Hall perhaps had the day wrong when he recalled the event, but Reynolds' quick support of Buford on July 1, as well as Meade's decision to send the 1st Corps to Gettysburg, may have been the result of this meeting.

Buford arrived in Gettysburg between 11:00 A.M. and 12:00 P.M. on June 30, eight hours ahead of his "no later than" time. At the same time a scouting or foraging party consisting of Brigadier General James J. Pettigrew's Confederate infantry brigade was approaching Gettysburg from the northwest along the Cashtown road. The Rebels observed Buford approaching Gettysburg and withdrew back to the hamlet of Seven Stars, five miles northwest of Gettysburg. Buford sent a squadron of the 8th Illinois Cavalry to shadow Pettigrew. The unit followed as far as Whisler's Ridge, overlooking Marsh Creek two and three-quarters miles northwest of Gettysburg on the Cashtown road. Videttes, pickets, and

patrols were deployed in all directions as Buford started to weigh his options and decide what actions he should take as the point man of Meade's movement to contact.²²

Buford's tactical dispositions are beyond the scope of this essay. These are covered in my biography of Buford and my essay on Union cavalry leadership in the programs of the Sixth Annual Gettysburg National Military Park Seminar.²³ The bottom line is that Buford decided on his own, unless one believes Pleasonton's later testimony, to make contact with Lee's lead element, and to try to hold the Rebels away from the road intersection of Gettysburg until either Reynolds or Meade came up to make the final decision.

It is important to note that nowhere in his dispatches of June 30 and July 1, nor in his official report of August 27, 1863, does Buford mention the high ground south of Gettysburg. This four-mile line of hills and ridges including Culp's and Cemetery hills, Cemetery Ridge, and the Round Tops, which on a map take the shape of an inverted "J" or a fish-hook, would provide Meade's army with a strong defensive position on July 2 and 3 that would help enable their victory in the battle.²⁴

There is only one contemporary source that claimed Buford divined how this position would benefit the Army of the Potomac. In 1895, General Frank Wheaton spoke at the dedication of Buford's statue on McPherson's Ridge. Wheaton was a good friend of Buford. The two had served together in the 2nd U.S. Dragoons from 1855 to 1858. Wheaton stated:

I never thought General Buford received due credit for his services. One of General Reynolds staff [not identified] told me that he was present when Reynolds joined Buford at Gettysburg [on July 1] and saw Buford point out Cemetery Ridge to Reynolds as a proper position for our troops in case Lee should concentrate on the front his advance was then holding. Lee did so concentrate and the Union forces fought the battle of Gettysburg on the ground indicated by General Buford.²⁵

I am not questioning the word of Wheaton, who served his country honorably from 1855 to 1897, retiring a U.S. Regular Army Major General.²⁶ But this one source from a close friend of Buford thirty-two years after the fact is not enough to prove that Buford's prime concern was the high ground south of town.

Buford's tactical disposition was generally as follows on the evening of June 30: A seven-mile line of videttes or pickets extending from the Fairfield road to the Harrisburg road. The main body of Gamble's brigade camped near the Lutheran Seminary while Devin's brigade bivouacked on the grounds of the Pennsylvania College. Buford's cavalry screen north and west of Gettysburg was tactically nowhere near the "fish hook." I believe Buford was concerned with denying the Rebels Gettysburg as a concentration point. Buford reportedly told his signal officer, 1st Lieutenant Aaron Jerome, on June 30, "The enemy must know the importance of this point and will strain every nerve to secure it, and if we are able to hold it we will do well."²⁷

What is Buford speaking of here? It is the road junction of Gettysburg, the possession of which would give the Confederates an important advantage. This does not change the value of Buford's role. The savvy cavalry scout was simply going to try to deny Lee this critical road junction. This gave Reynolds and Meade more options. They could either move to Gettysburg and fight the battle there, or Buford's delaying action would give Meade time to occupy the Pipe Creek line and "develop the situation."

Buford also provided Reynolds and Meade with critical intelligence that Lee did not have from Stuart. At 5:30 A.M., possibly after the Fairfield skirmish, Buford reported to Reynolds that Lee had a "strong position . . . just behind Cashtown." After noon he informed Pleasonton of his entrance into Gettysburg at 11:00 A.M. He mentioned Pettigrew's advance column and that a division of Lee's army was marching northeast toward York. (However, he misidentified it as Anderson's division when in truth it was Early's).²⁸ This mistake was later corrected when one of his troopers captured a Rebel courier, and Buford revised his report to place Ewell at Heidlersburg and Early at Berlin.)²⁹ By mid-afternoon of June

30 Buford's reports alerted Reynolds that the Rebels were converging on Gettysburg from the northwest and had considerable forces north and northeast of the town.

Late that evening, at 10:30 and 10:40 P.M., Buford sent Reynolds and Pleasonton his final dispatches of the day. He located A.P. Hill's corps at Cashtown with Longstreet's corps behind it, and Ewell's corps "crossing the mountains from Carlisle." He also mentioned the strong possibility of Rebels "advancing upon me from York."³⁰ As I have stated in other written works, a modern-day satellite photo could scarcely have given Reynolds and Meade a better view of the positions of Lee's three infantry corps. Even had Buford not performed magnificently on July 1, his intelligence reports on June 30 stand as one of the great accomplishments in American military history.

What effect did Buford's reports from Gettysburg have on Reynolds' and Meade's June 30 decisions? It is important to note that the correspondence in the *Official Records* are not always in chronological order, nor do they consistently give the time they were written. But from what we can reconstruct, it appears that early that morning Reynolds wrote to Howard and Meade that he believed that Lee was definitely marching out of the mountains from the northwest and north and converging on Gettysburg. But, he added, it was unclear if the enemy was moving on York or giving battle to the Army of the Potomac. Reynolds was positioned behind the Marsh Creek and evidently assumed that this was to be a defensive position, for he called for an engineer to recon the area. Reynolds had his reserve division a few miles south of Marsh Creek on the Emmitsburg road and informed Meade that "it might be necessary to dispute the enemy across (Marsh) Creek, in order to take up position behind Middle Creek ..."³¹

It is evident from this dispatch that Reynolds, at least until midday, was considering a defensive battle just north of Emmitsburg. Again, we do not know what was said between Buford and Reynolds or if they even spoke when Buford passed by on his way from Emmitsburg to Gettysburg. But it is a possibility that instead of discussing Reynolds' coming to the support of Buford at Gettysburg, that Buford's job was to buy time for Reynolds to assemble a defensive line further south. Of course, by the end of that fateful day it would be a moot point, for Meade would order Reynolds to Gettysburg.

At 11:30 A.M. on June 30, Meade replied to Reynolds' dispatch concerning the Marsh and Middle creeks. He addressed Buford's presence at Gettysburg, stating that in effect, the cavalry was an outpost: "With Buford at Gettysburg, you ought to be advised in time of their [Lee's] approach. In case of an advance in force against either you or Howard at Emmitsburg, you must fall back to that place [Emmitsburg], and I will reinforce you ..." Then Meade as a postscript told Reynolds that he could fall back without orders to Emmitsburg [the Middle Creek], and added that Reynolds' position at Marsh Creek "was given more with a view to advance on Gettysburg, than a defensive point."³²

What was Meade's intention at this point? This is difficult to tell. There are three possibilities. He could have planned to continue the advance to contact to Gettysburg, or to fight a defensive battle just north of Emmitsburg at Middle Creek, or to fall back to the Pipe Creek, where the 2nd, 5th and 6th corps were positioned. Or maybe Meade had decided on none of these options and was merely remaining flexible, as any commander must on a movement to contact. Without direct contact with the enemy it was impossible to "develop the situation." But during the course of the day Buford supplied both the contact and the information that helped clear the picture. "Buford sends reliable information that our enemy occupies Chambersburg in force, and that they are moving down from Cashtown," Reynolds related to 11th Corps Commander Howard later in the day.³³

Based on Buford's intelligence from Gettysburg and Reynolds' endorsements, the die was cast some time on the afternoon or evening of June 30. Meade issued the July 1 movement orders for his army informing his commanders that, based on Buford's actions as "point man," that Longstreet and Hill were at Chambersburg, partly towards Gettysburg, and Ewell was at Carlisle and York. Movements indicate that the enemy was advancing from Chambersburg to Gettysburg.³⁴ That intelligence was perfectly accurate.

Meade's orders called for Reynolds to move the 1st Corps to support Buford at Gettysburg with Howard and the 11th Corps marching to within "supporting distance." The 3rd Corps would move to Emmitsburg. These three corps constituted Meade's advance guard. The 12th Corps would move five

miles north from Littlestown to Two Taverns, while the 5th Corps would leave the Pipe Creek at Union Mills and march to Hanover. The 2nd Corps would move five miles north from Frizzelburg to Taneytown, where army headquarters would be established. The 6th Corps remained near Manchester, Maryland. These movements left only the latter corps on the Pipe Creek, although the 2nd Corps was close.³⁵ Whatever Meade's intentions concerning Pipe Creek, it is obvious that Buford's presence at Gettysburg was drawing the Army of the Potomac out of Maryland into Pennsylvania as four of its seven infantry corps would be north of the Mason-Dixon line on July 1.

Much has been written about Buford's mindset and movements on June 30. Almost all of it is speculation. All we know for certain is that he established his headquarters at Tate's Blue Eagle Hotel at the corner of Chambersburg and Washington streets, jailed a suspected spy, forbade local merchants from selling alcohol, and was seen by a local teenager near his headquarters wearing an old blue hunting jacket. Where he went and what he did during the day is not recorded.³⁶ His signal officer, 1st Lieutenant Aaron B. Jerome, wrote in 1867 to General Winfield Hancock that Buford told him on June 30 that "the battle would be fought at that point (Gettysburg)" and that Buford was "afraid it would commence in the morning before the infantry could get up . . . the enemy must know the importance of this point and will strain every nerve to secure it, and if we are able to hold it we will do well."³⁷

This quote is the only source that indicates that Buford intended to fight a defensive battle at Gettysburg and that he anticipated that a large-scale engagement would be fought there. But it was important to note that it was written four years later by Jerome, who was writing to Hancock, a close friend of Buford's, in an effort to get Buford his just credit for Gettysburg.

Buford himself was strangely silent about what he did and thought on June 30 after his division arrived in Gettysburg. In this official report dated August 27, 1863, after describing Pettigrew's retreat to the northwest, he stated simply:

The night of the 30th was a busy night for the division. No reliable information of value could be obtained from the inhabitants, and but for the untiring exertions of many different scouting parties; information of the enemy's whereabouts and movements could not have been gained in time to prevent him from getting the town before our army could get up. By daylight on July 1, I had gained positive information of the enemy's whereabouts and movements, and my arrangements were made for entertaining him until General Reynolds could reach the scene.³⁸

Buford was a modest, taciturn professional who did not elaborate on his decisions. However, his report indicates that he sought to delay the Rebels and keep them away from the concentration point of Gettysburg in order for Meade to either send the army to Gettysburg or set up at Middle or Pipe creek with Reynolds serving as a spoiling force to buy more time (see Tony Nicastro's essay in this publication for more about this possibility). There is nothing in his report to indicate that Buford predicted that the decisive battle would in fact be fought at Gettysburg. He was simply following a course of action that gave Reynolds and Meade the most, and best, options.³⁹

Contact: The Situation Develops

At 7:30 A.M. on July 1, Buford's advance outposts made contact with the enemy. One of Buford's vidette posts began the great battle from its position two and three-quarters miles northwest of Gettysburg on the Chambersburg pike, located near the Whisler house. The vidette post consisted of privates Thomas Kelly and James Hall, sergeants Levi Shaffer and George Heim, and Lieutenant Alex Riddler of Company E, 8th Illinois Cavalry. Kelly saw a cloud of dust approaching from the northwest and alerted Sergeant Heim, who rode to the rear and informed Lt. Marcellus Jones, who was acting as the commander of the forward vidette posts. Jones rode forward to the Whisler house and, borrowing a carbine from Sergeant Shaffer, fired the first shots of the Battle of Gettysburg at the lead soldiers of A.P.

Hill's advancing Confederates. Captain Daniel Buck's squadron (companies E and G) of the 8th Illinois Cavalry, roughly 80 men strong, moved forward to support Jones and his squad. Meanwhile, Confederate General James Archer sent the 5th Alabama Battalion (135 men) and two or three companies of the 13th Alabama Infantry Regiment (60 to 100 men) up the slope of Whisler's Ridge as skirmishers to engage and "feel" the blue troopers.⁴⁰

The warning that traveled back from Lieutenant Jones gave Buford time to react. He sent between one quarter to half of Gamble's brigade, between 400 and 800 men, from its camp near the Lutheran Seminary a mile northwest to Herr's Ridge to back up Captain Buck's squadron, which was falling back before the Confederate advance along the Chambersburg pike. Confederate division commander Major General Henry Heth deployed two of his four brigades in battle line – some 2,900 officers and men – and pushed Gamble's troopers back to McPherson's Ridge. There Buford had a line of approximately 2,000 dismounted cavalymen opposing the Rebels. By 9:30 or 10:00 A.M. this line began to give way before the pressure Heth applied.⁴¹

This is the moment that Reynolds arrived. He met with Buford at the dormitory of the Lutheran Seminary, then the two rode forward to McPherson's Ridge to assess the situation. No one knows what was said between the two. Reynolds was minutes away from his death, and Buford never wrote of the discussion before his death five months later. Except for Lieutenant Jerome's account of the initial conversation between Buford and Reynolds at the seminary, where Reynolds asked, "What's the matter, John?" and Buford replied with his now-famous response, "The devil's to pay!" the rest remains something of a mystery.⁴²

Was Buford trying to hold Gettysburg at all costs? Was he merely delaying until Reynolds arrived? Was Reynolds to give battle at Gettysburg or was he only a spoiling force to allow Meade to fall back to Pipe Creek? These questions will never be answered for certain. What is certain is that Buford's actions at Gettysburg determined that the battle would be fought there.

It is not the purpose of this paper to analyze Buford's tactics, but to place in its proper light his larger role in helping determine where the great battle between the Army of the Potomac and Army of Northern Virginia would take place. Buford's dispatches from the front on July 1 had an important influence on Meade's decision to select the option that called for a concentration of his entire army at Gettysburg. His first dispatch to Meade, at 10:10 A.M., informed the army commander that the Rebels were "driving my pickets and skirmishers very rapidly," and that Reynolds was advancing to his assistance. He concluded with the opinion, "I am positive that the whole of A.P. Hill's force is advancing."⁴³

We know that before this Meade had not settled on a definite course of action. He issued his most detailed order or circular of the campaign, known today as the Pipe Creek Circular, early on the morning of July 1. It is unknown whether Buford, Reynolds, or Howard received or knew of the circular before the fight at Gettysburg began.⁴⁴ In the two-page order, Meade states that he believes that Harrisburg and Philadelphia had been relieved and that "it is no longer his intention to assume the offensive until the enemy's movements or position should render such an operation certain of success. If the enemy assumes the offensive, and attacks, it is his [Meade's] intention, after holding them in check sufficiently long . . . to withdraw the army from its present position" to the Pipe Creek Line in northern Maryland.⁴⁵

It is possible, as Tony Nicasro asserts, that Reynolds and the 1st and 11th corps were the force Meade was using to hold Lee "in check sufficiently long" to position the rest of the army along the Pipe Creek position. However, Meade's tactical dispositions on July 1 allowed him great flexibility. He had two corps engaging Lee at Gettysburg. The 3rd Corps was ten miles southwest at Emmitsburg, the 12th Corps five miles southeast at Two Taverns, and the 5th Corps thirteen miles east at Hanover. These three corps were Meade's second line. They could either move to Gettysburg or fall back to Pipe Creek. All three corps were only ten miles north of Pipe Creek. Only the 2nd and 6th corps occupied positions near or along Pipe Creek. So Meade had one force making contact, one force ready to set up a defense, and one that could support either the Gettysburg or the Pipe Creek position depending upon circumstances.⁴⁶

At 12:30 P.M. on July 1, Meade was certainly still considering a withdrawal to Pipe Creek. He sent a dispatch at that time to Hancock relating that A. P. Hill's and Ewell's corps were moving upon Gettysburg, and that he thought Reynolds may not have received the Pipe Creek order. (Meade did not yet know that Reynolds had been killed.) To cover this contingency Meade ordered Hancock to march his corps out the Taneytown road toward Gettysburg until he was certain Reynolds was covering this road, at which point the 2nd Corps was to retrace its steps and withdraw to Frizellburg, per the Pipe Creek Circular. Through Buford, Meade knew what enemy forces were moving on Gettysburg, but he was still inclined to try to execute the Pipe Creek orders if possible.⁴⁷

Meade's opinion changed at 1:10 P.M., when he learned that Reynolds was dead. This was one of the critical moments of the Gettysburg campaign. Meade sent orders to Hancock directing him to go to Gettysburg at once and assume command of the forces there. "If you think the ground and position there a better one [than the Pipe Creek position] to fight a battle under existing circumstances, you will so advise the General [Meade] and he will order all the troops up."⁴⁸

In the forty minutes from 12:30 P.M. to 1:10 P.M. Meade shifted from a defensive stand behind Pipe Creek to an advance to Gettysburg. There is circumstantial evidence to indicate that Buford may have played a role in Meade's decision to send Hancock. According to Lieutenant Jerome, Buford sent a message to Meade that begged, "For God's sake send up Hancock. Everything is going at odds. Reynolds is killed and we need a controlling spirit."⁴⁹

Whether Buford ever really sent this message, or whether it had any influence on Meade's decision remains a question mark. What we do know is that between 1:10 P.M. and 7:30 P.M., the entire Army of the Potomac was ordered to Gettysburg.⁵⁰

At 5:25 P.M., Hancock reported to Meade that the ground at Gettysburg was "not unfavorable with good troops." He added, "It is a position, however, easily turned."⁵¹ This message probably prompted Meade to order his last two infantry corps to Gettysburg, the 5th Corps at 7:00 P.M. and the 6th Corps at 7:30 P.M. The decision had been made.⁵² Gettysburg would be where the Army of the Potomac would give battle.

Buford's final dispatch from the field came is timed at 3:20 P.M. This urgent yet concise message may have also had an effect on Meade. He had not yet committed his last two corps.

I am satisfied that Longstreet [Buford was wrong about this: It was Ewell.] and Hill have made a junction. A tremendous battle has been raging since 9:30 a.m. with varying success. At the present moment the battle is raging on the road to Cashtown and within short cannon-range of this town. The enemy's line is in a semicircle on the right, from North to West. General Reynolds was killed early this morning. In my opinion, there seems to be no directing person.
P.S. – We need help now.⁵³

Several parts of this message are significant. First, Buford is confident that two of Lee's three corps have united. Second, Buford's selection of words -- a "tremendous battle" and "raging" -- convey the seriousness of the engagement. Finally, without naming Howard or Doubleday, Buford offers the opinion that their leadership is seriously lacking. Hancock stated in his report that he arrived on the field at 3:00 P.M., although in his 5:25 P.M. dispatch he stated he "arrived near an hour since..." (which would place his arrival at 4:25 P.M.).⁵⁴ Either way Buford had probably not seen or been aware of Hancock's arrival when he wrote his 3:20 P.M. message.

Whether Meade saw Buford's dispatch, which was addressed to Pleasonton, is unknown, but since the cavalry corps commander made his headquarters near army headquarters there is a good chance he did. In any case, Meade did not mention it in his October 1, 1863 report of the campaign and wrote that his decision to fight at Gettysburg was based on dispatches from Hancock and Howard.⁵⁵

And so the movement to contact was over for George Meade. He later testified in front of the Joint Congressional Committee on the Conduct of the War and gave a field manual description of his plan for the movement to contact.

I should move my army as promptly as possible on the main line from Frederick to Harrisburg, extending my wings on both sides of that line as far as I could consistently with the safety and rapid concentration of that army, and should continue that moment until I either encountered the enemy, or had reason to believe that the enemy was about to advance on me; my object being at all hazards to compel him to loose his hold on the Susquehanna and meet me in battle at some point. It was my firm determination . . . to give battle, wherever and as soon as I could possibly find the enemy⁵⁶

Whatever plan Meade favored, Buford's initial contact with the Confederates at Gettysburg put in motion the chain of events that determined the battle would be fought there. Reynolds, Hancock, Meade, and even Howard and Pleasonton deserve their share of credit for the fact that the battle took place at Gettysburg, but in the measured opinion of the Compte de Paris, in his history of the battle:

It was John Buford who selected the battlefield where the two armies were about to measure their strength . . . He resolved to risk everything in order to allow Reynolds time to reach Gettysburg in advance of the Confederate army. This first inspiration of a cavalry officer and true soldier decided in every respect the fate of the campaign.⁵⁷

Notes

Author's postscript: Throughout this essay, with only a few exceptions I used the correspondence published in the *Official Records of the War of the Rebellion* (parts I and III of Volume 27) as sources. These spontaneous messages have an immediacy and honesty about them that is often lacking in reports written after the event. They comprise the only source that captures what soldiers like Buford and Meade were thinking at the time. Official reports and memoirs, post-war letters, and speeches are all suspect for obvious reasons. This does not mean that later documents do not contain some valuable information, but few men are willing to admit that they wavered or made a mistake in a combat situation, after the event.

I would like to express my heartfelt thanks to fellow Licensed Battlefield Guide Tony Nicastro for the education on the facts concerning the movements of the Army of the Potomac from Frederick, Maryland to Gettysburg, Pennsylvania from June 28 to July 1, 1863

¹ Headquarters, Dept of the Army, FM 7-72; *The Light Infantry Battalion* (Washington, D.C.: Headquarters Department of the Army, 1987), 3-12 to 3-15.

² Michael Phipps, *The Devil's to Pay: General John Buford, U.S.A.* (Gettysburg: Farnsworth House Military Impressions, 1994), 1-68; Michael Phipps, "They Too Fought Here: The Officer Corps of the Army of the Potomac's Cavalry During the Battle of Gettysburg" in *Mr. Lincoln's Army: The Army of the Potomac in the Gettysburg Campaign* (Gettysburg: The National Park Service, 1997), 92-135.

³ U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1892-1902), Series 1, 27(2):298. [Hereafter cited as *OR*]

⁴ *OR*, 27(3):374.

⁵ *OR*, 27(3):400.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 400-401.

⁷ Phipps, *Buford*, 15.

⁸ U.S. Congress, *The Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1865), 4:359. [Hereafter cited as *JCCW*.]

⁹ *OR*, 27(3):377.

¹⁰ Phipps, *Buford*, 30.

¹¹ John H. Calef, "Gettysburg Notes: The Opening Gun," *Journal of the Military Service Institution of the United States*, 40:40-58.

¹² *OR*, 27(3):400-401; 27(1):926.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 27(3):397-399.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 27(3):400, 402.

¹⁵ Phipps, *Buford*, 38.

¹⁶ *OR*, 27(1):926.

¹⁷ U.S. Army Ranger School is the premier army instrument of instruction for patrolling. At least one-third of the "curriculum" concerns the conduct of the reconnaissance patrol. SFC Magee was my platoon sergeant when I was an infantry platoon leader in the 82nd Airborne Division from 1979 to 1981. SFC Walters was my first sergeant when I was an infantry company commander in the 7th Infantry Division (light) from 1984 to 1985. They were the two finest non-commissioned officers among many great NCOs that I served with in my thirteen years in the U.S. Army and National Guard. Both Magee and Walters retired as command sergeant majors. I owe them much that I will never be able to repay.

¹⁸ *OR*, 27(1):926.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* The location of this Fairfield skirmish was a mystery until Mike Reilly, a biographer of John Reynolds, discovered two hand-written messages in the National Archives that had been found on Reynolds' body after he was killed at Gettysburg. One message was to Buford dated June 30. It asked if the force that Buford encountered at the "P. Musselman Farm" was still there. The other message was Buford's reply that the Rebels had fallen back ten miles north to Cashtown and that his patrols were moving freely through Fairfield. The 1858 Adams County map shows two Musselman farms on Jack's Mountain Road southwest of Fairfield. Today, a covered bridge stands just north of one of them. The ruins of the other Musselman barn stand a half-mile north of the covered bridge. To see this spot, go southwest through Fairfield on Rt. 116, then turn right on Jack's Mountain Road. On the right you will see the ruins of the barn of the northernmost Musselman farm. Continue on and cross the covered bridge (one of two in Adams County). To your left is the location of the southern Musselman farm. There are no visible remains of the farm. Information on the Musselman farms was provided by fellow Licensed Battlefield Guide Tim Smith. Thanks to Mike Reilly for the information on the Reynolds messages.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 27(3):416.

²¹ Phipps, *Buford*, 39.

²² *Ibid.*, 39-40; *OR*, 27(1):926, 923.

²³ Phipps, *Buford*, 39-45; Phipps, "They Too Fought Here," 107-109.

²⁴ *OR*, 27(1):927, 923-924.

²⁵ Phipps, "They Too Fought Here," 107-108, and footnote, 132; Frank Wheaton was assigned to the 1st U.S. Cavalry, however, was aide-de-camp to Col. William Harvey, who commanded Buford's 2nd U.S. Dragoons until 1858.

²⁶ Frances Heitman, *Historical Register of the United States Army* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1903), 1:1022.

²⁷ Phipps, *Buford*, 43-44.

²⁸ *OR*, 27(1):922-923.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 27(3):414.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 27(3):415.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 27(3):417-418.

³² *Ibid.*, 27(3):420.

³³ *Ibid.*, 27(3):422.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 27(3):416.

³⁵ *Ibid.* Since there is no time on these orders it is difficult to determine precisely when Meade concluded to send Reynolds to Gettysburg.

³⁶ Phipps, "They Too Fought Here," 107.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 108.

³⁸ *OR*, 27(1):926-927.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 927.

⁴⁰ Buford's report makes no mention of protecting the high ground south of Gettysburg, but does express his concern about Lee capturing the town, e.g., the road junction. Vertical File 6-IL8-CAV; Phipps, *Buford*, 44-46; Unit strengths are all from John Busey and David Martin, *Regimental Strengths and Losses at Gettysburg* (Hightstown, NJ: Longstreet House: 1994).

⁴¹ Phipps, *Buford*, 47-49.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 49.

⁴³ *OR*, 27(1):924.

⁴⁴ There is no time on the Pipe Creek Circular, and its time of issuance on July 1 remains unclear in the *Official Records*. It appears after a 12:00 P.M. dispatch from Meade to General Couch in Harrisburg.

⁴⁵ *OR*, 27(3): 458-459.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 27(3):416.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 27(3):461.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ Phipps, *Buford*, 52.

⁵⁰ *OR*, 27(3):464-465.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 27(1):366.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 27(3):467.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 27(1):924-925.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 27(1):366, 368.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 27(1):115.

⁵⁶ *JCCW*, (4):329-330.

⁵⁷ Phipps, *Buford*, 4. Buford's division suffered 139 casualties from a strength of 2,823, a loss of only 5 per-cent. The "point-man" had accomplished his mission with a minimum of casualties.