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Lee's Decision to Attack Cemetery Hill
July 1, 1863

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FROM:

TO:

LEE'S DECISION TO ATTACK CEMETERY HILL, July 1, 1863

The Battle of Gettysburg began about 8 a.m. on July 1, 1863.

There was intermittent heavy fighting in the morning and early afternoon between the Union 1st and 11th Corps and Hill's and Ewell's Confederate Corps. In the middle of the afternoon, the Union Corps were driven from their positions to the west and north of the town by four Confederate divisions and forced to retire in a somewhat disorganized fashion to Cemetery Hill, where they were rallied on a brigade and battery of the 11th Corps. Of the 18,000 Union infantry and artillerymen who had entered the fight, only 6,000 were said to have been collected that evening on Cemetery Hill. These men were posted behind walls with their artillery higher on the hill behind them. At an unspecified time early in the evening, the Iron Brigade and a regiment of Outler's Brigade, both of Wadsworth's Division, 1st Corps, were ordered to occupy Culp's Hill so that by dark, it may be assumed that the Union lines extended from the crest of Culp's Hill west to Cemetery Hill and then south to the vicinity of the Copse of Trees. Two brigades of Buford's Cavalry Division were posted on the flanks. The remaining five corps of the Army pressed on toward Gettysburg during the night, and all but one were on the field by the early morning of July 2.

The Confederate forces had halted their attack after driving the Union troops to Cemetery Hill. Four divisions, Heth's and Pender's of Hill's Corps and Rodes' and Early's of Ewell's Corps, were on the field. Johnson's Division, Ewell's Corps, arrived on the field at about dark and Anderson's Division, Hill's Corps, arriving near the field after the fighting had ceased, was placed in reserve to the rear. McLaw's and

Hood's Divisions reached a point four miles from Gettysburg that night; Pickett's Division remained in Chambersburg guarding trains. The Confederate cavalry was not at hand.¹

General Lee arrived on Herr Ridge about 3 p.m., immediately prior to the final assault delivered by Heth's and Pender's Divisions against the Union 1st Corps. He witnessed the retreat of the Federals to Cemetery Hill and learned from prisoners that the retreating troops belonged to the 1st and 11th Corps. He learned also that the remaining five corps of the Army of the Potomac were approaching; but, on July 1, knew nothing of their disposition. Shortly after the Federals were driven back, a reconnaissance of the Union lines was made by Colonel A. R. Long of Lee's staff, who reported that the "ridge was occupied in considerable force". This estimate was supported by Ewell, who believed the Federals to be presenting a formidable front.²

Lee, of course, was aware of the general disposition of his own forces. At this time he reported having had four divisions present who, in his words, were "already weakened and exhausted by a bloody struggle". He hesitated to commit them to an action that might involve them with fresh troops.³

On observing the Federal retreat to Cemetery Hill, Lee dispatched a message to General Ewell by Colonel Walter A. Taylor of his staff, in which he stated that Ewell should attack the hill if he could do so to an advantage, or, in Lee's words, "if practicable". However, he was to avoid bringing on a general engagement until the arrival of those divisions of the Army of Northern Virginia not yet on the field. This discretionary order is the only one known to have been issued by Lee to Ewell concerning an attack on Cemetery Hill on July 1.⁴

Buell considered Lee's order and concluded that it would not be practicable to continue the assault. He not only believed that the Cemetery Hill position was formidable and unassailable from the town, but that his artillery could not be brought to bear on it. Furthermore, the divisions with him, Rodes' and Early's, were jaded, and it had been reported that troops, possibly enemy, were seen approaching his left by way of the York Road. If these reasons were not sufficient to forestall an attack in themselves, there was also Lee's order not to bring on a general engagement. Buell could see ample reason for not continuing the assault and did not do so.⁵

It should be pointed out here that Buell's views were not shared by many of his subordinates. Early reported that he had searched in Gettysburg for Buell in order to urge an immediate assault and Gordon's attack had been difficult to halt. General Isaac Trimble, then a volunteer aide on Buell's staff, pleaded for a chance to occupy Culp's Hill. Lesser officers are reported to have wished for the resurrection of Jackson.⁶

As an alternative to the assault of Cemetery Hill, Buell resolved to occupy Culp's Hill, from which he could both dominate and outflank Cemetery Hill. This was to be done, not by Trimble immediately, but with Johnson's Division when it arrived on the field. Johnson, however, marching on the field at dusk, was posted to the east of the town and sent skirmishers to Culp's Hill. The hill was found to be occupied. After midnight, Johnson was ordered to take it if he had not already done so, but replied with the information that the Union forces were already there.⁷

There is no doubt but that Lee would have liked to have had an attack made against Cemetery Hill. However, he was properly concerned with the location of the Union army and the risk of his tired divisions' being struck as they were in the assault. The order given to Ewell, if it may be called an order, lacked decisiveness in all its parts except that one which cautioned against bringing on a general engagement. Consequently, Ewell took council of his fears and did not grasp the opportunity offered him.

Ewell noted the value of Culp's Hill at the time of the Federal retreat, but took no measures to occupy it, preferring to await the arrival of Johnson's Division. When that division arrived it was posted opposite the Hill, but was neither ordered nor moved against it. According to Freeman, Lee was made aware of Culp's Hill at the first conference early in the evening, but one must conclude that its importance was not then impressed upon Lee, for he changed his plan of attack later in the evening when he learned from Ewell that it could be occupied and that an attack could be launched by Ewell's Corps. However, no orders were given to occupy the hill until after midnight, which, of course, was too late. It would appear, therefore, that Ewell was remiss in not taking positive action to secure Culp's Hill late in the afternoon.

It would appear that the responsibility for not continuing the attack must rest largely with Lee. He commanded the Army, he was on the field and, though he may not have appreciated the value of Culp's Hill, he had as much knowledge of the situation as Ewell. He was, therefore, in a position to issue a positive order to either attack or hold, but failed to do so.⁸ Ewell, operating within the limits of this discretion and admonished not to bring on a general engagement, acted according to

his best judgment which, unfortunately for the Confederate cause on this occasion, was not good enough.

FOOTNOTES

1. See numerous general accounts of the battle, including Frederick Tilberg, Gettysburg National Military Park, Pennsylvania and Douglas S. Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, Volume III, pp. 90-105.
2. Walter H. Taylor, Four Years With General Lee, p. 95; A. R. Long, Memoirs of Robert E. Lee, p. 277; Report, Gen. R. E. Lee to Adjutant and Inspector General, Richmond, Virginia, Headquarters, Army of Northern Virginia, January, 1864, War of the Rebellion: Official Records . . . , Vol. XXVII, Pt. 2, p. 317 (Hereafter abbreviated O. R. 27); Report of Lieut. Gen. Richard S. Ewell, C. S. Army, commanding Second Army Corps, 1863, O. R., 27, Pt. 2, p. 445.
3. Report, Gen. R. E. Lee, . . . , O. R., 27, Pt. 2, p. 317.
4. Report, Gen. R. E. Lee, . . . , O. R. 27, Pt. 2, p. 317; Taylor, op. cit., p. 95 and Frederick Maurice, Ed., An Aide-de-Camp of Lee, p. 228.
5. Report of Lieut. Gen. Richard S. Ewell, . . . , O. R. 27, Pt. 2, p. 445.
6. Report of Maj. Gen. Jubal Early, C. S. Army, commanding division, Headquarters, Early's Division, August 22, 1863, O. R. 27, Pt. 2, p. 269 and Douglas S. Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, Vol. III, pp. 94-95.
7. Report of Lieut. Gen. Richard S. Ewell . . . , O. R. 27, Pt. 2, p. 446.
8. Freeman, op. cit., p. 101.

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1. War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I, Volume XXVII, Part 2.
2. Douglas S. Freeman, Lee's Lieutenants, Volume III, New York, 1951.
3. A. R. Long, Memoirs of Robert E. Lee, London, 1886.
4. Frederick Maurice, Ed., An Aide-de-Camp of Lee, Papers of Colonel Charles Marshall, Boston, 1927.
5. Walter H. Taylor, Four Years With General Lee, New York, 1878.
6. Frederick Tilberg, Gettysburg National Military Park, Washington, 1954.