

The Battle of Antietam

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September 17, 1862 dawned with a grey mist that would dissipate and turn into a beautiful fall day. By the time the sun set that evening, the battlefield outside of Sharpsburg, Maryland would be witness to the single bloodiest day in American military history. Almost 23,000 men would be killed or wounded by nightfall.

Riding high on the victory at Second Bull Run in late August, Robert E Lee's Army of Northern Virginia pushed on into enemy territory in early September, crossing the Potomac River and into Maryland. Lee's invasion was happening at the same time as a Confederate invasion of Kentucky under generals Braxton Bragg and Kirby Smith. Confederate President Jefferson Davis was optimistic that continued southern victories, especially on Union soil, would bring desperately needed foreign support and recognition.

Lee's plan involved temporarily splitting his army so that forces under Stonewall Jackson could capture the Union garrison and armaments at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. In addition to the weapons and ammunition at the arsenal there, capturing Harper's Ferry would prevent Lee from having Union forces in his rear as he advanced into Maryland. On the downside, this split meant that his army, already much smaller than the Army of the Potomac under George McClellan, would be divided into two more vulnerable entities.

Lee did not plan to have the two Confederate forces split for any longer than it took Jackson to take the town, but one of the stranger quirks of the Civil War amplified the risk he had taken. A copy of the complete detailed orders for Confederate troop movements was found

by two Union soldiers and given to McClellan. With complete knowledge of the placement of Confederate troops, McClellan went on the offensive.

Union forces mounted a fierce attack against the Confederates on September 14 at three passes through South Mountain. Lee had been using the mountain to shield his troop movements and the Confederates were able to hold back the Union forces long enough for Lee to regroup and send a call to Jackson to join the main forces. Anticipating attack, Lee set up a defensive perimeter on a ridge behind Antietam Creek outside of Sharpsburg on the next day.

During the day on September 15, Union forces poured into the valley on the other side of the creek. If McClellan had attacked on September 16, his overwhelming numbers would almost certainly have meant victory. But his cautious nature and a belief that Lee had many more men than he actually had caused McClellan to delay his attack until the next day.

The battle of September 17 was vicious and lasted from dawn until late afternoon. McClellan's battle plan was flawed in that his superior numbers were sent in piecemeal, with the Confederate left flank being attacked in the early morning, the center in the late morning and mid-day and the right flank in the afternoon. This disjointed attack allowed Lee to shift men on his interior lines and partly offset the superior Union numbers. However, by late afternoon Union forces finally broke through the Confederate stronghold on the right flank near Burnside's Bridge. It was at just this time that the first of Stonewall Jackson's men began to arrive from Harper's Ferry and then saved the day, beating back the Union assault.

Lee waited through most of the next day for another Union attack but it did not come. During the night the Confederates crossed the Potomac back into Virginia. Although technically a draw, most historians consider the Battle of Antietam a lost opportunity for the North and a display of very poor generalship on the part of George McClellan.

