

Gen. George Armstrong Custer and the Wolverines.



Crisis in Command

James H. Hillestad draws inspiration from W. Britain's ACW range, including personality figures, to build battlefield dioramas and examine various officers' impact on the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

On Wednesday morning, June 3, 1863, Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee set in motion his 70,000-man Army of Northern Virginia, heading north.

THE OBJECTIVE

Simply stated, Lee's intention was to invade the North, create havoc, feed his troops from the enemy's countryside and threaten Washington, D.C. Such an incursion, it was hoped, would bolster antiwar sentiment in the free states, reopen the possibility of foreign recognition of the Confederacy and bring about a negotiated end to the American Civil War.

To screen his army from Union eyes and provide reconnaissance, Lee relied on Maj. Gen. James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart's 4,000-man cavalry division. Stuart, however, was still smarting from his embarrassing encounter with Union cavalry at Brandy Station, Va., the largest cavalry clash in North American history.

He was eager to restore his tarnished reputation. And, instead of providing mundane, but essential, escort to the

Confederate infantry columns, Stuart set off on a "hallelujah" wide end-run around the Union Army, leaving Lee blind to the approaching Federals.

It was said that "Stuart the man" had superseded Maj. Gen. Stuart, the cavalry chief.

That Lee gave non-specific orders to Stuart (and subsequently to his other subordinate commanders at the Battle of Gettysburg) stemmed from his relationship with Lt. Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. Jackson and Lee were collaborators in every sense of the word. Their concepts of warfare were identical. Jackson operated like an extension of Lee's brain.

Exemplifying this relationship, Lee said, "I had such implicit confidence in Jackson's skill and energy that I never troubled myself to give him detailed instructions."

Jackson was fatally wounded by friendly fire during the Confederate victory at the Battle of Chancellorsville in Virginia, one month before Gettysburg.

Learning from a scout of impending Union forces from the Army of the

Potomac, Lee revised his plans with the intention of uniting his army near the village of Cashtown, eight miles west of Gettysburg in Pennsylvania. With his potent forces concentrated, he would then attack and defeat the Federals one piece at a time, as they scrambled to confront him.

Instructions were given to Lee's three corps commanders (Lt. Gens. James Longstreet, Richard S. Ewell, and Ambrose P. Hill) to avoid major engagements until such time as the entire army was concentrated.

JULY 1: THE ENCOUNTER

Lee's plan fell apart July 1, when a Rebel division led by Maj. Gen. Henry Heth (pronounced "heath") stumbled upon a deployed Union cavalry force on the outskirts of Gettysburg.

The cavalymen were under the command of Brig. Gen. John Buford. They were armed with seven-shot, repeating rifles and accompanied by a six-gun battery of 3-inch ordnance cannon.

Lee's order to avoid a major engagement notwithstanding, and with the concurrence of his corps commander,



ABOVE: Gen. John Reynolds arrives with the Iron Brigade from set No. 31051.

Lt. Gen. A.P. Hill, Heth began a headlong rush to enter Gettysburg.

Buford, though badly outnumbered, held his ground until elements of the Union 1st Corps arrived to support him. In command of these infantrymen was one of the most respected officers in the Union Army: Maj. Gen. John F. Reynolds. Tragically, he would die in the first hour of battle. The Confederates committed more troops and relentlessly drove the Federals back to Cemetery Ridge.

Losses were heavy on both sides. Heth

suffered a debilitating concussion when a bullet went through his hat and hit him in the forehead. What saved his life were several layers of newspaper that he had stuffed in the new hat to make it fit properly.

Lee had entered Pennsylvania anticipating that he would choose the battleground. Now, thanks to the unbridled eagerness of Hill and Heth, he found himself facing an enemy that held the invaluable high ground. Heth put the blame on the absence of Stuart's cavalry to alert him to Union dispositions.

Heth's self-defense was, "Train a giant for an encounter and he can be whipped by a pygmy -- if you put his eyes out."

A measure of blame can be shared by Lt. Gen. Ewell, who commanded the Confederate 2nd Corps. Ewell had



LEFT: Gen. Robert E. Lee No. 17922.

been ordered to attack and dislodge the disorganized Union troops on Cemetery Hill. Lee's orders, however, were couched with the caveat "attack that hill if practicable, but avoid a general engagement until the arrival of other divisions of the army." Ewell chose to follow the instructions to the letter by awaiting additional reinforcements.

This was to have monumental repercussions. Had Ewell attacked and gained Cemetery Hill and nearby Culp's Hill, the South would have established control of the battlefield. Many historians have postulated that were he still alive, Stonewall Jackson would not have hesitated to seize the opportunity. At the



BELOW: Gen. Lewis Armistead, No. 31034.



RIGHT: Gen. Winfield Hancock, No. 17923.



LEFT: Gen. George Pickett No. 31047.



LEFT: Col. Joshua Chamberlain, No. 17925.

heart of the matter, Ewell was no Jackson. That being said, ultimate responsibility for the failure of the Confederates to make an all-out assault on Cemetery Hill July 1 must rest with Lee. If he wanted an attack, as the commanding general he should have organized it and ordered it.

JULY 2: FOLLOW-THROUGH

The following day, Lee and Longstreet, his "Old Warhorse," surveyed the Union lines from their observation post near the Lutheran Seminary. Longstreet, a master of defensive tactics (at Second Manassas and Fredericksburg), urged Lee to move south around the Union left flank and fight a defensive battle. Such a move would threaten Washington, and would compel Union commander Maj. Gen. George G. Meade to attack Lee on ground of Lee's choosing.

Lee, however, was eager to renew the attack, believing that momentum and morale were with his army.

Lee's intent July 2 was to attack both Union flanks. With units of his 2nd Corps, Ewell was to demonstrate against the Union right flank on Culp's Hill. Meanwhile, Longstreet, with two of his 1st Corps divisions, plus one division from Hill's 3rd Corps, would assault up the Emmitsburg Road to roll up the Union line.

Then fate intervened. Lee envisioned that his troops would advance unhindered through an unoccupied peach orchard at the Sherfy farm. This was not to be, thanks to a brash act by Union Maj. Gen. Daniel E. Sickles, commander of the Union 3rd Corps.

Sickles was unhappy with his position



The turnpike fences along the Emmitsburg Road.

just north of Little Round Top, as it was overlooked by the higher ground in the orchard. Without any authorization from Meade, he moved his corps out of the Union line and took an advanced position in the orchard, one mile distant.

This action caused Longstreet's forces to retarget their objective. Instead of going north as ordered by Lee, they headed east to protect their exposed right flank.

It is noteworthy that Maj. Gen. John Bell Hood, in command of the attacking force, appealed to Longstreet to allow him to skirt the Union defenses

by maneuvering to the south and east and attacking them from the rear. This plan was similar to what Longstreet had proposed to Lee and which Lee had rejected. Somewhat petulantly and citing Lee's orders, Longstreet refused the request.

Later, Hood would say, "Gen. Longstreet is to blame for not reconnoitering the ground and for persisting in ordering the assault."

What ensued was a fierce, three-hour battle over sites that went down in history as the Peach Orchard, the Wheatfield



LEFT: Gen. George Meade
No. 31067.



RIGHT:
Gen. James Longstreet,
No. 31021.



RIGHT:
Gen. Henry "Harry" Heth,
No. 31069.



RIGHT:
Gen. A.P. Hill,
No. 31023.



The formidable entrenchments of Culp's Hill.

a half-mile to the east and then the foreboding Devil's Den, described as a geological marvel of huge granite boulders devoid of trees or anything green.

When the clash was over, the ground was saturated with the blood of more than 8,000 dead and wounded soldiers, evenly divided between the Blue and the Gray. The Confederate advance was blunted at Little Round Top, where Col. Joshua L. Chamberlain and his 20th Maine Regiment launched their celebrated last-ditch bayonet charge.

As fighting abated toward the south, the attack at the northern end of the

Union line commenced at about dusk. Ewell sent forth the divisions of Maj. Gens. Jubal A. Early and Edward Johnson. Their attack was repulsed.

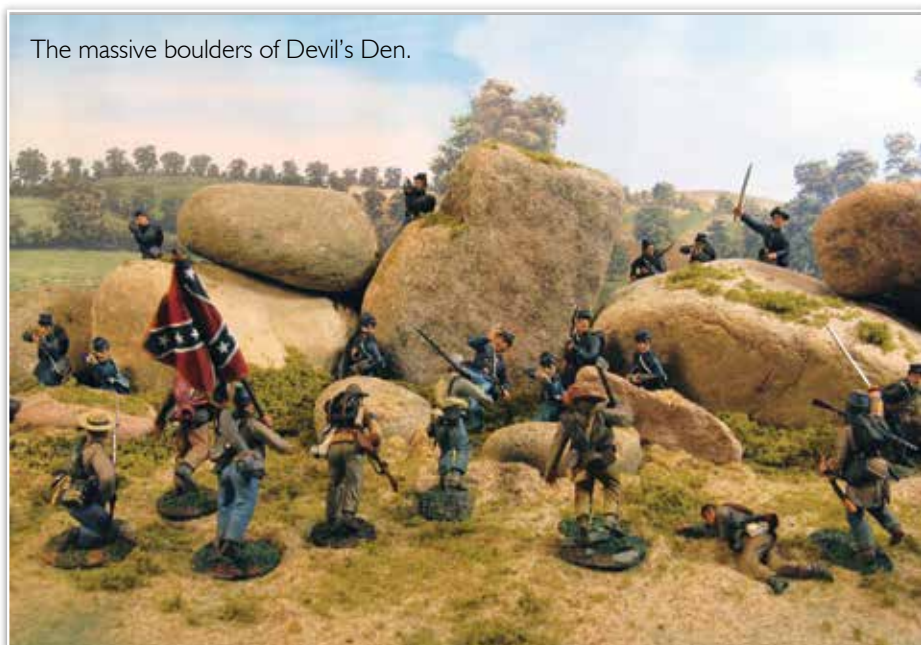
This was largely due to the foresight of Union Brig. Gen. George S. Greene. It was Greene who ordered the construction of breastworks on Culp's Hill, using earth, logs and rocks. This was not standard practice, as it was believed that such protective entrenchments did not contribute to the aggressive qualities of the men.

The battles of the second day resulted in each side suffering almost 10,000

casualties in what turned out to be the second bloodiest day of the war (after Antietam, with 23,000 casualties).

For the South, it was a day marked by a lack of coordination and direction. Lee had followed his by now customary practice of issuing general orders, but letting his corps commanders execute them as they thought best.

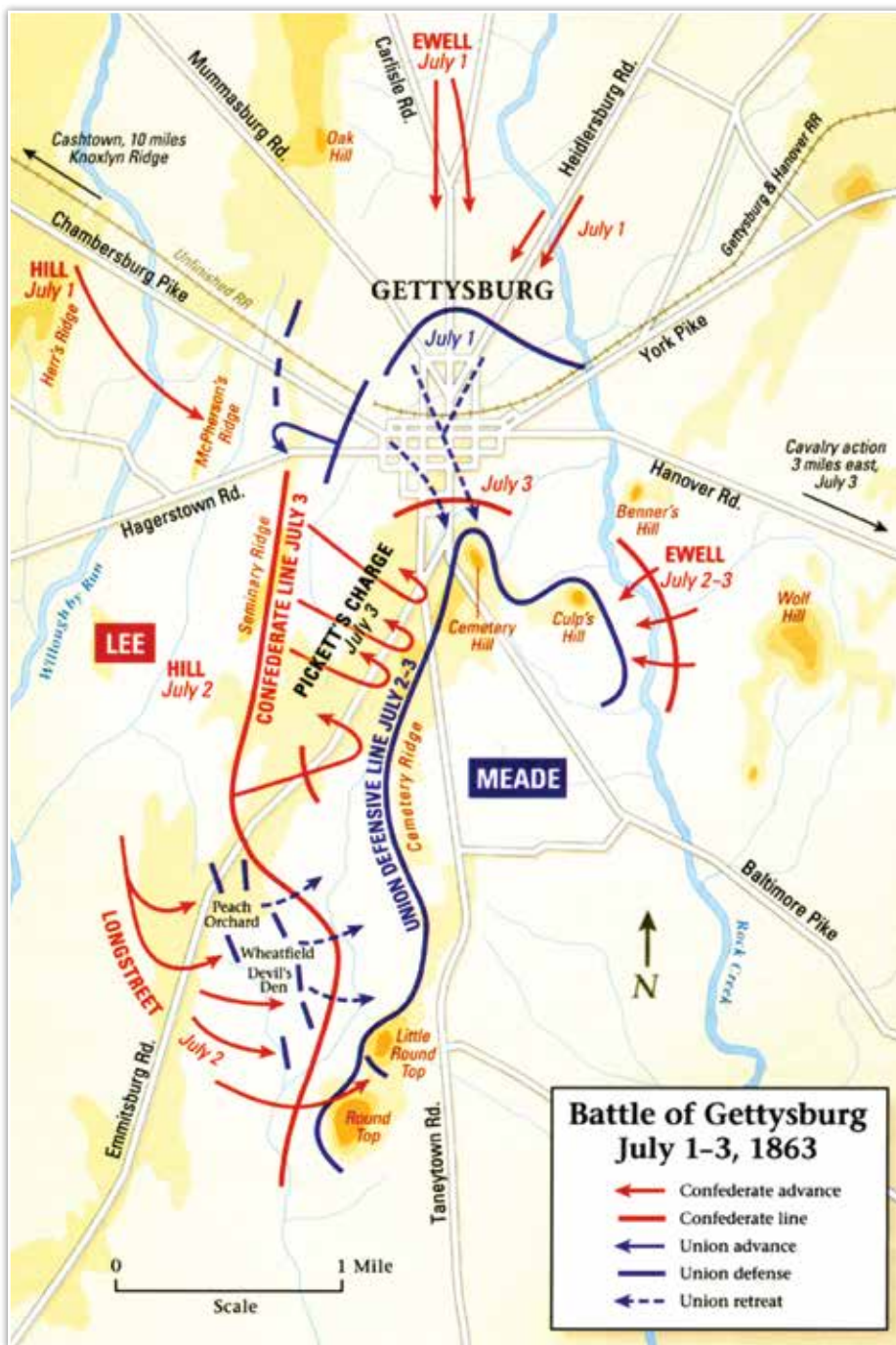
On the Union side, by contrast, officers from Meade down to regimental colonels moved reinforcements to the right spots and counterattacked at the right times.



The massive boulders of Devil's Den.



Gen. John Bell Hood
No. 31022.



JULY 3: THE CLIMAX

When dawn broke July 3, Lee was confident that one more push would break the enemy. He believed that the attacks of the previous day had caused Meade to reinforce his flanks and weaken his center.

Lee would now hit the center with Maj. Gen. George E. Pickett's fresh divisions of Virginians, along with brigades from Hill's corps -- a total of about 12,000 men. This attack was to be coordinated with a renewed assault by Ewell on Culp's Hill and an attack on the Union rear by the recently arrived three cavalry brigades of Jeb Stuart.

Again, lack of coordination came to the fore. Ewell's attack was launched independently at dawn and died out by 11 a.m. Stuart's cavalry began their advance two hours later. They immediately

ran into Brig. Gen. George Armstrong Custer's 2nd Cavalry Brigade of Michigan "Wolverines," which blunted their advance.

It was not until after 2 p.m. that the Confederate infantry, under the overall command of Longstreet, stepped out of sheltering woods on Seminary Ridge. They had to advance across almost one mile of open fields, under intense artillery fire every step of the way.

When they got across the stout post-and-rail fences lining the Emmitsburg Road, they came under musket fire from Union infantry sheltered by a stone wall and commanded by Maj. Gen. Winfield S. Hancock. After the battle, an examination of a 16-foot section of fence revealed that it was perforated with 836 musket balls -- such was the ferocity of the Union fire.



Gen. John Buford No. 31068.

Only 200 Confederates breached the stone wall, Brig. Gen. Lewis A. Armistead being one of them. They were quickly shot down or captured. All 15 regimental commanders in Pickett's division were casualties. Of the 12,500 men who made the fabled Pickett's Charge, 6,500 were killed or wounded -- one out of every two.

On that day, July 3, Lee waited at his headquarters between Hill's and Ewell's corps. He took no proactive steps to ensure that a maximum effort was mounted. Oversight was tragically absent. Pickett was left to "hang out and dry," and sadly, Longstreet seemed to have simply lost interest.

JULY 4: THE AFTERMATH

The next day, July 4, 1863, the Army of Northern Virginia began the long trek home.

A Confederate survivor of the Gettysburg campaign said, "I hope we will never cross the Potomac again, for I don't believe we ever made anything by crossing it yet." ■

about the writer

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA. This TS&MF article was adapted from a version that originally appeared in the August 2010 issue of *The Standard*, the quarterly publication of the W. Britain Collectors Club. For illustrative purposes, Jim built dioramas re-creating scenes from the Battle of Gettysburg and mustered 1:32-scale, matt-finished figures, all by W. Britain.