Major General George Meade's Account of the Battle of Gettysburg (October 1, 1863)

Headquarters, Army of the Potomac
October 1, 1863

GENERAL: I have the honor to submit herewith a report of the operations of this army during the month of July last, including the details of the battle of Gettysburg, delayed by the failure to receive until now the reports of several corps and division commanders. Who were severely wounded in battle.

On June 28, I received the orders of the President of the United States placing me in command of the Army of the Potomac. The situation of affairs at that time was briefly as follows:

The Confederate army, commanded by General R.E. Lee, estimated at over 100,000 strong, of all arms, had crossed the Potomac River and advanced up the Cumberland Valley, Reliable intelligence, placed his advance (Ewell's corps) on the Susquehanna, at Harrisburg and Columbia... my own army, of which the most recent return showed an aggregate of a little over 100,000 was situated in and around Frederick, Md., extending from Harpers's Ferry to the mouth of the Monocacy, and from Middletown to Frederick.

June 28 was spent in ascertaining the position and strength of the different corps of the army, but principally in bringing up the cavalry, which had been covering the rear of the army in its passage over the Potomac.

On the 30th... General Buford having reported from Gettysburg the appearance of the enemy on the Cashtown road in some force, General Reynolds was directed to occupy Gettysburg.

On reaching that place on July 1, General Reynolds found Buford's cavalry warmly engaged with the enemy... Major-General Reynolds immediately moved around the town of Gettysburg, and advanced upon the Cashtown road, and without a moment's hesitation deployed his advanced division and attacked his enemy.

Up to this time the battle had been with the forces of the enemy debouching from the mountains on the Cashtown road, known the be Hill's corps. In the early part of the action, success was on our side. Wadsworth's division, of the First Corps, having driven the enemy back some distance, capturing numerous prisoners, among them General Archer, of the Confederate army. The arrival of re-enforcements for the enemy on the Cashtown road, and the junction of Ewell's corps, coming on the York and Harrisburg roads, which occurred between 1 and 2 P.M., enabled the enemy to bring vastly superior forces against both the First and Eleventh Corps, outflanking our line of battle, and pressing it so severely that about 4 p.m. Major-General Howard deemed it prudent to withdraw these two corps to the Cemetery Ridge, on the south side of the town, which operation was successfully accomplished; not, however, without considerable loss in prisoners, arising from the confusion incident to portions of both corps passing through the town, and the men getting confused in the streets.
About the time of this withdrawal, Major-General Hancock arrived, whom I had dispatched to represent me on the field, on hearing of the death of General Reynolds. In conjunction with Major-General Howard, General Hancock proceeded to post the troops on Cemetery Ridge, and to repel an attack that the enemy made on our right flank. This attack was not, however, very vigorous, and the enemy, seeing the strength of the position occupied, seemed to be satisfied with the success he had accomplished, desisting from any further attack this day.

About 7 P.M. . . . [b]eing satisfied from the reports received from the field that it was the intention of the enemy to support with his whole army the attack already made, and the reports from Major Generals Hancock and Howard on the character of the position being favorable, I determined to give battle at this point; and, early in the evening of the 1st, issued orders to all the corps to concentrate at Gettysburg, directing all trains to be sent to the rear, at Westminster.

At 10 P.M. of the 1st, I broke up my headquarters, which until then had been at Taneytown, and proceeded to the field, arriving there at 1 A.M. of the 2d. So soon as it was light, I proceeded to inspect the position occupied, and to make arrangements for posting the several corps as they should reach the ground.

By 7 A.M. the Second and Fifth Corps, with the rest of the Third, had reached the ground, and were posted as follows: The Eleventh Corps retained its position on the Cemetery Ridge, just opposite the town; the First Corps was posted on the right of the Eleventh, on an elevated knoll connecting with a ridge extending to the south and east, on which the Twelfth Corps was placed, the right of the Twelfth Corps resting on a small stream at a point where it crossed the Baltimore pike, and which formed, on the right flank of the Twelfth, something of an obstacle. The Cemetery Ridge extended in a westerly and southerly direction, gradually diminishing in elevation until it came to a very prominent ridge called Round Top, running east and west. The Second and Third Corps were directed to occupy the continuation of the Cemetery Ridge on the left of the Eleventh Corps. The Fifth Corps, pending the arrival of the Sixth, was held in reserve.

While these dispositions were being made, the enemy was massing his troops on an exterior ridge, distant from the line occupied by us from 1 mile to 1 1/2 miles.

During the heavy assault upon our extreme left, portions of the Twelfth Corps were sent as re-enforcements. During their absence, the line on the extreme right was held by a very much reduced force. This was taken advantage of by the enemy, who, during the absence of Geary's division of the Twelfth Corps, advanced and occupied a part of his line.

With this exception, the quiet of the lines remained undisturbed till 1 P.M. on the 3d, when the enemy opened from over one hundred and twenty-five guns, playing upon our center and left. This cannonade continued for over two hours, when our guns, in obedience to my orders, failing to make any reply, the enemy ceased firing, and soon his masses of infantry became visible, forming for an assault on our left and left center. He assault was made with great firmness, directed principally against the point occupied by the Second Corps, and was repelled with equal firmness by the troops of that corps. . . . This terminated the battle, the enemy retiring to his lines, leaving the field strewn with his dead and wounded, and numerous prisoners in our hands.
On the morning of the 4th, reconnaissances developed that the enemy had drawn back his left flank, but maintained his position in front of our left, apparently assuming a new line parallel to the mountains.

On the morning of the 5th, it was ascertained the enemy was in full retreat by the Fairfield and Cashtown roads. . . .

July 5 and 6 were employed in succoring the wounded and burying the dead. . . . I determined to follow the enemy a flank movement, and, accordingly, leaving McIntosh's brigade of cavalry and Neill's brigade of infantry to continue harassing the enemy, put the army in motion for Middletown, Md.

The result of the campaign may be briefly stated in the defeat of the enemy at Gettysburg, his compulsory evacuation of Pennsylvania and Maryland, and withdrawal from the upper valley of the Shenandoah, and in the capture of 3 guns, 41 standards, and 13,621 prisoners; 24,978 small-arms were collected on the battle-field.

Our own losses were very sever, amounting, as will be seen by the accompanying return, to 2,834 killed, 13,709 . . . wounded, and 6,643 missing; in all, 23,286 . . .

It is impossible in a report of this nature to enumerate all the instances of gallantry and good conduct which distinguished such a hard-fought field as Gettysburg. . . . I will only add my tribute to the heroic bravery of the whole army, officers and men, which under the blessing of Divine Providence, enabled a crowning victory to be obtained, which I feel confident the country will never cease to bear in grateful remembrance.

Very respectfully, your obedient servant,

Gen. G. Meade,

Major-General, Commanding

Brig. Gen. Lorenzo Thomas,

Adjutant-General, U.S. Army, Washington D.C.