



## When Intelligence Made a Difference

— 19TH CENTURY —

### Geospatial Intelligence at Gettysburg

by Robert M. Clark

Until the beginning of the 20th Century, battlefield intelligence primarily depended on visual observation of an opponent's activities via two means: (1) cavalry, or (2) from the high ground, using favorable terrain, watchtowers, or both. Use of the combination proved to be decisive in the Union victory at the Battle of Gettysburg.

The Battle of Gettysburg during July 1 - 3, 1863 is well known to students of American Civil War history. Confederate General Robert E. Lee had moved his Army of Northern Virginia north into Maryland and then Pennsylvania, intending to draw the Union Army out and destroy it – hoping the result would be a peace settlement. The Union Army of the Potomac indeed followed Lee's troops, but as the two armies moved north, an intelligence disparity developed, largely because of the contrasting styles of two quite different cavalry commanders: Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart and Union General John Buford.

#### E.B. Stuart

General Lee's primary intelligence source was General Stuart, A master of cavalry tactics and reconnaissance, flamboyant, audacious, colorful, dashing and impulsive all are words that have been used to describe him. His job was to screen the flank of Lee's army and to track the movements of the Union army. But enroute he encountered columns of Federal infantry blocking his path. Instead of reporting the encounter to Lee, he moved his brigades east between the Union army and Washington, fighting engagements with local units, capturing supplies, and causing havoc in Maryland and Pennsylvania – but totally losing contact with Lee in the process. Lee, meanwhile, moved

slowly and cautiously north, unaware of the Union movements.

#### John Buford

Union General Buford was in many ways the opposite of Stuart. Meticulous and cautious, a veteran of service on the western frontier, he had commanded cavalry units in engagements from the beginning of the war. By July 1863, he was in command of the 1st Division, U.S. Cavalry, with the assignment of tracking the movement of General Lee's Army of Northern Virginia as it moved north into Pennsylvania. Buford knew that his primary job was intelligence; and he carried it out flawlessly in tracking Lee's army as it moved north.

#### The Race to Gettysburg

Meanwhile, Lee had at last received some intelligence about his opponent. A Confederate spy for General Longstreet, Henry Harrison, had been tracking the Union move north, and on June 28 he reported the position of Union units to Lee and Longstreet. Discovering that the U.S. Army of the Potomac was nearby, Lee ordered all of his scattered units to converge on the town of Gettysburg.

It was too late. Buford's cavalry had arrived in Gettysburg first, on June 30. Buford had immediately recognized the importance of the high ground south of the town, and deployed his two brigades to hold off the enemy. On July 1, the arriving Confederates attacked; Buford defended tenaciously and was able to hold the ground west of the town, taking heavy losses, until Union infantry arrived to reinforce him. During the day, the Union forces were pushed back, but were able to retreat and take up good defensive positions south of Gettysburg. By dawn on July 2, the Union Army had established strong positions in the shape of a fishhook starting at Culp's Hill in the north and running along Cemetery Ridge to the south, ending in a rocky promontory called Little Round Top.

Meanwhile, without cavalry support, Lee was moving without knowledge of what he would encounter in Gettysburg. He later described the damaging effect of this lack of intelligence, noting that

*... the absence of the cavalry rendered it impossible to obtain accurate information. ... By the route [Stuart] pursued, the Federal Army was interposed between his command and our main body, preventing any communication with him until his arrival at Carlisle. The march toward Gettysburg was conducted more slowly*



"View from the summit of Little Round Top at 7:30 P.M. July 3rd, 1863," painting by Edwin Forbes. Library of Congress Collection.

than it would have been had the movements of the Federal Army been known.<sup>1</sup>

Lee's lack of intelligence at a critical time, along with Buford's holding action, had deprived Lee of the high ground, and that proved to be decisive in the battle.

### The High Ground

Since prehistoric tribal warfare where weapons were clubs and stones, combatants have known the advantage of holding more favorable terrain – the high ground. Within military circles, the high ground continues to have an almost theological status, and not just for its combat advantage. Observation platforms began their existence as tools for gaining geospatial intelligence about military opponents, and they continue to be used today in the form of aircraft, aerostats, drones and satellites.

On few occasions, though, has the high ground had an historical impact matching that of the race to seize it at Gettysburg. During the two days of combat that began on July 2, much has been made of the terrain advantage that enabled the Union forces to hold off repeated Confederate attacks. Union Colonel Joshua Chamberlain's tenacious defense of the Union flank on Little Round Top has been dramatically memorialized in the 1993 movie *Gettysburg*.

The history books, and the movie, touch only lightly on the most important geospatial advantage of

holding Little Round Top that day. From its summit, Signal Corps observers could see much of the Confederate troop disposition and movements. Confederate general John Bell Hood's division was assigned to take Little Round Top. But Hood could not move into position without being observed. He was forced to take a long trek through woods to avoid being seen. Meanwhile, more Union forces arrived to strengthen the line. By the time Hood finally got his tired and thirsty troops into position, he was surprised to find a reinforced corps waiting for him. Neither side prevailed in the resulting battle that day, but Union forces continued to hold. The next day, General George Pickett's charge against the Union center, again observed in detail from Little Round Top, resulted in a decisive Confederate defeat and Lee's withdrawal from Gettysburg.

If Lee had been provided with good intelligence from his cavalry, he probably would have arrived in Gettysburg first, and occupied the high ground. The battle's outcome might have been quite different; the outcome of the war might have been different, as well.

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1. Donald R. Jermann, *Civil War Battlefield Orders Gone Awry: The Written Word and Its Consequences in 13 Engagements* (McFarland, 2012) p. 300.