

# What Went Wrong Before Antietam?

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II

*What Went Wrong Before Antietam?*

By Jaime Konieczny '07



During the Civil War of the United States, opposing sides split the best military minds in the country and made them the leaders of their armies. The Confederacy established General Robert E. Lee as the commander in charge of the Army of the Confederacy in 1862, which he renamed the Army of Northern Virginia.<sup>1</sup> The Union army, being entirely uncertain of which general would lead the army to a swift and quick victory, switched their leading commander several times. The first two years of the war saw many men as General-and-Chief of all Union forces; one of these men was General George McClellan. Although he did not remain General-and-Chief long, President Lincoln entrusted him with the leadership responsibility of Commander of the Army of the Potomac in 1861. General McClellan was considered an excellent general for organizing the troops. Yet though considered an excellent general, the Battle of Antietam was not a complete Union victory; it was a mere draw. It was a stalemate in that neither side achieved anything significant. General Lee did not continue on to invade the rest of Maryland and Pennsylvania as planned. However, McClellan also did not crush the Army of Northern Virginia, as was his intention. Why was this? What actions or lack thereof caused General McClellan to merely survive the Battle of Antietam as opposed to leading the Union Army to a glorious victory? In order to answer this question one must first identify the conditions and actions of the General prior to the battle itself.

Before the initial fighting began on September 16, 1862, General McClellan was having problems with his subordinate commanders, as well as making decisions about troop movement and mustering the confidence to fight the battle against the Confederacy at Antietam. However, on September 13, 1862, General McClellan was given a rare gift of war, which has become to be known as the Lost Orders. These written orders contained the exact location of General Lee's troops, and they also stated that his troops would be divided into five separate sections. The orders were found by a Union soldier simply by accident and were quickly advanced up the chain of command to General

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.civilwar.com/timebot.htm>, date accessed April 6, 2005

McClellan. For the general this came as a golden opportunity to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia. However, General McClellan, unsure of what specific actions to take did not move his troops into action until three and half days later, September 16, 1862. By this time General Lee had discovered that his plan was known and therefore had made preparations to reunite his troops. This caused General McClellan to lose an enormous opportunity to strike a fundamental blow at the Confederacy.<sup>2</sup>

Along with not taking advantage of the Lost Orders, General McClellan had another significant problem. When he finally decided to engage in battle with the Army of Northern Virginia he had problems communicating the entirety of the plan to his subordinate commanders. Reasons for this include the fact that he did not formulate a plan until September 16, 1862, and as he was doing so he neglected to hold a meeting to coordinate with the other generals. His initial plan was to simultaneously attack General Lee's army with two flanks, in order to cut off his southern escape routes to the Potomac; by doing so he envisaged that it would be as if "pinching the enemy in a vice."<sup>3</sup> This strategy in itself may have worked, if he had effectively communicated the design to his troop commanders. However, without holding a large meeting of all the officers to explain his plan (he simply relayed the orders through a messenger), he left them in confusion as to the exact role their positions held. For example, if General Burnside and Corps Commander Cox had known that their flanking position was meant to act as a severe force against the rebel army perhaps they would have had a better outcome on September 17, 1862. However, due to other circumstances, such as the ordered division of the First and Ninth Corps by General McClellan, there was tension and animosity between General Burnside and himself. This division also caused confusion pertaining to who was responsible for the orders from McClellan and what duties were to be upheld between General Burnside and Corps Commander Cox, because both men were present at the line and General Burnside had recently been demoted. General McClellan went on to further agitate Burnside and Cox by bringing in his staff engineers to inspect the ground and specifically mark out where the Ninth Corps was to be placed. This situation spurred animosity because prior to this all tactical decisions were left to the care of the generals.<sup>4</sup> This would prove to be a significant problem for General McClellan, because the tension and anger brought on by splitting Burnside's corps, changing commanders, and undermining Burnside's and Cox's command abilities augmented the miscommunication so that McClellan's plan of attack was not understood to its entirety. This cost the Union army the lives of several thousand men.<sup>5</sup>

Furthermore, General McClellan was not only having communication issues with the commanders—he also had problems making accurate decisions of where to send the troops that he wanted to bring to Antietam Creek, the most likely site of the battle's beginning. This constant run around is shown in his messages to Major General Franklin, in which he attempted to move Franklin from Harpers Ferry to support the troops at Antietam. However, Franklin at the same time asked for more troops, knowing that there were rebel troops at his location. This request was denied and General McClellan

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<sup>2</sup> Stephen W. Sears, ed., *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan Selected Correspondence 1860-1865*, 434; Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 297-300.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen W. Sears, *George B. McClellan: The Young Napoleon*, 297-300.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 297-300.

informed Major General Franklin through letters that the orders would be to march to Antietam. Yet, in his messages to the general he gave three positions for Franklin to move his troops to once they had arrived at Antietam. In the messages McClellan stated that each one of the positions would depend on where the Confederate troops would move. This is a clear indicator that since he had not acted on the Lost Orders, McClellan had effectively lost the location of General Lee's troops.<sup>6</sup> This uncertainty is also evident in a letter that General McClellan wrote to Major General Franklin on September 16, 1862. The letter was written after information was relayed that the Union force, which was to be protecting the Maryland Heights area, had surrendered and rebel movement was seen heading back towards Harpers Ferry. General McClellan writes, "I think the enemy has abandoned the position in front of us, but the fog is so dense that I have not yet been enabled to determine."<sup>7</sup> This letter provides evidence that the Union army was doing poorly before the battle of Antietam began. It also further proves that McClellan did not fully utilize his original information of rebel troops.

A further cause of concern for General McClellan before the battle was that he did not have the entirety of the troops with him at Antietam prepared to fight. His indecisiveness wasted time; by the time the decision was made the positive effect that it would have had on the battle was null and void. McClellan's orders to Franklin did not have him begin his march to reinforce the troops until dawn of the morning of the battle; by the time the troops arrived to help the Union the battle was practically over.

A further problem that occurred before the Battle of Antietam was the misinformation given to the Union troops. This information applied to both the size and placement of General Lee's troops. The miscalculation of the placement of Lee's troops caused a significant problem for McClellan. In a letter to General-in-Chief Halleck, on September 13, 1862 General McClellan placed the rebel troops at approximately "120,000 men." The letter goes on to state that these forces were headed to Harrisburg and Philadelphia.<sup>8</sup> This caused him slight trepidation, but he insisted that they would advance to victory against Lee in a day or so. The next two days passed with McClellan ordering the troops to engage and drive off the rebel troops and to take mountain passes and towns if possible. Small victories were accomplished which increased morale, but in that time Lee's troops began to regroup from their five different sections. General McClellan knew that since Lee's plans were discovered he would alter his strategy to invade the North and probably regroup his troops for a decisive battle between the two main forces.<sup>9</sup>

General McClellan was still daunted by the supposed overwhelming numbers of the Army of Northern Virginia; for this reason he ordered several troops to remain cautious. This note of caution was issued in McClellan's letter to Major General Franklin on September 15, 1862. He wrote, "It is important to drive in the enemy in your front but be cautious in doing it until you have some idea of his force."<sup>10</sup> The fear of being

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>7</sup> George McClellan, "September 16, 1862 Letter to Major General Franklin," ed. Stephen W. Sears, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan Selected Correspondence 1860-1865*, 466.

<sup>8</sup> McClellan, "September 13, 1862 Letter to General-in-Chief Halleck", ed. Sears, *The Civil War Papers*, 456.

<sup>9</sup> Sears, *The Civil War Papers*, 458-464.

<sup>10</sup> McClellan, "September 15, 1862 Letter to Major General Franklin," ed. Sears, *The Civil War Papers*, 464.

outnumbered was an unfortunate miscalculation by General McClellan in the events leading up to the Battle of Antietam; his chief advisor, Fitz John Porter, informed him wrongly of Lee's numbers. Not only was McClellan misinformed, his other commanding officers, who were present at the line of battle, also noted extremely large numbers from 100,000 to 130,000. "The overwhelming numbers worried General McClellan, who only at best commanded an army of 95,000 men, only 75,000 of whom were capable of being put on the firing line. That General Lee would stand and fight with hardly 38,000 men (when his army was finally reunited) was to McClellan unimaginable."<sup>11</sup> From General McClellan's perspective given the numerical calculations it was reasonable to be concerned about advancing out-manned and presumably out-gunned into battle with the enemy. By the time the battle began on September 17, 1862, General McClellan had already written General-in-Chief Halleck, seeking for reinforcements and further supplies including ammunition.<sup>12</sup> Therefore General McClellan while noted for his organization was preoccupied by the supposedly large numerical advantage of Lee's army along with his own depleting resources for his troops.

These concerns, along with pressure from Washington D.C., caused General McClellan to hesitate in the face of battle. McClellan's general strategy of caution was also noted by his military and political superiors, such as Abraham Lincoln, even early in the War. President Lincoln in response to media questions of why he did not call for the resignation of General Grant, who was known for aggressive military action and who had recently suffered a great military defeat, stated that, "I can't spare this man; he fights."<sup>13</sup> This statement was a not so subtle comment towards General McClellan and the fact that he was hesitant to engage in battles with the troops of the Army of the Potomac. However, the disapproval of the President did not seem to weigh heavily enough on General McClellan's mind, because six months after the statement was made General McClellan was still hesitating to engage in battle, this time at Antietam.

This view of McClellan constantly hesitating has remained consistent through the present day. The author of the article "Killing Zone at Burnside's Bridge," Robert Smith propagates the negative image of McClellan as a commanding officer by stating that he was "efficient in training, bold in planning, timid in battle."<sup>14</sup> This image is further developed by Stephen Sears, the author and editor of several books about McClellan including, *George B. McClellan the Young Napoleon*, and *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan Selected Correspondence 1860-1865*. From the chapter and letters published about the Battle of Antietam, Mr. Sears continues the negative image of General McClellan. He does so by listing the problems McClellan had prior to the battle and including other facts that show him to be ill prepared for battle, such as sleeping through the first hour of the battle on September 17, 1862. Sears also states that McClellan would have preferred not to fight the battle and that he hoped that the morning of the battle General Lee's troops would be gone and the battle not fought.<sup>15</sup> Thus

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<sup>11</sup> Sears, *The Young Napoleon*, 302-303.

<sup>12</sup> McClellan, "September 16, 1862 Letter to General-in-Chief Halleck," ed. Sears, *The Civil War Papers*, 466.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.civilwar.com/timebot.htm>

<sup>14</sup> Robert Smith, "Killing Zone at Burnside's Bridge," *Military History*, Vol. 21, Iss. 2; 2004, 34.

<sup>15</sup> Sears, *The Young Napoleon*, 297.

General McClellan's consistent hesitation to go into battle has remained one of his defining qualities for over a century.

Well over a century has come and gone since the Battle of Antietam. It has been considered to be the single bloodiest day in American military history, 22,000 Americans were killed.<sup>16</sup> Yet, with all of these deaths who won the battle? The conclusion has been that it was a draw, that no real victory was achieved. Why did General McClellan not win a sweeping victory? History has concluded that he had the manpower, the strategic advantage and the time in which to do so. As it has been shown General McClellan had a communication breakdown within his army. The first breakdown occurred when he missed his golden opportunity to strike a fundamental blow at the Confederate army using the Lost Orders. The second lack in communication occurred with the well planned but poorly explained attack at Antietam using simultaneous flanks to cut off escape routes for the enemy. This too caused a loss of a great opportunity to take advantage of Lee's troops and their thin reinforcements. Thirdly, General McClellan was poorly informed about the numbers of the enemy, causing fear and hesitation, which also resulted in a breakdown of the plan, once again creating a missed opportunity to crush the Army Northern of Virginia. Prior to the battle General George McClellan had many opportunities to ensure the victory that the North was hoping to win. Had he not been hesitant, indecisive, and misinformed during the days leading up to and including the battle, the North may have won a decisive victory that may have changed the course of the war.

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<sup>16</sup> Smith, 34.

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