

## **The Regulars at Antietam: Opportunity Denied**

**By Dave Welker © 2012**

The US Regulars played a vital role in the Battle of Antietam on September 17th, 1862, although this service is often largely overlooked in the standard histories. That the Regulars are once again left in the background of history could, on the one hand, reflect that the earliest histories of the battle on the Union side were mostly written by volunteers. Or it might be that the Regulars suffered relatively few casualties in comparison with the volunteer regiments, which admittedly did most of the often-horrific fighting that day. But most likely, it is the fact that what the Regulars actually did—as important as that was—wasn't as important as the role they might have played if allowed to fight. But to understand why that was, we need to start at the beginning.

The US Regulars marching into Maryland during the second week of September remained in the same organization they'd served in at the Second Battle of Bull Run barely a week earlier. They comprised the Second ("Regular") Division of Major General Fitz John Porter's V Corps, and were serving under Brigadier General George Sykes. Sykes' First Brigade was led by Lieutenant Colonel Robert C. Buchanan and included the 3rd and 4th Regiments, as well as the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 12th US Regiment and the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 14th US Regiment. The Second Brigade was led by Major Charles S. Lovell and consisted of the 1st, 2nd, 6th, 10th, 11th, and 17th Regiments. Sykes also had a small Third Brigade, commanded by Colonel Gouverneur K. Warren that included the already-famous 5th and 10th New York Regiments, as well as four batteries of US Artillery. Being a part of the Army of the Potomac's reserve, the Regulars had been among the last units to head into Maryland in pursuit of Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia, leaving for the field from their position on Washington's northern defenses early on Sunday, 14 September (the same day that the Battle of South Mountain occurred). But because of that success, Porter's V corps was rushed to join General McClellan and the rest of the Army of the Potomac in the field.

By late on the 15th, the Army of the Potomac remained that morning largely in the same position it had held at dark the day before. Franklin's VI Corps remained in possession of Crampton's Gap and held the army's left flank. Hooker's I Corps and Richardson's Division of the II Corps, having pressed the Confederates out of South Mountain's Turner's Gap the previous evening, held the right flank. Burnside and his IX Corps remained in control of Fox's Gap and from there would act as a reserve during the planned press through the passes in pursuit of Lee, moving north to Boonsboro or south to Pleasant Valley as the situation required. Bull Sumner held the center with his II Corps—two divisions of it—and the newly arrived XII Corps under the command of Joseph K. F. Mansfield.

Throughout that Monday, September 15th, McClellan received several pieces of good news. Porter and his V Corps were finally arriving on the scene. Sykes' Division was already up and ordered to reinforce Burnside and the Union reserve. Morell's Division was marching from Frederick and Humphrey's Division was nearing Frederick. With luck—and much effort by the men—the entire V Corps would be added to McClellan's force by the end of the day. Early in the morning Hooker sent a message indicating that the Confederates had abandoned Boonesboro and were running for the Potomac. Franklin's separate dispatch confirmed the good news, adding that McLaws was leaving Pleasant Valley. This positive news was clouded somewhat by word from the signal station at Monument Hill that the enemy had stopped and was forming lines behind the Antietam. This development could mean that Lee intended to recross the Potomac and was forming defensive lines to forestall Union attacks on his scattered and retreating army. Or, it might mean that Lee was preparing for battle. There was only one way to find out which was the case and that was

by pressing forward, so McClellan ordered Hooker push on toward the town of Sharpsburg, where the roads to the only two nearby crossings to Virginia met. If the Rebels passed through Sharpsburg, it would be clear they were retreating and that Lee's Maryland Campaign had failed before it had really begun.

Hooker had arrived on the banks of Antietam Creek—just east of Sharpsburg—to find Richardson's artillery engaged with the enemy and quietly climbed a nearby hill to survey the tactical situation he faced as the senior officer on the scene. He instantly determined that the Rebel position numbered "as nearly as I could estimate, about 30,000 men." While this number was certainly too high by several thousand men, it was not the size of the enemy force that kept Hooker from advancing but rather the condition of his own corps. "Fully conscious of my weakness in numbers and morale," explained Hooker, providing his own italics, "I did not feel strong enough to attack him in front, even after the arrival of the First Corps..." When later in the afternoon Hooker observed "the left of the enemy...break into column and march to the rear" west along the Sharpsburg-Boonsboro Pike, he was unsure what this development might mean. Certainly, this could be a sign of a general retreat across the Potomac but it might just as easily signal that the force holding the bridge—a span soon to be named the "Middle Bridge"—might be joining the main body, the presence of which Hooker had reported earlier. Hooker couldn't know if then, but Lee and his army were going to stand and fight, either to buy time to retreat or—if some miracle occurred—to stay and fight. That "miracle" would arrive in the form of a note early the next day informing Lee that Stonewall Jackson had managed to secure Harpers Ferry in a single day (Lee had expected it to take at least a week). Lee now would stay to fight it out in the hills around Sharpsburg. General Hooker, of course, had no idea this was the case, so he made preparations as best he could. One of his first acts was to add to Richardson's II Corps force astride the pike and holding the eastern end of the bridge by posting Sykes' newly-arrived division on the left of Richardson's Division, in a line of battle. Here they would remain for the rest of the

Early on the 16th, General Sykes moved to establish full control and prevent the Confederates from forcefully holding or destroying the Middle Bridge. McClellan might have counted himself lucky to have an experienced commander as Sykes in this key position at just this moment. Now, watching the Middle Bridge and the western bank of the Antietam for any sign of enemy troops, Sykes knew that keeping this crossing intact and in Union hands, would be vital to whatever McClellan might be planning for the coming hours of September 16th.

While Hunt's artillery was moving into position along the high ground on the eastern bank of Antietam Creek, Sykes' Union infantry moved forward to solidify Northern control of the bridge. Advancing under cover of fog, the 4th US Infantry Regiment, commanded by Captain Hiram Dryer, pressed forward through the 3rd US Infantry's skirmishers and to the bridge's mouth. Dryer could see enemy infantry moving on the opposite side and so he directed Lieutenant John L. Buell to take Company G and rush the bridge in an effort to determine if the Rebels remained there in any force. Watching Buell and his men race across without opposition to the other side, Dryer immediately ordered Companies B and K to accompany him across, while the remainder of the regiment covered their advance from the eastern bank of the creek. Once there, the captain posted his three companies to flank the bridge, part of them behind a barn on the left of the pike while the remainder sat under cover of the stream bank on the right-hand side. By 7:30, fog or no fog, Dryer and his men—backed by Union artillery and Sykes' entire division immediately to their rear—held the tactically important Middle Bridge for the Union.

By 9:00 a.m., the sun emerged in the sky and the fog that had hidden the Confederates, and nearly everything else, began to lift in earnest. General Sykes now moved to reinforce his hold on the bridge, perhaps anticipating that once the Rebels knew of his action, they would make some effort to undo it. He directed Lieutenant Colonel George W. Getty of the 5th US Artillery to order Benjamin's Battery E of the 2nd US Artillery and Weed's Battery I of the 5th US Artillery—attached to Wilcox's Division of the IX Corps and Sykes Division of the V Corps, respectively—forward to the ridge overlooking the Antietam, posting them just south of the Boonesboro Pike. From this position they could see—finally—that Rebels remained in their front, comprised of some skirmishers directly ahead and a larger body of troops off to their right.

The Confederate skirmishers must have begun moving even before they could have made out the full extent of the Union threat facing them, probing slowly forward toward the Middle Bridge. Huddled below and in front of the Union guns, Captain Dryer noticed the skirmishers, now advancing through the remaining wisps of fog toward his position on both sides of the road. Without time to bring up more of his regiment from across the bridge, Dryer opted to deploy one company on each side the pike in skirmish order and press back the Rebel threat. The artillerymen of Benjamin's and Weed's Batteries to their rear saw the skirmishers, too, and within minutes, the two Union batteries newly deployed at the Middle Bridge loosed the fury of their six 20-pound rifled Parrot guns and four 3-inch ordnance rifles. First they targeted the skirmishers but quickly moved to firing on a larger body of troops, most likely the two brigades under command of Nathan "Shanks" Evans—Evans' own and Col. Anderson's—holding the road and the western approach to the Middle Bridge. Evans' small division had come into Maryland still bearing the weight of losses from weeks of fighting in Virginia and had had their ranks thinned even more from the fighting of two days before near Boonsboro. Captain Weed's Union battery targeted Evans' men with case shot—shells filled with dozens of lead balls, a long-range version of the deadly anti-personnel canister round—which Lieutenant Benjamin recalled "drove them in confusion into a ravine." Though the Confederate infantry assault had failed, Southern artillery would now pick up their mantle.

Minutes after the first Rebel shells exploded among their batteries, the Union guns on the ridge responded with a devastating reply. All 33 Parrot guns of the German Battalion and Benjamin's Battery, along with Weed's four three-inch ordnance rifles, soon poured forth a steam of steady and deadly-accurate fire. For nearly 40 minutes the two lines of artillery would duel while a light rain showered down. One of Walton's exploding shells was particularly effective in doing its work, mortally wounding the German Battalion's commander, Major Albert Arndt. But most of the rest of the Southern artillery's fire wasn't nearly as effective. Many of the shells never even reached the Yankee guns and the overwhelming firepower of their Union enemy was making it increasingly hard to load and aim. General Longstreet, watching the mismatched fight decided that his artillery firepower could be better used and ordered Walton to move his batteries behind cover of a hill. So ended what General D.H. Hill described as "the most melancholy farce of the war." But however much a farce this artillery duel and the preceding infantry drive to push the Yankees back across the creek may have been, they were the last organized Confederate effort to regain control of the Middle Bridge. Thanks to Sykes and his Regulars, George McClellan now owned this tactically vital piece of real estate.

The Regulars' early hold on the Middle Bridge was a vital driver of General McClellan's eventual plans for the Battle of Antietam. To attack Lee's army, the Union needed to cross three bridges—the northern-most or Upper, bridge was well to the east of the Confederate position, while the southern-most, or Lower, bridge was in a no-man's land between the two and would come to be the undoing of McClellan's plan. The Middle Bridge was held by the

Union from the start – thanks to George Sykes and the Regulars. What this meant was that McClellan could plan his attack secure in the possession of two of the three bridges, and so it was that he crafted his plan around these points. The Union would attack first from the right—crossing Hooker’s I Corps and Mansfield’s XII Corps by the Upper Bridge—to strike Lee’s left flank. Next would come an attack on Lee’s right flank—by Burnside’s IX Corps—across the still-to-be taken Lower Bridge. The final and main attack would come from the Union center—driving across the Middle Bridge—to strike Lee’s presumably weakened center. And it would be the Regulars and Porter’s V Corps—backed hopefully by Sumner’s II and Franklin’s VI Corps. It was a standard attack plan worthy of McClellan’s West Point training.

Late on the 16th, McClellan got his attack underway by sending the I and XII Corps across the Upper Bridge and nearby fords to strike Lee’s left flank at dawn on the 17th. At dawn on the 17th, General Joe Hooker restarted the attack, striking toward the Dunker Church, seeking to break Lee’s line there. Though Hooker instead spent the early morning fighting for control of DR Miller’s cornfield, the first phase of McClellan’s attack plan was nonetheless underway. McClellan then turned briefly to preparing the attack in the center, held by the V Corps and Sykes’ Regular Division. This consisted of ordering the Union’s cavalry across the Antietam, for as General Pleasonton reported, “On the morning of the 17th instant, after the commencement of the action on the right, I was directed by Major-General McClellan, verbally, to advance with my division of cavalry and horse batteries of artillery on the turnpike toward Sharpsburg, to some suitable position beyond the bridge over the Antietam Creek, and support the left of Sumner’s line of battle with my force.”

McClellan has long been criticized by historians—again, notably by Ezra Ayers Carman—for failing to use his cavalry to scout the true position of the Confederate left flank or to otherwise aid Hooker, instead of keeping it bottled up in the center, presumably guarding against defeat and a Rebel counterattack. Such criticism would be valid if McClellan ever really intended Hooker’s flanking attack to be the main blow at Lee. But in planning to strike the main thrust at Lee’s center, General McClellan was using his cavalry perfectly in keeping with his use of Porter’s V Corps and its “Iron Column” of US Regulars. In this center attack it is they, not Hooker, who would need the cavalry to quickly secure ground and support their attack by guarding their advancing flanks or by launching a lightning cavalry thrust at the weakest point of Lee’s line at just the right moment.

As the morning of September 17th wore on, the fighting grew in intensity. The Union I Corps was reinforced by the XII Corps, which managed to do little more than secure the bloody Cornfield and the East Woods. But they failed to break Lee’s line at the Dunker Church and so McClellan sent Sumner’s II Corps to the right to help Hooker. But by the time they arrived, Hooker had been wounded and Sumner took command of the entire attack. Stamping his own mark on the battle, Sumner changed the axis of the fight—from striking north-south to east-west—and attacked the Confederate position in the West Woods. Nearing success, Sumner was turned back—snatching defeat from the jaws of victory—by extending his attack too quickly and deeply into the Rebels’ position without waiting for reinforcements. Not only were those reinforcements not where Sumner needed them, but they were completely lost to his awareness. So it was that the remaining two divisions of the II Corps—under French and Richardson—stumbled into a fight in the Sunken (or Bloody) Road. The fighting, intentionally or not, was moving closer to the center and the Regular’s position.

The Regulars—who could see portions of the Sunken Road fight to their right—fully expected to be engaged at any moment. Pleasonton’s ranks apparently expected so, too because “several times during the day the men mounted and drew sabers to charge (as all

supposed), but were dismounted again without attempting anything.” But instead of attacking or supporting an infantry attack, Pleasonton’s cavalry remained static in the center, his artillery firing at Lee’s scattered infantry picketing before Sharpsburg and the town itself, as well as those targets from Longstreet’s corps in the Piper farm fields to their right.

Thought the wheels were starting to come off the Union train—the attack on Lee’s right flank by Burnside had gotten started late and stalled just trying to take the Lower Bridge—McClellan’s own words indicate that at mid-day he remained determined to launch the main attack in the center, and soon. At 11:45 that morning he composed a dispatch to Pleasonton that advised “Do not expose your batteries without necessity unless they are inflicting on the enemy a loss commensurate with what we suffer. How goes it with you[?]” Then, in a postscript, the General Commanding added “Can you do any good by a cavalry charge?” Not only was McClellan advising Pleasonton to hold back his artillery, probably to support the attack in the center, but he was weighing launching a massed cavalry charge! Despite the fact that such attacks by 1862 properly belonged in the day of Napoleon, nearly a half century ago, McClellan was obviously considering using the alleged shock and speed of his mounted arm to break a hole in the center – a hole that the V Corps and its Regulars could plunge through and widen.

Around noon, General McClellan finally left his headquarters to survey the condition of his troops and line. As he rode cheers rose up from the ranks of Morell’s Division of the V Corps, so loud they could be heard above the din of battle and firing of the artillery in Morell’s immediate front. In fact, men could track McClellan’s progress along the line by the proximity of cheering. John Smith of the 118th Pennsylvania recalled seeing General McClellan and that “[r]egardless of the flying, bursting missiles, there he sat astride his splendid charger, glass in hand, calmly reviewing the mighty hosts.” McClellan apparently could see the situation at the Middle Bridge because he ordered Colonel Alexander S. Webb, of his staff, to ride forward to order General Sykes to advance the 2nd/10th US Regulars to support Pleasonton’s position. Whatever conclusion McClellan may have reached from this intelligence gathering session, it should have been clear that his hold on the Middle Bridge was secure, giving him control of nearly a thousand yards of ground across the creek. In fact, his cavalry skirmishers had advanced almost half way—and nearly unopposed, really—to the very center of Lee’s position before Sharpsburg. Holding this ground was critical because any larger attack would need that room in which to deploying Porter’s men, so the stage had been nicely set for his attack in the center. That he held this advanced position so securely with cavalry and artillery alone should have told General McClellan something more - that the absence of any move by Lee to retake this ground and remove the threat facing his center suggested the Confederate chief had nothing with which to drive back the threat. After all, Lee was no fool and he would know that massed cavalry and artillery were probably meant to support an infantry attack. Not striking back at all meant something significant. Or it should have meant something significant. But General McClellan probably saw no opportunity in this fact before his very eyes.

At 1:00 or so, McClellan’s plan got a boost when he learned that Burnside’s corps was finally across Antietam Creek and ready to start the second flanking attack. And with this development once again came a move to ready the main attack from the Union center. At around 2:00, General George Sykes decided to reinforce his hold on the bridge and the position beyond it. Sykes’ order directed the 4th US Infantry’s Captain Hiram Dryer to lead his own regiment and the First Battalion of the 14th US across the creek and to take command of all the Regular units there. His task was to support the Federal batteries deployed astride the Boonsboro Pike, as well as to “dislodge the enemy from certain haystacks in a field on the right of the pike.”

The enemy near the hay stacks was Evans' small brigade of 293 men, all that Lee could spare to hold the center of his line above Sharpsburg at this moment. They were deployed behind a worm fence that ran long a ridgeline, angling to the right and front toward the end of the Sunken Road. Beyond his infantry, all that Evans had to support his position were the 6 guns of Captain Boyce's Macbeth Artillery, posted in the center of Evans' line. Not only weren't Evans' men of sufficient strength to hold off the 1,640 US Regulars now facing them but Dryer's own 320 men of the 4th US alone might have overwhelmed the Confederate defenders. Watching the Yankees surge more troops across the Middle Bridge, Evans could be heartened only with the knowledge that two "commands," cobbled together from stragglers in the rear, were on their way to his aid. These units, commanded by Colonels A. H. Colquitt and Alfred Iverson, numbered 250 men. It wasn't much—and no one could know how or even if they'd fight—but it was all the help he would get.

Captain Dryer's 4th US arrived at about 3:00 and deployed on the right of the pike and prepared to advance. At the same time, General Pleasonton sent McClellan a message asking for more infantry. Pleasonton's message didn't indicate if he was wanting to attack and asking for infantry to support his advance, or if he was worried that Evans' advancing straggler units might pose a threat to his position. But a clearer, subsequent request for troops suggests that Pleasonton could see the weak position before him and probably wanted to attack while the opportunity existed. General McClellan, however, wasn't ready for such a move. His reply came to Pleasonton dated 3:30 and read "General McClellan directs me to say he has no infantry to spare. Confer with Major General Porter, and if he cannot support your batteries, withdraw them." Clearly, George McClellan wasn't yet ready to unleash the third phase of his attack and no cavalry chief was going to take charge of his timetable for action.

Meanwhile, Dryer's 4th US aligned itself with the skirmishers of the 2nd/10th US across the pike. Once ready, the combined line of Regulars, in skirmish order, started forward toward the Confederate position on the ridge before them. Lieutenant John S. Poland led his skirmish line westward on the left of the pike, moving steadily despite the growing intensity of Rebel artillery fire that tore into the lines as they went. Dropping into a swale bought the men a short break, but these were US Regulars and they needed no prodding to drive them from this cover. Pressed up over the next ridge, they quickened their pace as they overwhelmed the 18th Virginia and the artillerists of Moody's Battery, who had been causing them such trouble. Nearing the battery, they opened a general fire that made it impossible for the Rebels of Moody's Battery to man their guns and which threatened to overtake the position. A line of Confederate infantry in battle lines appeared to support the guns but they too, along with the artillery, quickly retreated for the safety of Sharpsburg. The 2nd US skirmisher alone had just driven off a regiment of infantry and two artillery pieces!

On the right of the pike, Dryer's 4th US Regulars, too, were advancing in skirmisher order, commanded by Lieutenant Caleb Carlton. They pressed forward through a small cornfield and on up toward the ridge top in their front. They didn't even have to fire more than briefly because their mere presence apparently was enough to drive the advance units of Evans' Brigade—the 18th, 22nd, and 23rd South Carolina—away, racing to reform on the Hagerstown Pike just north of town. As Evan might have feared, the straggler units broke quickly and the men ran for town and scattered throughout its streets. But it had taken only minutes for the skirmishers of these two regiments of the Regular Army to drive nearly 500 yards and brush away the Confederate defenders. By 4:00 the whole center of the Confederate line now lay bare to the possibility of Union capture. And if two companies advancing as skirmishers could make such progress, it must have been obvious to General Pleasonton and Captain Dryer—who had watched this all unfold before their eyes—what

might happen if the remaining force of the Regular Division still waiting to advance might do! If only they could get someone in authority to act...

Dryer could see the opportunity before his very face, but probably knew that doing anything more without approval risked overstepping his bounds, if not acting in some way that might upset whatever it was General McClellan was trying to do here. Dryer probably knew that what he'd done so far already had overstepped his orders, going well beyond clearing the threat to Pleasonton's artillery batteries emanating from near the hay stacks. But Dryer was unperturbed, taking the initiative that so few in the Union ranks seemed able to seize this day, and was at that moment bringing forward the remaining battalion of the 12th US and companies of the 4th US for an attack on the center of Lee's line at the edge of Sharpsburg. The Union stood poised on the edge of achieving—at least in part—General McClellan's ultimate, third phase of his battle plan!

But not every one of Sykes' officers was as aggressive as Captain Dryer. Captain Matthew M. Blunt, leading the First Battalion of the 12th US, was apparently troubled by Dryer's initiative—Dryer had asked Blunt to support his move despite their lack of orders—and quickly dashed off a message to General Sykes. Blunt's note warned Sykes that Captain Dryer was about to attack, disguising the fact that he was pulling the rug out from under his fellow officer by blandly stating that he "didn't understand that he had been sent over the Antietam for that purpose." Sykes reportedly was annoyed by this breach of command authority and quickly directed Lieutenant William H. Powell—from General Buchanan's brigade staff—to ride to Dryer and immediately order him to halt any advance and to pull his troops back to a defensive position. Within seconds, Powell was racing across the Middle Bridge to deliver the order. Powell arrived, finding Captain Dryer mounted in the middle of the Boonsboro Pike, just at the moment he was ordering the 4th US forward. Dryer must have been disappointed, if not angry at this decision, and asked if he had anything "left to his discretion" in the order. When Powell explained that no, the order was direct and to be executed with no change, Dryer responded like the soldier he was and quickly cancelled the attack by Carlton's men of the 4th US. And then, true to his orders, the captain rode away to order Poland's men to fall back to the security of the Sherrick Farm lane. It was a moment that might have been historic but through inaction from above was to be little more than an interesting historical footnote. After all, even if Captain Dryer had taken the center of Lee's line, doing so without any link to McClellan's plan or action by Generals Porter or Sykes—acting for McClellan—would have been pointless. Sykes, after all, had no orders to move and could do little more than rein in the aggressive captain, regardless what he might have wanted to do.

General Pleasonton, too, could see the opportunity before him and sought to do what Dryer could not. Though his cavalry weren't sufficient to do this job, his rank and authority better enabled him to spur the Union command force into action where Captain Dryer could not. On top of that, Pleasonton could see the wider action before the flanks of his position, a large body of Confederate infantry advancing on Hancock's newly-assigned division of the II Corps on his right, while Burnside's troops were clearly making progress in advancing on the left of the Union line. At 4:00, Pleasonton decided to act. As Pleasonton explained in his report, "I was so satisfied that this could be done at that moment, that I sent a request to Maj. Gen. Fitz John Porter, asking for the assistance of some infantry to support my advance on the Sharpsburg Ridge." All he needed, as he had asked for earlier, was infantry to make it happen. But Fitz John Porter had no intention of advancing. As explained in Porter's report, "Between the dispatching and receiving of that call the tide of battle had changed. Our troops on the left under Burnside had been driven from the heights which they had so gallantly crowned, while those on the immediate right, under Sumner, were held in check. The army was at a stand. I had not the force asked for and I could not,

under any orders, risk the safety of the artillery and center of the line, and perhaps imperil the success of the day by further diminishing my small command, not then 4,000 strong—then in the front line and unsupported, and protect all our trains.” There was little Pleasonton could do now. There would be no such attack in the center, at least not under Porter’s authority.

What exactly had happened here? Pleasonton was certainly mystified at that moment because he noted in his report that only two days later did he learn Porter’s reason for refusing to send troops. Porter’s response, though, was a turning point even if it was not immediately clear that this was so. On the surface it appeared to be Porter’s response and decision alone, suggesting McClellan apparently was away from his headquarters at that critical moment. In fact, McClellan was away, going to the Union right to see the situation there for himself yet again. He may have been physically absent but McClellan’s spirit and command authority certainly hovered still over the Union Army’s decisionmaking spirit like a pondering, all-powerful presence. Porter’s response may or may not have reflected the V Corps commander’s personal view, but it certainly conformed to what he knew McClellan wanted – that no attack in the center should come until McClellan himself ordered it. Leaving his headquarters to see the situation in the field for himself is a commendable act but leaving no one there free to act on opportunities presented by the battle’s developments is yet another failing of McClellan’s command style at the Antietam.

Instead of racing back to his headquarters to direct the next move in his battle plan—the final blow against Lee’s position—General McClellan’s only response to this last visit to the right was to merely rescind his earlier order directing Morell’s two V Corps brigades to the right. As General Porter recorded “Two brigades of Morell’s division were dispatched in the afternoon to the aid of General Sumner, then hard pressed. They were halted near their destination by the major general commanding, who had sent for them. They returned [to their position in the center] after dark.” Reflecting that McClellan was in no hurry to strike in the center, his orders to Morell apparently carried no sense of urgency, so the two brigades would return to their previous position only after dark, too late to be of any use at all. And while this decision certainly reflected no sense of urgency to attack, neither did it reflect any sense of panic that Lee might at any moment strike the center of his line—or any point, really—with the Southern hoards that McClellan and others would later claim as the excuse for inaction.

McClellan would later claim in his post-war memoirs—in a section not lifted from his Official Report, like much of the rest of the Antietam chapter of that work—that his afternoon ride to the Union right revealed that his army was shaken and beaten. Though he never directly states it, by placing his “new” material at the end of the book’s description of the action on the 17th, General McClellan clearly implies that it was the poor fighting state of the men that caused him to abandon any aggressive spirit. “When I was on the right on the afternoon of the 17th,” wrote McClellan, “I found the troops a good deal shaken—that is, some of them who had been in the early part of the action. Even Sedgwick’s division commenced giving way under a few shots from a battery that suddenly commenced firing from an unexpected position. I had to ride in and rally them myself.” Beyond what almost certainly is a boldfaced lie about personally rallying Sedgwick’s troops—no other such accounts of this heroic claim exist—McClellan’s allegation are shameful. That there was disorder and confusion is undoubted and that some men were beaten is unquestioned. But in the hours since fighting there had ended, lines had been reformed and order restored in many units. After all, it was men of Doubleday’s I Corps division—who had borne so much of the day’s early fighting—that had turned back Stuart’s flanking attack on the extreme Union right. Blaming the men for the course of the rest of the Union actions during what remained of that day is disgraceful, even for George McClellan.



At 5:00 Porter—almost certainly at McClellan’s direction—sent a dispatch to General Sykes that was as close as the Union Army would come that day to an order authorizing an attack in the center. “Burnside is driving the enemy.” Porter advised, “Please send word to the command you sent to Pleasonton, to support his batteries, and let him drive them.” This dispatch, despite its tepid language, clearly was an order to attack and would have made Captain Dryer, to whom Porter was referring, very happy. But apparently nothing came of this dispatch. Perhaps “Tardy” George Sykes received the message and simply chose not to act on it. Perhaps it arrived, but too late to be acted upon, or maybe the situation there changed before Porter’s orders could take effect. The most likely explanation is the later because about the time that that order would have reached the center, General McClellan appeared; if this was so, Porter’s 5:00 pm directive to attack would suddenly have become moot.

Once again General McClellan had left his headquarters to see the situation for himself, but this time he headed to the center of his line. George Smalley recorded this moment, writing “McClellan remounts his horse, and with Porter and a dozen officers of his staff rides away to the left in Burnside’s direction.” Smalley apparently expected that McClellan was headed to see Burnside, but if so, he was quite wrong because not only did General McClellan never suggest that was his objective, but he never made it that far and stopped instead at the Union center. “Sykes meets them on the road,” Smalley remembered, “...the three Generals talk briefly together.”

If McClellan’s presence in the center had blocked his earlier order, through Porter, to launch the attack in the center, it also might have had the effect of putting that attack clearly, unambiguously into motion. As the three generals consulted, a note arrived from Captain Dryer that might well have provided the impetus for that decision. The note had gone—and any good communication in the Regular Army should—through Dryer’s immediate superior officer, Colonel Buchanan. Captain Thomas M. Anderson remembered that he had been talking with Colonel Buchanan when Dryer’s orderly arrived with a note. Dryer informed the colonel that in his advanced position he could see that there was nothing more than a single Confederate battery and two regiments of infantry in front of Sharpsburg linking the two wings of Lee’s army. Given this fact, Dryer proposed attacking the battery and, clearly, driving on to break Lee’s center in two and asked permission to advance. Buchanan knew that this was important but had implications beyond his own brigade, so the colonel appended a note explaining “Dryer reports rebel center very weak & wants leave to attack” and forwarded it quickly to General Sykes. And conveniently, at the moment Captain Dryer’s note arrived, General Sykes was meeting with Generals McClellan and Porter.

Colonel Buchanan apparently expected that Dryer’s note would do the trick because he ordered his brigade to prepare for action, saying, “Fall in, you men. Our turn has come at last.” Buchanan was right to prepare, but a significant hurdle remained before his Regulars and the Union center could come to life. Dryer’s note reached the three generals as they held their conference between the positions of Taft’s and Weed’s Batteries. From this vantage point, they could clearly see the situation in the Union center as far as the ridge before Sharpsburg and had nearly as good a view as Captain Dryer did – in some respects it was better because of their elevated position on the eastern bluff of the Antietam. When the message arrived, Sykes read it and passed it to both Generals McClellan and Porter. What the three said exactly at the moment wasn’t recorded but General Sykes later explained to Captain Anderson that “he remembered the circumstance very well and that he thought General McClellan was inclined to order in the Fifth Corps. But when he spoke of doing so, Porter said “Remember, General! I command the last reserve of the last Army of the Republic.” Sykes may or may not have meant for this recollection to place blame on

General Porter for what happened next but, regardless, history clearly records what George McClellan did – which was nothing.

There would be no attack on Lee's center, Captain Dryer would never get a chance to exploit the weakness in the Confederate center he'd reported, the US Regulars would do nothing more to affect the outcome of the Battle of Antietam than they'd already done that day. While many Union officers—perhaps as General Sykes had done—would spin the decision or actions in the center to suit their own ends, one thing remained clear and unquestioned in this series of debates. That is, that General McClellan alone made the final decision to not order an attack and it is he who bears the burden of this decision. Porter's advice was nothing more and the general commanding could have brushed it aside, as he apparently did in directing Porter's 5:00 pm message to Sykes. But now, when he had a chance to act, General McClellan opted instead for the safe, the easy, the bird-in-the-hand. But in doing so, he doomed the Battle of Antietam to being not the decisive battle of the war but, instead, just another major fight in a war full of major, costly fights. The volunteers had fought so hard, and suffered so much, had died in droves to make this battle matter. And the Regulars had been forced to adopt a passive role, shackled in the center when they all knew the difference they could make in this battle, finishing off what the volunteers had paid for so dearly. But when the moment of truth came, George McClellan denied them all success.

Harsh, Taken at the Flood, pp. 311-312.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, p. 217.

OR, XIX, Vol. 1, p. 352.

[http://home.earthlink.net/~tjreeseecg/regulars/id\\_10.html](http://home.earthlink.net/~tjreeseecg/regulars/id_10.html)

<http://www.civilwarhome.com/Bio/sykesbio.htm>

George Sykes would rise to command the V Corps in June 1863—replacing George Meade—and was promoted to major general of volunteers. Though Sykes performed admirably through the Battle of Gettysburg, his leadership at Bristoe and during the Mine Run campaign was found lacking by Meade. Agreeing with Meade, Grant removed him from corps command in March 1864 in a move that many friends suspected had more to do with his association with McClellan than his actions on the field. George Sykes died in Texas in 1880 and today lies buried in the West Point cemetery under a memorial bearing the Maltese cross of the V Corps.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, p. 356.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, p. 356.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, pp. 350-351, p. 353. and p. 436.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, p. 356.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, pp. 848-849, 1026.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, p. 211.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, p. 211.

Carman, The Maryland Campaign, p. 320.

Carman, The Maryland Campaign, p. 319.

Sears The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan, p. 467.

Smith "Antietam to Appomattox with the 118th Pennsylvania Volunteers," pp. 42-43.; OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, pp.338-339, 351.; Carman, The Maryland Campaign, p. 320. Carman suggests that Webb's mission – riding into the very jaws of death," as Smith wrote – was to send the 2nd/10th US Regulars forward. He was right and Porter confirms it in his OR

account when he explains that McClellan himself was the authority that ordered a portion of Sykes' command forward to aid Pleasonton.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, p. 357.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, p. 939.

OR, Vol. LI, p.1845.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, pp. 356-363.; Carman, *The Maryland Campaign*, p. 323.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, pp. 356-363.; Carman, *The Maryland Campaign*, p. 325.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1 p. 339.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 1, p. 338; p. 349.

McClellan, *McClellan's Own Story*, p. 606.

OR, Vol. XIX, Pt. 2, p. 316.

George W. Smalley "New York Tribune Narrative;" Frank Moore, ed. *The Rebellion Record: A Diary of American Events*, Vol. V (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1863). p. 472; Carman, *The Maryland Campaign*, p. 361.

Thomas M. Anderson "The Reserve at Antietam," *Century Magazine* 32, No. 5 (September 1886); Carman, *The Maryland Campaign*, pp. 327-328.

Anderson "The Reserve at Antietam," ; Carman, *The Maryland Campaign*, p. 328.