The Peach Orchard Salient At Gettysburg: Folly Or Forseight?

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CSC 1991

SUBJECT AREA - History

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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The battle of Gettysburg remains one of the most studied campaigns in military history. One of its most fascinating and controversial aspects, concerns the occupation and defense of the Peach Orchard salient on July 2, 1863. Despite orders to remain on Cemetery Ridge, General Daniel Sickles advanced his III Corps into a salient, far in front of the Army of the Potomac, in order to block a Confederate attack on the Union left flank. Sickles' action precipitated a savage fight, that although blunted the rebel assault, caused horrendous casualties. Many historians claim that the III Corps position was foolishly occupied by Sickles, and nearly resulted in the destruction of the Union forces at Gettysburg. The purpose of this paper is: to relate the circumstances surrounding the action of July 2, to discuss Sickles' motivation and to evaluate the defense of the Peach Orchard salient in terms of the Fundamentals of Defense.

The III Corps was originally posted along the southern portion of Cemetery Ridge, from the left of II Corps to the Round Tops. In Sickles' sector, Cemetery Ridge diminished in height until it was little higher than ground level. Much of the position was wooded, and in some places, marshy. Although Little Round Top was commanding ground it offered no observation and fields of fire to cover the left flank of the position.

After attempting to get Meade's permission to move to better ground Sickles detected a large body of Confederate infantry to his left front. Fearing a large scale attack on his left flank Sickles moved his Corps out to a Peach Orchard located along a relatively high ridge following the Emmitsburg Road. His new position offered excellent fields of fire for his artillery to the left front and right flank. Sickles concentrated his brigades well on key terrain along the salient. He effectively covered gaps and his flanks with artillery and sharpshooters. However, he lacked the support necessary to hold his advanced position against the superior numbers of Longstreet and Hill's corps'.

After the Confederate attack commenced, Meade discovered III Corps' isolated position and promptly ordered in supporting infantry and artillery from the II and V Corps. After four hours of long and bloody combat most of the salient was lost to the rebels, but the threat to the Union left was over.

Sickles' primary motivation for establishing the salient was his desire to occupy ground more suitable for defense. Sickles deplored combat in the wooded terrain and wanted to deny the commanding ground of the Peach Orchard to the enemy. His unhappy experience of having to give up good ground to the enemy at Chancellorsville, heavily influenced his actions at Gettysburg.

In retrospect, many of the present day Fundamentals of the Defense favor the defense of the Peach Orchard salient, over the original position assigned by Meade. Although lacking in the fundamentals of preparation, flexibility, and knowledge of the enemy, the III Corps position, with minimal support, applied the fundamentals of concentration, offensive action, maneuver, use of terrain, mutual support, defense in depth, and surprise. The Cemetery Ridge position may have been easier for Meade to support, but it offered poor fields of fire for artillery, covered and concealed avenues of approach for the enemy, and no observation and fields of fire to cover his left flank. Sickles foresight can be appreciated by anyone who has seen the fields of fire, and depth that the salient provided, while understanding the ranges and lethality of the weapons of 1863. Sickles "folly" was his failure to coordinate the support of his over extended corps with Meade, prior to the start of the attack. Although requiring extensive support from the II and V Corps to succeed, III Corps' action broke the back of
the assault, and bought time for Meade to bring up the remainder of his troops for the final combat on July, 3.
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OUTLINE

THESIS STATEMENT: Despite orders to the contrary, General Daniel Sickles advanced his III Army Corps to a defensive position, far forward of Army of the Potomac, which resulted in "near disaster" on the army's left flank. Although severely criticized by contemporary historians, Sickles' action warrants a second glance to fully understand the "folly or foresight" of this controversial commander.

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The battle of Gettysburg has captured the imagination of thousands of scholars and military professionals since 1863, and remains a fascinating study of command, tactics, and other aspects of the art of war. One of the most controversial aspects of the battle surrounds the combat in the Peach Orchard Salient, of July 2, 1863. Despite orders to the contrary. General Daniel Sickles advanced his Third Army Corps to a defensive position far forward of the Army of the Potomac, which resulted in near disaster on the army's left flank. Although severely criticized by contemporary historians, Sickles' action warrants second glance to fully understand the "folly or foresight" of this controversial commander.

After victory at Chancellorsville in May of 1863, Robert E. Lee began the consolidation of his army west of Culpeper, Virginia in preparation for a second invasion of the North. With the concurrence of the Confederate government, he intended to move his forces north through the Shenandoah Valley and into Pennsylvania. Lee's motives for invasion were to feed and supply his needy army in the lush farmland of the Cumberland Valley, and to draw the Army of the Potomac out from its strong position on the Rappahannock, and into a decisive battle, in order to gain victory and a negotiated peace with a war weary North. (2:12-13) Upon discovery of Lee's movement, General Joseph Hooker reluctantly launched his army in pursuit. Maintaining themselves between the moving rebels and Washington, the Federals engaged elements of the Army of Northern Virginia in savage combat at Brandy Station, Loudoun Valley, and at
Frustrated by the poor performance of "Fighting Joe" Hooker, Lincoln was finally able to replace him on June 28, with Major General George Gordon Meade. A quiet, competent, commander with a hot temper, Meade moved quickly to mass his army to engage Lee's forces, which had been foraging for supplies along a wide frontage in southern Pennsylvania. After learning of the presence of Longstreet's and A.P. Hill's corps, encamped east of Chambersburg, Meade dispatched three of his corps to intercept the Confederates north of Emmitsburg, Maryland. Although neither commander had selected the time and place of engagement, a small skirmish between the foraging confederate division of Henry Heth and John Buford's Union cavalry division, on July 1, quickly escalated to a major battle, as both sides rushed into the fray, on the outskirts of Gettysburg. (15:114-115)

The results of the first day's conflict were not conclusive, although the rebels succeeded in driving the First and Eleventh Corps from the field after a bitter fight. The Federals were able to rally and consolidate their bloodied forces south of Gettysburg, on a complex of hills and a ridgeline extremely suitable for defense. The northern portion of the Union line rested on Cemetery Hill, rising some 80 feet above the village, with the right flank anchored to the east on Culps Hill, about 90 feet higher in elevation. The center and left flank followed a low, gently sloping ridgeline known as Cemetery Ridge. Cemetery Ridge stretched southward about two miles with portions of it in marshy low ground, little higher than ground level. Two cone shaped hills rose up to the south of Cemetery Ridge, these were known
as Little and Big Round Top. (11: 94) General Meade was satisfied with the
ground and ordered the remainder of the Army of the Potomac to
concentrate there for subsequent battle. The Federals would fight a
defensive battle at Gettysburg, with Lee’s forces conducting a series attacks
from 1-3 July in order to rout the Northerners and destroy their supply
trains. If Lee could defeat the Army of the Potomac in a decisive battle on
northern soil, it was very likely that the North would recognize the South's
independence and sue for peace. On the other hand, Meade was more than
happy to allow the rebels to expend themselves in costly infantry assaults
across the open fields between his defenses, along the "fish hook", and the
Confederate positions located along Seminary Ridge, about a mile to the west,
and the village of Gettysburg to the north.

General Lee did not want to fight a general engagement when he first
arrived on the battlefield from Cashtown on July 1, but upon the arrival of
Ewell's Corps on the Union right, he decided to attack aggressively to defeat
the Federals before Meade could concentrate his entire army at Gettysburg.
The Confederates were unable to drive the fragments of the battered I and
XI Corps from their hastily prepared defenses on the top of Cemetery Hill.
As a result, Lee was obligated to devise a plan of attack for the following
day. Eager for the quick destruction of the Union defenses on Cemetery
Ridge, "Mars Robert's" concept of operation called for Longstreet's Corps to
attack the Union left flank, in echelon by brigade, from right to left. The
attacking Confederates would guide on the Emmitsburg Road and employ the
divisions of Hood, Mclaws, and Anderson (of A.P. Hill's Corps). By echeloning
his attack, Lee hoped that Meade would shift forces from the center of his
line, to bolster his left flank which would be struck first by Hood's Division.
As the attack progressed Lee's forces would meet lessening resistance as the Northerners shifted forces toward their left (4: 498-49) The Emmitsburg Road would take the attack into what Lee thought was the left flank of the Federals, astride Cemetery Ridge near the position of XI Corps. Ewell's Corps would conduct a supporting attack against the Union right flank at Culp's Hill. Such was the Confederate operations plan for July 2, 1863. (8:301)

The morning of July 2, found Sickles' III Corps arrayed from the left of Hancock's II Corps, along the southern portion of Cemetery Ridge to the low marshy ground near the base of Little Round Top. Until the remaining Corps of the Army of the Potomac arrived, Sickles would defend the left flank of the Union line.

A man with few inhibitions, Major General Daniel Sickles was a colorful commander with a combative nature. Despite his political background and lack of formal military education. Sickles was an aggressive officer, who held the view that an army was meant for fighting - not sitting. At Chancellorsville, Sickles appreciation of terrain, initiative and aggressive employment of the III Corps was a bright spot in an otherwise dismal operation for the Army of the Potomac. Sickles was a "Hooker man" and was likely dismayed with Meade's appointment as commander of the army, in that Meade had little regard for Sickles status as a "political general". (14: 346)

Sickles did not like the position assigned to him by General Meade. Situated on the southern portion of Cemetery Ridge, the assigned frontage was approximately 1,500 yards long. Although the size of his corps was
more than adequate to defend such a frontage, much of the line would be in
low marshes or in Weikert's Woods, which covered much of the ridge in the
III Corps sector. Sickles considered that there were few decent fields of fire
for his infantry and virtually none for his artillery. (13: 417) He also was
concerned for his left flank. Although Little Round Top offered good
observation and fields of fire to the west and north, the wooded slopes of Big
Round Top masked any observation and fire to the left flank and rear.
Sickles considered that the Round Tops could easily be bypassed by a
determined force bent on flanking the Union line. Immediately to his front,
the ground rose to an elevation about 20 feet higher than his portion of
Cemetery Ridge. The high ground ran along the Emmitsburg Road, through a
Peach Orchard, near the Wheatfield Road intersection and the Sherfy and
Wentz farms. This ground masked his position on Cemetery Ridge, and if
controlled by enemy artillery, would dominate his line. (8: 302)

Sickles visited Meade at 10:00 a.m. to voice concern for the security of
his left flank and to ask his commander to inspect the ground and allow him
to redeploy his troops on ground more favorable to the defense. General
Meade refused to visit Sickles' position and rebuked his III Corps
commander by saying,"O, generals are all apt to look for the attack to be
made where they are." He went on to explain where he wanted III Corps to
be posted, and granted that Sickles could post his corps as he saw fit as long
as it was: "within the limits of the general instructions I have given you; any
ground within those limits you choose to occupy, I leave to you." Meade
further stated that Buford's Cavalry would protect Sickles' left flank and that
he would allow his chief of artillery, General Henry Hunt to inspect the
ground. (11:93)
Hunt appreciated the military aspects of terrain offered by Sickles' proposed position centering on the Peach Orchard. The position offered excellent fields of fire to the front and left flanks for artillery. Additionally, the position along the Emmitsburg Road appeared a few feet higher than the rebel held Seminary Ridge, 800 yards to the west, and higher than the Cemetery Ridge, from the Copse of Trees to Little Round Top, 1,500 yards to the east. Hunt observed that although the Peach Orchard line would create an angled salient, which may be subject to fire from its front and flanks, union artillery and supporting infantry could shelter behind its crest to reduce the dire effects of enfilading fire. Hunt would not allow Sickles to occupy the new position on his authority, but offered to talk to Meade. He further suggested that Sickles conduct a reconnaissance of the front to better glean the enemy situation in his zone of action. (15: 231 & 8: 301-304)

Buford's cavalry support on Sickles' left was withdrawn about 10:30 a.m., on the orders of General Pleasanton with (the consent of Meade), and sent to Westminster to rest and refit. There was no replacement unit sent to cover the vulnerable left flank of the III Corps. (3: 351) At 12:00 p.m., Sickles ordered a group of Berdan's Sharpshooters and the 3d Maine Infantry to "feel the enemy's right". The group moved up the Millerstown Road from the Peach Orchard and was eventually driven back by overwhelming numbers. Although Sickles had discovered the right flank of A.P. Hill's Corps, he determined that the rebels would in fact try to turn his left. Sickles could not wait any longer for permission. He would act on his own initiative, and advance his corps en mass to the Emmitsburg Road. At
2:00 p.m., the 10,000 veterans of the III Corps marched out to their new positions along the Peach Orchard salient, as if on parade. (1: 27)

General Sickles would defend the salient with two divisions abreast. Major General David B. Birney's 1st Division would occupy the left portion of the line, which ran south east from the Peach Orchard, through the Stoney Hill and the Wheatfield, along Houck's Ridge, through the Devil's Den and Plum Run Valley, to the base of Big Round Top (1,700 yard frontage). Brigadier General Andrew Humphreys' 2d Division would occupy the right portion of the line running from the intersection of the Wheatfield and Emmitsburg roads, along the Emmitsburg Road ridge line, to a point to the right front of Caldwell's division, II Corps located on Cemetery Ridge (1,500 yard frontage). (11: 124-125) Sickles' Corps now occupied a frontage almost twice that of a normal corps frontage in the defense. Both his right and left flanks were in the air' and he left the southern flank of the remainder of the army on Cemetery Ridge uncovered. (see map 1)

General Meade's 3:00 p.m. council of war with his corps commanders was cut short by the sounds of booming artillery on his left flank. Although he had ignored his left wing all day, Meade immediately ordered General Sykes to throw in his V Corps to hold the left flank of the Union line, and rode off to check on the III Corps. (15:592) Meade was horrified upon observing the advanced position of Sickles' Corps. When confronted by his commander, Sickles offered to return to Cemetery Ridge, but was told that it was too late. As the Confederate artillery preparation continued Meade quickly went off to bring up reinforcements from the II and V Corps.
Although Lee had issued his attack order to Longstreet at 10:00 A.M., the Confederate corps commander experienced numerous delays and difficulties in moving his forces into their attack positions on the southern portion of Seminary Ridge. At 3:00 P.M. the rebel artillery of 46 guns commenced a vicious duel with Sickles' 22 guns arrayed near the Peach Orchard and Houck's Ridge. The artillery duel was fought at ranges between 500-800 yards and lasted until Hood's division launched its assault at 4:00 P.M. (9: 376) The unexpected appearance of a full Union Corps astride Lee's planned avenue of approach greatly upset the Confederate brigade and division commanders tasked with the operation. General Kershaw observed: "I found him to be in a superior force in the orchard, ... afar beyond the point at which his flank was suppose to be". (13: 367) General Hood thought that the attack, as originally ordered, was suicidal and mentioned: "It seemed to me that the enemy occupied a position so strong; I may say impregnable". (15: 358) Hood as well as McLaws complained bitterly to Longstreet, requesting that the axis of advance be modified to allow them to flank the Union line from behind the Round Tops. Longstreet would not discuss the matter with Lee and ordered his division commanders to execute the original plan. Although affirming that they would, they in fact, did not. Longstreet's division commanders would attack east in an attempt to flank the Peach Orchard salient, instead of up the Emmitsburg Road as ordered.

At 4:00 p.m., Longstreet's Corps commenced their assault, en echelon from right to left, with a delay of about 30-45 minutes allowed between brigade attacks. The series of trip-hammer blows would strike first in Birney's area, developing the battle from the Devil's Den, to Little Round Top, to the Wheatfield, to the Stony Hill, and to the Peach Orchard. (15: 482)
General Anderson's division, of A.P. Hill's corps, continued the attack en echelon, in his turn, at 7:15 p.m. to strike Humphreys' division along the Emmitsburg Road. Simultaneously with the Confederate attacks, federal divisions were thrown into fight to plug gaps and relieve battered III Corps troops. Henry Hunt provided an additional 16 batteries from the artillery reserve to support Sickles' position. (9: 376) Federal artillery firing from the Peach Orchard and Houck's Ridge did tremendous execution on the flanks of the rebel infantry as they crossed the open fields toward the Union positions. Despite heavy loses, the rebels closed savagely as the entire line became engaged at close quarters. The V Corps provided brigades to support Birney's forces in the Slaughter Pen, of Plum Run valley, and the Stony Hill. In addition Sykes' men would save the day by driving Hood's forces from the Round Tops after fierce combat over the rocky face of Little Round Top. Hancock's II Corps would conduct a division counterattack into the Wheatfield, and would cover the withdrawal of Humphrey's division, from their exposed position, after the collapse of the Peach Orchard salient. (15: 367-377)

The fighting raged between the ridges for over four hours as both sides piecemealed forces into the fray. Much of the battlefield changed hands many times as numerous assaults were met with hard hitting counter attacks. The turning point of the battle occurred with the breaking of the Union position at the Peach Orchard by Barksdale's Mississippi brigade after 6:30 p.m. With Birney's division giving way on his left, Humphreys' division was obliged to withdraw to the II Corps positions on Cemetery Ridge. As the Peach Orchard was falling, General Sickles was severely wounded when his leg was shattered by a cannon ball. Sickles turned his command over to David Birney and was then carried to the rear, while calmly puffing away on
a cigar. Anderson's division continued to press Humphreys' retreating forces. As evening approached, the Confederate brigade of Ambrose R. Wright breached Hancock's line on Cemetery Ridge, but was forced to retire due to lack of support. (15:623-624) (see map 2)

Darkness brought an end to the bitter fighting leaving the Confederates in control of the Devil's Den, Wheatfield, and the Peach Orchard. The threat to the Union left flank was blunted, leaving the Army of the Potomac in control of Cemetery Ridge and the Round Tops. Lee was stopped, but not without tremendous cost to both sides. The three Confederate divisions lost over 6,000 officers and men, while the union forces suffered over 9,000 casualties. These figures represents about 30-40 percent of both forces engaged. (15:118) Sickles' battered III Corps would effectively cease to exist after Gettysburg. The battle of Gettysburg would end after Pickett's combat the following day.

The controversy surrounding the audacious movement of the III Corps into the Peach Orchard salient has been a long standing source of debate among historians and military annalists. Much had been made of it in the published accounts of the battle in both the press and books of the period. Most historians and many high ranking officer's of the period are of the opinion that the occupation of the salient was folly and may have jeopardized the security of the Army of the Potomac at a most critical time. On the other hand, there have been a few individuals of the opinion that Sickles' move was foresight and provided the needed depth to blunt the Confederate blow. It seems clear that General Daniel Sickles willfully disobeyed general Meade by his occupation of the Peach Orchard salient.
However, both General Halleck and Meade claim that Sickles had merely misinterpreted his orders. Unfortunately Sickles would not let a sleeping dog lie. Writing under an assumed name of "Historicus", Sickles slandered Meade in a clumsy attempt to defend his actions at Gettysburg. In an article published by the New York Herald, March 12, 1864, Sickles attempted to portray Meade as a commander unwilling to fight at Gettysburg, and that the III Corps action gave him no other choice but to fight and hence saved the day for the Union. (15:129-135) Additionally, Sickles political ambitions would cause additional controversy when he became involved with radical republicans and the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War. (13: 414) He would remain active in the defense of his Gettysburg actions until his death in 1914.

In order to gain a measured insight into the action, it is prudent to evaluate the battle in light of current doctrine regarding the Fundamentals of Defense provided in OH 6-1. Ground Combat Operations. The Fundamentals of Defense are general rules evolved from the logical and time proven application of the Principles of War to defensive action (10: 8-2)

PREPARATION: Sickles' Corps failed to adequately apply the fundamental of preparation. Although troops were posted well in the salient, virtually no effort was made by the waiting troops to entrench, erect breastworks, or prepare abatis where possible (in the Rose Woods or Stony Hill). Although Graham's brigade of Pennsylvanians in the Peach Orchard came under artillery fire almost as soon as they occupied their position, many brigades had between two and three hours of relative peace in which to make preparation. Many units, chose to boil coffee, eat, rest or fill
canteens at Plum Run prior to the attack. Once in action, many attempted to build breastworks under fire, but it was too late then. (6: 50)

CONCENTRATION. Sickles' position did adhere to the defensive fundamental of concentration. Although the III Corps occupied a frontage of 3,200 yards, nearly twice the frontage that should normally be defended by a corps of only two divisions, Birney and Humphreys concentrated their brigades on key terrain. Sickles then utilized his artillery to cover gaps in the line, and to support exposed flanks of infantry. The Batteries covering the gap between Graham's brigade in the Peach Orchard and De Trobriand's brigade on Stony Hill, as well as Smith's battery supporting the left flank of Ward's brigade on Houck's Ridge, did tremendous execution of Longstreet's assault and actively participated in the counter battery efforts of the III Corps. Berdan's sharpshooters and infantry skirmishers were employed as an economy of force effort, to cover Big Round Top and the Gap between the III Corps and Hancock's position on Cemetery Ridge (12: 56) De Trobriand and Brewster's brigades of Birney's and Humphreys' divisions were the respective division reserves and were well posted. (15: 519) There was no corps reserve. General Humphrey's commented that had all the II and V Corps support been in position from the start, or decisively committed at one time, the out come would have been much different. As it was, Meade had to expend more troops in piecemeal reinforcement, than would have been necessary had he had the time to coordinate the support effort prior to the assault.

FLEXIBILITY. The fundamental of flexibility was not readily apparent along the salient, when considering the III Corps position in isolation of the
supporting divisions that were subsequently provided by the II and V Corps. Although the initial positions were well suited to counter the Confederate attack, Sickles' lack of an organic, corps reserve hampered his ability to focus on trouble spots in his zone. When Law's Alabama troops swept past Ward's brigade and on to the Round Tops, Sickle had no flexibility to respond, in that he was overly committed across his front. Although, one may argue that the Round Tops were the responsibility of V Corps, since Meade had tasked Sykes with its defense at 3:00 p.m.

OFFENSIVE ACTION. General Sickles was only partially successful in the application of the principle of offensive action, in his defense of the salient. There were numerous counterattacks organized and conducted in company, regiment, brigade, and division strength and although they succeeded in eventually stopping the Confederate drive well short of its objective, they were piecemeal efforts at best. However, the counter attack made by Humphrey's battered division, supported by elements II Corps, was successful in driving back Anderson's division in the evening of July 2. (15:529 537)

MANEUVER. Sickle's movement out to the Peach Orchard was an effective application of the fundamental of maneuver, in that it was conducted to bring more effective fires to bear on the enemy than he could from his original position on Cemetery Ridge. As the battle progressed, the maneuver of III Corps artillery and of batteries of the artillery reserve was skillfully accomplished in order to block enemy penetrations, cover holes in the line, provide support to the infantry, and engage advancing columns of infantry to maximum effect. (9: 363-408)
USE OF TERRAIN. The evaluation of General Sickles' use of terrain is one of the most interesting aspects of the Peach Orchard controversy. Most historians hold that the occupation of Sickles' position, isolated the III Corps far in advance of the Union line, uncovered the left flank of the army, and left the Round Tops unprotected. The alternative was to occupy the wooded, low lying portion of Cemetery Ridge and the Round Tops. Sickles' experience, at Chancellorsville had made a profound impact that undoubtedly influenced his decision to establish his Peach Orchard defense. On his own initiative, Sickles' had moved elements of his corps out from the Union line to occupy the high ground of Hazel Grove, from which his artillery was instrumental in halting Jackson's flanking attack as it threaten to overrun the Union center. When Hooker later ordered him to abandon the position, Confederate artillery occupied the ground and bombarded the Union line with good effect. Sickles' had learned a lesson about fighting in low woods, below "good ground". Cemetery Ridge, like his wooded position at Chancellorsville, would not allow the employment of artillery to good effect. (3: 354) Although Little Round Top offered good fields of fire to the front and right, it had no value for the protection of the left flank, other than to deny it to the enemy. The Peach Orchard, Wheatfield Road, and Smith's battery position on Houck's Ridge offered mutually supporting and interlocking fields of fire for Sickles' artillery. Sickles artillery was able to enfilade the attacking infantry with great effect. (9: 367-398) Many of the Confederate commanders who were killed or wounded (including Hood) were as a result of this artillery fire. The Cemetery Ridge position would have offered wooded terrain for the concealed approach of the attacking rebels, vice the open killing fields offered by Sickles' ground. General Henry Hunt observed:
The salient proposed by General Sickles', although much longer, afforded excellent positions for our artillery; its occupation would cramp the movements of the enemy, bring us nearer to his lines, and afford us facilities for taking the offense. It was in my judgement tactically the the better of the two. (8: 302)

Sickles' only folly in pursuing the defense of his salient, was that he did so without Meade's knowledge. Given proper notice and concurrence, Meade could have adequately integrated the position into the Union line.

MUTUAL SUPPORT. The position of the III Corps offered good mutual support within its zone of action. The Peach Orchard and Wheatfield Road battery positions could support the front of Birney's line, past the Rose farm. The Stony Hill could support both the Wheatfield Road as well as the Wheatfield. Smith's battery posted on Houck's Ridge, above Devil's Den could fire in support of the Peach Orchard. Humphreys' positions along the Emmitsburg Road could mutually support the Peach Orchard as well as the front of Caldwell's division located to the north along Cemetery Ridge. The lack of mutual support between the III Corps position and the rest of the Army of the Potomac was a tremendous oversight on the part of Daniel Sickles. Sickle's troops were in fact closer to the Confederate lines than he was to his own. This would have a profound effect on the timely employment of reinforcements, in support of a hard pressed III Corps, later in the day. Had Meade the time to properly tie in his forces in support of Sickles, then the salient could have been held with less cost to Union arms. Sykes possession of the Round Tops and the Slaughter Pen, as well as the posting of artillery in the gap between the II and III Corps, would have satisfied the fundamental of mutual support.
DEFENSE IN DEPTH. The fundamental of defense in depth can be evaluated at two levels. At the army level, the addition of the forward position increased the main battle area by almost 1,900 yards. This added significant depth to the overall defense of the Union left, in that the Rebels had to fight savagely for well over a mile to get to the positions on Cemetery Ridge which were the focus of their attack. Had Longstreet's corps conducted their assault as originally planned, up the Emmitsburg Road (with III Corps in its original position), Weikert's Woods would have covered their assault to the Cemetery Ridge. Despite the possibility of enfilading the rebel columns as they obliqued toward Cemetery Hill, they would not have suffered much attrition in route. Thus, Longstreet might have struck the ridge with overwhelming combat power. At the corps level, Sickles had no depth to speak of. Without his third division to cover the withdrawal of Birney and Humphreys' divisions, or to support them in their defense, Sickles' lacked the depth he needed to trade time for space. As a consequence, most of the III Corps casualties were sustained as Birney and Humphreys attempted to withdraw to alternate positions near the base of Cemetery Ridge. (15:533 - 534)

SURPRISE. The unexpected movement of the Union III Corps to its forward position did indeed surprise the Confederate forces. Confederate scouts had initially reported that the Union left was wide open. The fact that an entire Union Corps was occupying their planned attack position shocked them greatly. General McLaws observed: The view presented astonished me. as the enemy was massed in my front, and extended to my right and left as far as I could see." (4: 498) The surprise achieved by Sickles was fleeting, as
the rebels quickly recovered and adjusted their attack to meet the new threat.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE ENEMY. Knowledge of the enemy is a fundamental that was lacking overall for the Army of the Potomac on July 2. Sickles suspected that the Army of Northern Virginia would strike in his sector. The reconnaissance in force conducted by Berdan confirmed the presence of Rebels in force to Sickles' front. However, had Sickles realized that he would be facing both Longstreet's and A.P. hill's Corps, he may have thought twice before venturing out unsupported. Along the same thought, had Meade a better picture of the enemy's intention that day, he may have listen to his concerned III Corps commander and inspected the ground prior to the action on 2 July.

In conclusion, it is apparent that Meade's subsequent reputation as a quiet hero, compared to Sickles reputation as a drunken, womanizing, politician, has influenced the way in which people view Sickles' battlefield leadership and the action at the Peach Orchard. In retrospect, many of the Fundamentals of the Defense do favor the Peach Orchard salient as "foresight" on Sickles' behalf. His eye for "good ground" can be appreciated by anyone who has seen the fields of fire that the salient provided, and understood the ranges and weapons effects of the armies of 1863. "Sickles' folly" was his failure to coordinate the support of his over extended corps with Meade prior to the commencement of the attack.

It is doubtful that the "Sickles Controversy" would have grown to overshadow the valor and sacrifice of the men who fought on that hot July
day, had Sickles stood by his early admission on the matter: "It was not through any misinterpretations. It was either a good line or a bad one, and, which ever it was, I took it on my own responsibility....I took that line because it enabled me to hold good ground." (11:103) Daniel Sickles perceived a threat made a decision and boldly acted without authority. Was it folly or or should Sickles' critics be grateful that he was a man of action, and not the kind to require strict orders to march to the sound of the guns?


6. Harrison, Kathleen R. "Our Principal Loss was in this Place". Gettysburg July 89: 45-69.


