

CW3.4.7 – Civil War Battle Stations

Antietam (September, 1862)



Gathered together for burial after the Battle of Antietam. C. 1862. Photographer: Alexander Gardner. Source: Library of Congress: <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2011648595/>

Following another loss at Bull Run in August of 1862, Union forces were on the run, not far from the capital of Washington, DC. The Confederate President Jefferson Davis, and Military General, Robert E. Lee, saw an opportunity to continue their victories by marching to Maryland. Lee crossed the Potomac River with 55,000 men and hoped that the people of Maryland would rise up in support of the Confederate cause. Unfortunately for Lee, there was no popular uprising (revolt.) He next divided up his troops in order to capture a Union military post.

On September 13 in a field near Frederick, Maryland, two Union troops found a copy of Lee's orders to divide his troops into four parts wrapped around three cigars. Union General McClellan did not move quickly to act upon this advantage, however. He waited almost eighteen hours to begin to move his troops to attack Lee. Lee used this time to reorganize, having learned from a Maryland citizen about the Union's discovery of his orders.

On September 17, the two forces finally met at Antietam Creek, near Sharpsburg. By the time they fought, the armies were relatively well-matched. The southerners were on the defense and the Union attacked. The fighting was horrible; by the end of the day, 6,000 troops had died, and 17,000 more were wounded. Lee fled with only 30,000 troops, and the Union army did not go after him, probably because of the devastation [destruction] they had seen the day before. Union General McClellan had won a strategic victory at Antietam, but had yet again wasted an opportunity to destroy the Confederate forces once and for all.