

Union Leaders' Communications Following the Battle of Gettysburg

Abstract: The battle of Gettysburg was the largest battle ever fought on this continent, involving over 150,000 troops and resulting in more than 50,000 casualties. Even though the war would last almost another 2 years, Lee would never again have the strength to take his army into a northern state after the battle of Gettysburg. After the battle, Meade sent a dispatch to Halleck asking to be relieved of command. This was Lincoln's response to that dispatch, although it was never signed or sent.

Letter from Abraham Lincoln to George Gordon Meade, July 14, 1863:

I have just seen your dispatch to General Halleck, asking to be relieved of your command because of a supposed censure of mine. I am very, very grateful to you for the magnificent success you gave the cause of the country at Gettysburg; and I am sorry now to be the author of the slightest pain to you. But I was in such deep distress myself that I could not restrain some expression of it. I have been oppressed nearly ever since the battle of Gettysburg by what appeared to be evidences that yourself and General Couch and General Smith were not seeking a collision with the enemy, but were trying to get him across the river without another battle. What these evidences were, if you please, I hope to tell you at some time when we shall both feel better. The case, summarily stated, is this: You fought and beat the enemy at Gettysburg, and, of course, to say the least, his loss was as great as yours. He retreated, and you did not, as it seemed to me, pressing him to pursue him; but a flood in the river detained him till, by slow degrees, you were again upon him. You had at least twenty thousand veteran troops directly with you, and as many more raw ones within supporting distance, all in addition to those who fought with you at Gettysburg, while it was not possible that he had received a single recruit, and yet you stood and let the flood run down, bridges be built, and the enemy move away at his leisure without attacking him. And Couch and Smith! The latter left Carlisle in time, upon all ordinary calculation, to have aided you in the last battle at Gettysburg, but he did not arrive. At the end of more than ten days, I believe twelve, under constant urging, he reached Hagerstown from Carlisle, which is not an inch over fifty-five miles, if so much, and Couch's movement was very little different.

Again, my dear general, I do not believe you appreciate the magnitude of the misfortune involved in Lee's escape. He was within your easy grasp, and to have closed upon him would, in connection with our other late successes, have ended the war. As it is, the war will be prolonged indefinitely. If you could not safely attack Lee last Monday, how can you possibly do so south of the river, when you can take with you very few more than two thirds of the force you then had in hand? It would be unreasonable to expect, and I do not expect [that], you can now affect much.

Your golden opportunity is gone, and I am distressed immeasurably because of it.

I beg you will not consider this a prosecution or persecution of yourself. As you had learned that I was dissatisfied, I have thought it best to kindly tell you why.

Questions for discussion:

- 1) What do you think were Lincoln's objectives in writing this letter?
- 2) Why do you think he decided to not send it?
- 3) How do you think Lincoln's experience with previous generals influenced his writing of the letter?
- 4) Do you think Meade should have pursued Lee more aggressively after the battle of Gettysburg? Why or Why not?

Abstract: The 24th Michigan, known as the Wayne County regiment, fought with the Iron Brigade and the First Corp. Many of the men from Company D were from Romulus, the school district within which I teach. On the first day at the Battle of Gettysburg, they suffered roughly 80% casualties. Depending on who you talk to, this may have been the highest casualty rate of any regiment on either side of the war. At the end of the war, they served as an honor guard for Lincoln's body as it was moved back to Springfield, Illinois. The report that follows is an excerpt of the official report written by Colonel Morrow after the Battle of Gettysburg.

**Colonel Morrow's Action Report
of the 24th Michigan at the
Battle of Gettysburg**

From the Official Records

...At an early hour on the first day of July we marched in the direction of Gettysburg, distant six or seven miles. The report of artillery was soon heard in the direction of this place, which indicated that our cavalry had already engaged the enemy. Our pace was considerably quickened, and about 9 A.M. we came near the town of Gettysburg, and filed off to the left, leaving it on our right, we crossed an insignificant branch, and was moved forward into line of battle on the double quick. The cavalry immediately in our front was hotly engaged with the enemy, and the brigade was ordered to advance at once, no order being given or time allowed for loading our guns. I halted my regiment for this purpose, but was directed by a staff officer of General Wadsworth to move forward immediately without loading, which I did.

The order to charge was now given, and the brigade dashed up and over the hill, and down into the ravine through which flows Willoughby's Run, where we captured a large number of prisoners, being part of General Archer's brigade.

The cavalry, in the meantime, had taken position on our left flank. In this affair the Twenty-Fourth Michigan occupied the extreme left of the brigade, the 19th Indiana being on our right. I had lost my color-bearer, Abel G. Peck, a brave and faithful soldier, several of my color guard, and many men.

After advancing to the crest of the hill beyond the run, we were halted, and threw out skirmishers to the front, and also to the left near a brick house. We now received orders to withdraw to the east bank of the stream. The brigade changed front forward on the first

battalion and marched into the woods known as McPherson's woods, and formed in line of battle, the 19th Indiana being on the left of the 24th Michigan, and the 7th Wisconsin on its right.

In executing this movement my Lieut. Colonel and Adjutant were severely wounded and did not afterward join the regiment, the former having lost a leg and the latter being severely wounded in the groin. The line of the Twenty-Fourth Michigan curved a little backwards on the right, that wing being thrown a little back so as to connect with the 7th Wisconsin skirmishers who were immediately deployed in front and became at once engaged with the enemy. The woods were shelled, but I have no casualties to report as occurring at this time. I several times sent officers to the General commanding to report the condition of the line, and suggesting a change of position, as it was, to my judgment, untenable.

To these reports of the condition of the line I received answer that the position was ordered to be held at all hazards. The enemy advanced in two lines of battle, their right extending beyond and overlapping our left. I gave directions to the men to withhold their fire until the enemy should come within easy range of our guns; this was done, but the nature of the ground was such that I am inclined to think we inflicted but little injury on the enemy at this time. Their advance was not checked and they came on with rapid strides, yelling like demons. The 19th Indiana, on our left, fought most gallantly, but was overpowered by superior numbers, the enemy having also the advantage of position, and after a severe loss was forced back.

The left of my regiment was now exposed to an enfilading and crossfire, and orders were given for this portion of the line to swing back so as to face the enemy now on the flank. Pending the execution of this movement the enemy advanced in such force as to compel me to fall back and take a new position a short distance in the rear.

In the meantime I had lost in killed and wounded, several of my best officers and many of my men. Among the former were Captain William J. Speed, acting Major, Lieut. Dickey, a young officer of great promise, and Charles Ballou, my second color bearer.

The second line was promptly formed, and we made a desperate resistance; but the enemy accumulating in our front and our losses being very great we were forced to fall back and take a third position beyond a slight ravine. My third color bearer, Augustus Ernst, of Company 'K', was killed on this line; Major E. B. Wight, acting Lieutenant Colonel, was wounded at this time and compelled to leave the field.

By this time the ranks were so decimated that scarcely a fourth of the force taken into action could be rallied. Corporal Andrew Wagner, of Company 'F', one of the color guard, took the colors and was ordered by me to plant them in a position to which I designed to rally the men; he was wounded in the breast and was left on the field. I now took the flag from the ground where it had fallen and was rallying the remnant of my regiment when Private William Kelly, of Company 'E', came up and took the colors from my hand,

remarking as he did so, 'The Colonel of the Twenty-Fourth shall never carry the flag while I am alive', he was killed instantly.

Private Lilburn Spaulding, of Company 'K', seized the colors and bore them for a time; subsequently I took them to rally the men and kept them until I was wounded near the barricade west of the Seminary Buildings, and left the field.

We had inflicted severe loss on the enemy, but their numbers were so overpowering and our losses had been so great that we were unable to maintain our position, and were forced back, step by step, contesting every foot of ground to the barricade referred to.

Previous to our abandoning our last position orders were received to fall back, given, I believe, by Major General Doubleday. The command of the regiment now devolved upon Captain Albert M. Edwards, who collected the remnant of it and fell back with the brigade to Culp's Hill, which it held for the two succeeding days. Shortly after I was wounded Captain Edwards found the colors in the hands of a wounded soldier, who had fallen on the east side of the barricade. He was reclining on his right side, and was holding the colors in his left hand. I have not been able to ascertain the name of this brave soldier in whose paralyzed hands Captain Edwards found the flag, and who describes the soldier as having been severely wounded, and is therefore probably among the dead. His name may forever be unknown, but his bravery will never die.

Captain Edwards behaved very gallantly at this time in rallying the men under a murderous fire. The field over which we fought from our first line of battle in McPherson's woods, to the barricade near the seminary, was strewn with the killed and wounded. Our losses were very large, exceeding perhaps the losses sustained by any one of equal size in a single engagement, of this or any other war.

When the enemy evacuated the place on the night of the third instant most of the wounded were left behind. The regiment occupied Culp's Hill during the battles of the second and third of July, but sustained little or no loss.

During the battle of the first instant the regiment lost in killed four color-bearers, Abel G. Peck, Charles Ballou, August Ernest, and William Kelly. During the engagement of the first the flag was carried by no less than nine persons, four of the number having been killed and five wounded....

Questions for discussion

- 1) Why do you think the flag or color bearer played an important strategic role in a battle?
- 2) Why do you think so many of the 24th Michigan flag or color bearers were killed and wounded?
- 3) What kind of personal characteristics did one have to have to be the flag or color bearer?
- 4) Why did the pull back of the 19th Indiana play such a significant role for the 24th Michigan?