

## History 211 US Military History Discussion Transcript for March 4, 2021

### **Main Reading: Video tour of Gettysburg and Forte map**

*This week was supposed to be our field trip to Gettysburg. We couldn't go together in person, but students watched a video tour of the battlefield led by Prof. Pinsker and reviewed a map of the battle created by Tom Forte (Class of 2020). The following selections come from student comments:*

#### **OVERVIEW**

STUDENT COMMENT: The battle of Gettysburg and the subsequent Union victory was a major turning point in the American Civil War. The battle of Gettysburg lasted only 3 days, but was “the 4<sup>th</sup> deadliest engagement in American military history.” (Forte) During the first stages of the battle the assaulting Confederate forces were largely successful and pushed the Union forces back to a position on Cemetery Ridge. General Lee and the Confederate forces pushed into Pennsylvania in hopes of achieving a victory on Northern soil that would demoralize the North and strengthen their position in potential peace negotiations. General Lee and the Confederate forces went on the offensive, he believed the Union forces and the fragile northern political alliances could be shattered if the Confederates could defeat the Union forces and push them back from the field of battle. General Lee had a similar outlook at the battle of Gettysburg as Lincoln had on the Civil War, he wished to meet the Union forces and defeat them rather than pull back and hold strategic position. On the final day of the battle of Gettysburg General Lee ordered Confederate forces to embark on a full frontal assault on fortified Union positions. During Pickett's Charge the Confederate frontal assault led by General Longstreet, Confederate casualties exceeded 50%. (Forte) Pickett's charge was an astounding failure and the Confederate forces retreated from Gettysburg shortly after.

STUDENT COMMENT: I think I am starting to understand what you mean when you advise us to look at things from 10,000 feet, but then zoom in on important details. The stories of the individuals bring the battle to life, and helped me more fully understand the major movements which took place and their impact on the soldiers. I was particularly moved by the stories of Bayard Wilkeson and Amos Humiston. Hearing about a number of casualties in a battle does not evoke the same response or understanding as a well told narrative of the death of an individual soldier, and perhaps this is something I should consider in my own writing.

STUDENT COMMENT: I think watching the video tour of Gettysburg and reading the Forte map webpage provide two different views of the Battle of Gettysburg but provide a helpful and realistic description of the Battle of Gettysburg. The Forte map webpage did a really good job in discussing the logistics and statistics of the Battle of Gettysburg, but the video tour did a really good job of humanizing the video. The Forte map webpage really highlights the devastation both armies experienced, especially in terms of casualties. However, while the actual numbers themselves are not as staggering as some other battles in other wars, the percentages of the casualties from the Battle of Gettysburg, especially considering the battle was only 3 days, is

what is so striking to examine. When comparing the numbers/percentages to current day, or even to the time of other deadly and bloody battles, those numbers are extremely high and costly. It is hard to imagine how in one attack alone, Robert E. Lee and the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia experienced greater than 50% casualties, and how by the end of the 3 days of fighting, all Lee had left of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia was 62% (Forte). It is amazing to think about how even with those numbers, Lee somehow found a way to continue on and fight for another 2 years, and even still came close to winning the war after the Battle of Gettysburg.

## **TOPOGRAPHY**

STUDENT COMMENT: The importance placed on topography at the Battle of Gettysburg was the point of note that stuck out most to me from watching the Teachers Tour Video. The video immediately reminded me of ROTC and the lab I completed on key terrain features. Those five major terrain features being: Hill, Ridge, Valley, Saddle, and Depression. In addition to this I noticed that the Gettysburg Battlefield had the distinction of not only having every major terrain feature but also every minor one as well. Those 3 minor features being a draw, a cliff, and a spur. Noticeably I thought of the ridge terrain feature first when thinking of the Battle of Gettysburg and the important role this played. For instance, how Union General Buford laid out his defenses on ridges west of the town of Gettysburg specifically at Seminary Ridge. His use of maximizing the local terrain to buy his small cavalry forces more time against superior Confederate infantry forces, until Union infantrymen arrive to reinforce him was a genius play by General Buford. Buford understood that if the Confederates could gain control of these heights, which he used to his advantage. I wonder if a Union Infantry force made contact with the Confederate infantry force how, circumstances may have differed. Perhaps Less emphasis would have been placed on the terrain and more of an immediate skirmish would have ensued. However, one thing is certain that the topography and elevation played a major role in the actions of those at the Battle of Gettysburg.

## **AMOS HUMISTON**

STUDENT COMMENT: After watching the video tour from the grounds of Gettysburg, it made me realize the immense sacrifice and personal struggles that occurred during the battle. The video tour pointed to specific examples of individuals that were faced with certain death and had to make extreme situational decisions which had lasting effects on their regiments and families. For example, the video tour tells the story of Amos Humiston who in the dying final seconds of his life, was clutching a photo of his kids he received a month earlier from his wife. Amos didn't have any identification on him at the time of his death, so it took a plethora of people and resources to figure out who he was since his story was so inspiring and hit close to home for many families that had made a sacrifice for the war. Lastly, these stories tell a different type of battle from the video tour that highlight some of the negative aspects of the battle that aren't told in popular culture. By referencing these stories, it shows the audience the importance of struggle and death as part of the war and how it is an inescapable outcome of the war.

### **LEE AND LONGSTREET**

STUDENT COMMENT: This video focuses a good bit on the clashing of leadership within each force. The decisions made between Lee and Longstreet after the loss of Stonewall are targeted as where the tactical mishaps occurred. The adjustment with the new leadership is targeted as the cause for delay and the unnecessary frontal attacks. It brings forth the question whether the battle could have ended differently if Stonewall had been there. To that point as well it raises the question as to whether a defeat on the Union's side would have truly been a crushing defeat. There is an argument to be made that the morale within northern cities could have shifted to one of anger and resistance to confederate forces. But it was regarded as a defeat for the confederate forces, and as they retreated the connection between Lincoln and Meade was another challenge of new leadership. The difference in strategy over how to proceed with the battle, and the idea of waging war on the south or the army came into play. Lincoln wanted Meade to chase and crush the confederate army as he retreated but Meade will have no such action. The importance of having good connections and like-minded people within the upper leadership whether civilian or military was highlighted by this video.

### **LITTLE ROUNDTOP**

STUDENT COMMENT: I enjoyed the videos because they really took me through every small fight inside of the three-day battle. From the way that Professor Pinsky described those fights it seemed that every one of them was of equal importance to the battle. My personal favorite was the fight in the forest between the 20th Maine and the confederate Alabamians. Chamberlain had his men in a V shape formation while confederate soldiers were charging at them. When they started to run out of ammo Chamberlain made a bold decision to strap their bayonets and charge. They defeated the confederates in this fight and were able to hold a very important position at Little Roundtop. This is my favorite because the video was able to give me such a visual image of how this fight happened and I picture it as a very uplifting victory.