

**DID GENERAL MEADE
DESIRE TO RETREAT AT THE
BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG?**

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AT THE BATTLE OF GETTYSBURG?

BY

GEORGE MEADE,

FORMERLY CAPTAIN AND AIDE-DE-CAMP AND BREVET LIEUT.-COL. U. S. ARMY.

PHILADELPHIA:
PORTER & COATES.
1883.

and the troops of the enemy, and with the intention of ordering an attack from there if the enemy did not themselves attack."

We have now, be it observed, reached four o'clock in the afternoon—that is, within one hour of the time when, as General Doubleday would have it, General Meade indicated the intention of retreating. There is nothing as yet, it must be admitted, that seems to indicate an intention or even desire to retreat, or even to withdraw from the position at Gettysburg. On the contrary, we have not only seen that the army was pushed forward as rapidly as possible to Gettysburg, with the expressed intention of fighting there, and that one attack had been ordered, and only countermanded upon the report of the two officers who had examined the field in their front, but, in addition, that General Meade had despatched to General Halleck that he would take the offensive if the enemy delayed doing so; and we find him an hour afterward proceeding to the left of the line with that object in view.

Incredible as it may appear, it is during the time between 9.30 A. M. and 4 P. M., which General Butterfield, in his testimony before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, specifies as the interval within which General Meade gave him instructions to make out an order to withdraw the army. Why General Meade should at that time have wished to retire, or having wished to retire, did not, has never been explained. It is not necessary to the present issue to discuss this statement, but merely to say that General Meade, when before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, denied emphatically ever having given General Butterfield any such instructions, and showed so conclusively that such could not have been his intention, that this assertion is too much for even General Doubleday to adopt, who does not hesitate to accept General Butterfield's statement on almost every other point, and who usually does not scruple to retail, if it will reflect upon General Meade, any scrap of idle gossip as matter of veracious history.

General Meade had hardly arrived on the part of the field to the left, just in rear of the advanced position assumed by General Sickles with the Third Corps, and engaged in conference with that officer, when the enemy opened his batteries on the Corps, and made a most vigorous and determined attack on that part of the line, and the battle soon became general along the whole line.

This is not the place to enter into details regarding the terrible struggle which ensued, and which lasted until long after dark. We are concerned only with the action of General Meade on that memor-

able day, and with that action only so far as it is impugned by General Doubleday. The general history of that day's fight is well known. To the valor and admirable fighting of our troops, to the gallantry and hearty coöperation of the superior officers, and to the skilful handling of the army are owing that this determined attack of the enemy was repulsed, our lines maintained, and he driven from the field. General Meade, in constant communication with all the prominent officers who were engaged there, remained throughout the whole of the engagement on and about that part of the field where the enemy's attack was made. That he was fully alive to the emergency is evidenced by the promptness with which he brought forward reinforcements, some of which he led personally to the line of battle, and by his strenuous exertions in reforming his line and maintaining his position.

Yet General Doubleday, continuing to criticize Mr. Swinton's statements, makes the assertion that, during all this time General Meade was desirous of retreating, and he emphasizes it by italics. "This desire to retreat was supplemented," he says, "by *acts which form part of the history of the battle.*" The only way in which this statement is reconcilable with fact is, that General Doubleday refers to his own history of the battle. As the only evidence, however, of his statement, he produces a letter of February 8, 1883, from General Alfred Pleasonton, in which he says, that—

"General Meade, on the 2d of July, 1863, at Gettysburg, about five o'clock in the afternoon, gave me the order to get what cavalry and artillery I could, as soon as possible, and take up a position in rear to cover the retreat of the army from Gettysburg. I was thus occupied until ten o'clock at night, when I was recalled by an order from General Meade."

Now, there is nothing on record that warrants either this assertion of General Doubleday's, or the statement embodied in General Pleasonton's letter quoted by him. There are no orders on file that even indicate such a design. There is no mention of or allusion to it in any way in the official report of General Meade, or of any other general officer, including that of General Pleasonton himself. There is no mention of or allusion to it in the testimony of any of the officers who appeared, in the spring of 1864, before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, including that of General Pleasonton himself; and certainly it was made amply apparent that that Committee sought for anything that might even by implication cast discredit upon the commander of the Army of the Potomac; and, judging from their tes-

timony, Generals Doubleday and Pleasonton were in full sympathy with the Committee. There is no officer, besides General Pleasonton, who received at that time, as he alleges he did, an intimation from General Meade that he desired or intended to retreat. Strange that, of all the officers in high command in the Army of the Potomac, General Pleasonton should have been the only one to whom General Meade communicated his design!

Let us now see what reliance is to be placed on the statement of this witness of General Doubleday's. General Pleasonton, in answer to the question conveyed to him in the note from General Doubleday, answers, as we have seen, that about five o'clock in the afternoon of July 2d, he was ordered to take up a position in the rear, to cover the retreat of the army from Gettysburg, and that he was engaged in this duty until ten o'clock that night. Now this in sum involves the astounding conclusion that only one hour after the attack began, and long before the Third Corps had been forced back, General Meade desired to retreat, and gave General Pleasonton an order preliminary to doing so. It is doubly astounding from the fact that General Pleasonton was, according to his own account, absent for five hours from the field of battle, throughout the most important part of the day's fight, engaged, as he alleges, in the responsible duty of preparing for retreat. But how comes it, then, that in his official report of the campaign, made in August of the same year, he omits to mention or to allude in any way to this incident of which he has now so perfect a recollection? And again, it may naturally be asked, Why, when he was before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, in March, 1864, only nine months after the battle, did he not in his testimony refer to it in even the most remote manner, but, on the contrary, as will shortly appear upon his own authority, did, in answer to the question as to whether he knew of General Meade's ever having had any idea of retreating from Gettysburg, say that *he did not remember*. It would seem, then, that when events are recent, General Pleasonton's recollection of them is not so vivid as when they are long past; that, in fact, they do not reach the sphere of his consciousness until some years after their occurrence.

General Doubleday, aware of the discrepancies in the testimony of his witness, attempts to bolster it up by pointing out that there is further testimony of General Pleasonton's before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, which has probably escaped notice, and which, he would persuade us, is quite sufficient to bear out his charge. Let us now examine that, and see what it amounts to. In the Reports

of the Committee on the Conduct of the War, Part 2d of the Supplement, will be found the testimony to which General Doubleday refers. It is in the form of a long letter, dated Oct. 16th, 1865, addressed to the Committee by General Pleasonton, who had shortly after his first testimony before the Committee been relieved from duty with the Army of the Potomac, giving a history of his personal experiences throughout the whole of the Rebellion. The following is an extract from page 10 of this letter, which is General Pleasonton's account there of the second day's battle at Gettysburg. He says:—

“ On the 2d of July, 1863, that portion of the army that was on the field was placed in a defensive position, but General Meade had so little assurance in his own ability to maintain himself, or in the strength of his position, that when the rebels partially broke our line in the afternoon of the 2d, he directed me to collect what cavalry I could, and prepare to cover the retreat of the army; and I was thus engaged until twelve o'clock that night. I mention this fact now, because when I was before your honorable Committee, and was asked the question whether General Meade ever had any idea of retreating from Gettysburg, I answered that I did not remember, the above circumstance at that time being out of my mind, and it was only afterwards recalled by my staff officers on my return to camp.”

It is thus seen that this statement of General Pleasonton, made a little over two years after Gettysburg, differs entirely from that before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, made nine months after Gettysburg, and very materially from that made last February, nearly twenty years afterward. In his first statement (before the Committee) he remembered *nothing* about the question of retreat. In his second statement (in his letter to the Committee) he says that in the emergency, when the enemy partially broke our line, General Meade instructed him to take measures for the *contingency* of retreat. But in the third statement, nearly twenty years after Gettysburg, he it remembered, the time at which he represents himself as having received his orders is long before affairs assumed a critical aspect, the length of time he was absent on this alleged duty is shortened by two hours, and the question of *contingency* of retreat has been entirely discarded. To sum up, General Pleasonton, in his official report immediately after the battle, did not consider this incident of sufficient importance to mention it. In the following year, when before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, he forgot it. Two years after the battle he gave it as evidence of unnecessary precaution. Nearly twenty years afterward he gives it succinctly, without qualification, as an explicit order for a specific purpose.

As a possible explanation of these irreconcilable statements, an incident of July 2d, at Gettysburg, connected with General Pleasonton, is here introduced. This incident is alluded to in the official report of one of that general's subordinates. While it shows that certain action preparatory to retreat was actually taken by General Pleasonton on the afternoon of July 2d, it also clearly shows how little confidence he himself had at that time in our ability to maintain ourselves, "when," as he says, "the rebels partially broke our line on the afternoon of July 2d."

During the campaign of Gettysburg, Captain J. M. Robertson, Second U. S. Artillery (now Bvt. Brig. Gen. U. S. A.), was in command of the First Brigade of Horse Artillery, attached to the Cavalry Corps, and therefore under the immediate orders of General Pleasonton. In that officer's official report of the campaign, made on 22d August, 1863, we find the following statement:—

"Arrived near the battle-ground of Gettysburg at 5.30 A. M. on the 2d, and reported to the General commanding the Cavalry Corps, and by his directions held my batteries in reserve near the battle-ground until near dark, when, by his direction, I moved back about two miles on the Baltimore Pike and encamped for the night."

Hearing that some such movement had taken place, but not knowing by whose orders, I some years ago wrote to General Robertson for an account of the movement, and under what circumstances it came to be made. In reply, he said that on the evening of the 2d July, just at sunset, he had his reserve batteries feeding in a meadow on the banks of Rock Creek, when an officer rode furiously up to him. General Robertson continues:—

"As soon as he was near enough to be heard, he said in a very excited manner, so that all the men heard him: 'General Pleasonton directs that you at once move your batteries across Stony [Rock] Creek, and retire about one mile on the Taneytown road [Baltimore Pike] and take up a position. The Rebs have broken through our centre, and it is all up with us!'"

It may be answered that this mode of address was simply that officer's, that General Pleasonton was in no wise responsible for undue excitement in an officer's demeanor when carrying his order. Still, inasmuch as he had received his order from General Pleasonton, it is reasonable to conclude that the excitement which he betrayed was communicated to him either by the words or the manner of his chief. It would seem, therefore, that General Pleasonton, at dusk of that memorable day, was so far from thinking that General Meade was

unduly wanting in confidence as to his ability to maintain his position when the enemy partially broke our line, that he himself thought it "was all up with us."

Thus it has been shown that the testimony of this witness upon whom General Doubleday has greatly relied to sustain his charge against General Meade has completely broken down under its own collated weight, and that the charge, so far as this testimony is equal to sustaining it, must perforce with it fall to the ground.

Continuing to comment upon Mr. Swinton's statements regarding the point which has now been exhaustively discussed, General Doubleday says:—

"By way of rebuttal, Mr. Swinton parades the following declaration of General Meade. A very slight examination will show that *it refers to a different period of the battle; to the morning of the 2d, and not to the evening.* General Meade says: 'I utterly deny, under the full solemnity and sanctity of my oath, and in the firm conviction that the day will come when the secrets of all men shall be made known—I utterly deny having intended or thought for one instant to withdraw that army, *unless the military contingencies which the future should develop during the course of the day might render it a matter of necessity that the army should be withdrawn.*' The italics are mine."

This purports to be a passage from General Meade's testimony before the Committee on the Conduct of the War, as printed in the report of the Committee, and also in the appendix to Mr. Swinton's "Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac." And he who pretends to quote it is he who, in a preceding clause of his letter, only a few lines back, speaks of himself, impliedly, "as a faithful historian." The italics, he says, are his; let that pass, although the meaning did not require them. The quotation is correct, of course, if so relatively small a matter as italicizing is noticed. We ought to feel doubly sure of that, from the fact that the letter under consideration is now *republished* on a sheet for special distribution. But is it correct? No. General Meade said:—

"I utterly deny, under the full solemnity and sanctity of my oath, . . . I utterly deny *ever* having intended or thought, for one instant, to withdraw that army, unless the military contingencies which the future should develop during the course of the day might render it a matter of necessity that the army should be withdrawn."

Proceeding, General Meade added:—

"I base this denial, not only on my own assertion and my own veracity, but I shall also show to the committee, from documentary