



## The Civil War's **Bloodiest Day**

*James H. Hillestad, Member No. 6, chronicles the battle of Antietam (Sharpsburg) and the role that a nondescript cornfield would play in the final outcome.*

**A**fter repelling the Army of the Potomac's invasion of Virginia and the subsequent major Confederate victory at the Second Battle of Bull Run, Robert E. Lee decided to invade Maryland. It was August 1862.

His motivation was threefold. His supply wagons were bare, for northern Virginia's farms and fields had been stripped of crops and livestock. Maryland offered the opportunity to replenish food and supplies. He also sought to sever railroad access to Washington and to win Maryland for the Confederacy. And perhaps most importantly, he wanted to demonstrate conclusively to Europe that the South was worthy of recognition.

Pulitzer Prize-winning historian James M. McPherson wrote in an

essay "Antietam was unquestionably the most important battle of the Civil War in its impact on foreign relations. Never again did Britain and France come so close to intervention; never again did

*...never again did the Confederacy come so close to recognition by foreign governments.*

the Confederacy come so close to recognition by foreign governments. In the Revolution, the battle of Saratoga brought French intervention, which was key to ultimate American victory. In the Civil War, Antietam turned out to be the Saratoga that failed."

On September 17, 1862, the opposing forces clashed near the



**TOP**  
Figures from No.31152 moving through Miller's cornfield.

**TOP INSET**  
Mural and diorama from the Wisconsin Veterans Museum

**RIGHT**  
2nd Wisconsin Flag-bearer figure from set No.31152



Miller's Cornfield Diorama 60" x 30"

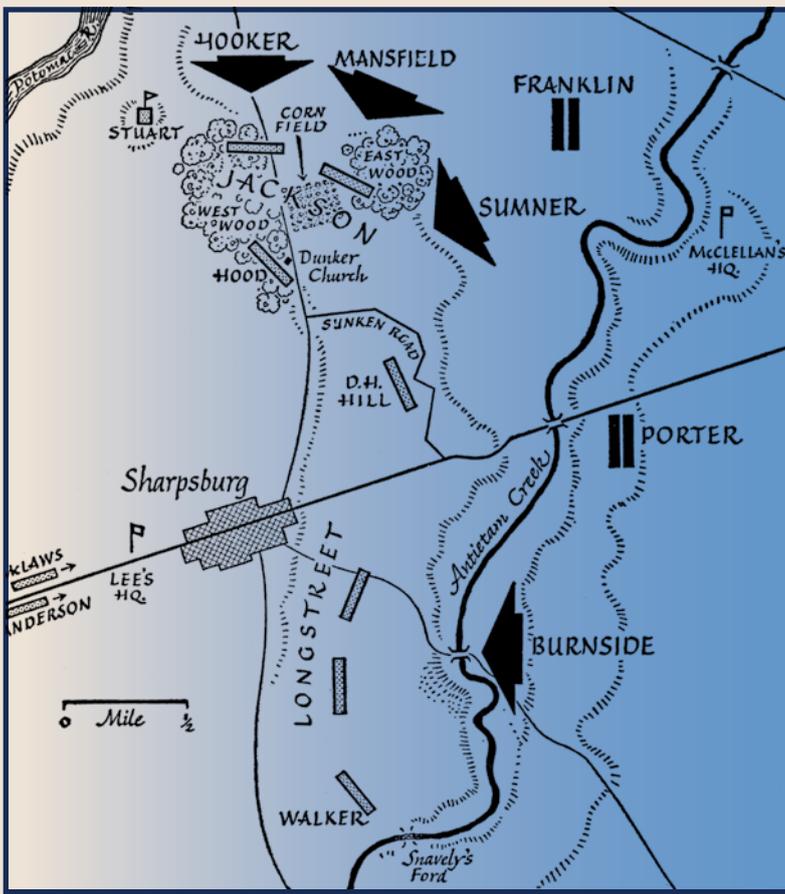
*By 10 A.M., the "first" Battle of Antietam was over, with 13,000 casualties lying in the cornfields and surrounding woods. It has been said that "No corn should ever grow there again, lest the stalks hang their heads in shame at the terrible carnage that took place in that field."*

town of Sharpsburg, adjacent to Antietam Creek ("antietam" is believed to be Algonquian for "swift water"). The battle unfolded in three main stages, beginning on the Union right. General Hooker's First Corps attacked along the Hagerstown Pike with heavy action concentrated in farmer David R. Miller's cornfield -- a 30-acre plot surrounded by woods near the Dunker Church of the German Baptist Brethren. The Dunkers were so called because of their ritual of totally immersing in water those who were to be baptized. The gentle and peaceful Dunkers shunned such vanities of the world as church steeples, and their churches were simple and unadorned.

The fighting seesawed back and forth for five hours. Confederate General John Bell Hood's Texas Brigade took on the "Iron Brigade" commanded by Colonel John Gibbon. The brigade contained the second, seventh and sixth Wisconsin regiments, and was known as the "Black



The Cornfield -- then and now



LEFT  
Map of the Battle of Antietam



Attack by the 2nd Wisconsin



A Union 12-pound Napoleon gun prepares to fire



Dunker Church -- then and now



Advancing Iron Brigade figure from No.31152



General Robert E. Lee, No.17922, and General George B. McClellan, No.17927

Hats," for the distinctive, broad-brimmed Hardy Hats they wore. These Midwestern boys took pride in both their nickname and their army designation -- the First Brigade of the First Division of the First Corps. (The article *The Black Hats* in the May 2008 issue of *The Standard* offers more on this legendary brigade.)

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### Did you know?

Two future U.S. presidents, Rutherford B. Hayes and William McKinley participated in the Battle of Antietam. Captain Oliver Wendell Holmes of the 20th Massachusetts, who would go on to serve as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court was wounded in the neck and left for dead.

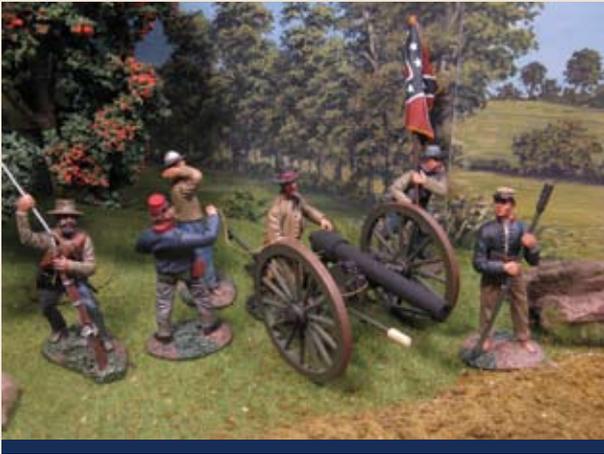
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As Hood's Confederates retired, Hooker's First Corps was left reeling. Mansfield's Twelfth Corps then advanced and occupied the East Woods. The Federals were met by D.H. Hill's brigades, and they fought each other to a standstill.

It was then that Union Major General Sumner deployed his Second Corps. The Confederates occupied a strong position in a natural trench formed by a sunken farm track -- later known as Bloody Lane. The violent struggle lasted until 12:30 P.M., when the Confederates fell back to regroup in the outskirts of Sharpsburg.

The Rebel center was now wide open, but McClellan refused to commit the fresh troops of General William Franklin's Sixth Corps.

The final stage of the battle commenced at about 3:00 P.M., on the Union left flank at Rohrbach Bridge over Antietam Creek, later dubbed "Burnside's Bridge." After intense fighting, Major-General Ambrose Burnside succeeded in advancing two of his Ninth Corps regiments over the bridge in an attempt to block Lee from retreating across the Potomac. Finally, it looked as if the Union forces would prevail, but again, time and resources worked against them. Burnside took his time in organizing the attack (originally intended to be launched at 10:00 A.M.), and McClellan refused to commit his reserves (Fitz-John Porter's Fifth Corps). Confederate General A.P. Hill arrived at the right time and right place with his Carolina brigades, after a forced 17-mile march from Harper's Ferry. The battle ended with the Federals falling back towards Antietam



Confederate 10-pounder Parrott Rifle in support



Taking cover behind harvested corn

Creek and Lee retreating to Virginia.

Robert E. Lee had taken his army into Maryland to wage the decisive campaign for Southern independence, and he failed. George McClellan had been granted the opportunity to crush the Southern

army, and he, too, failed.

Though initially outnumbered 80,000 to 30,000, Lee secured a tactical victory due, in large measure, to his skillful employment of his limited forces and to inept Union leadership. General McClellan failed to use his cavalry for



"Close Quarters"

reconnaissance, either to gather intelligence or to protect the flanks of his army against surprise attack. Throughout the day, without exception, he put his troops in action in dribbles, without coordination, and without mutual support. He allowed Lee to shift his outnumbered forces from his right flank (opposing Burnside) to his left flank (to deal with Mansfield and Sumner). He held a third of his available army in reserve, and they never made it to the battlefield. Through his timidity, he let victory slip away.

On November 7, President Lincoln relieved McClellan of his command of the Army of the Potomac.



Hood's Texans to the Front

Antietam was a day of fearful violence, beyond anything in the nation's experience. In the course of twelve hours, some 23,000 men lay dead, wounded, or missing -- more than three times those suffered on D-Day. 🏳️

## Miller's Cornfield -- Life Size!



Celebrated Civil War artist Keith Rocco captured the fervor of the Iron Brigade as they advanced through the cornfield, in a spectacular mural painted for the Wisconsin Veterans Museum.

The mural is complemented by life-size figures depicting the 2nd Wisconsin Regiment in action -- an awesome tableau.

The museum, located in Madison, Wisconsin, opened in 1993. With 10,000 square feet of exhibit space, concentrated in two galleries focusing on 19th and 20th Century battles involving Wisconsin regiments, the museum is a "must-see" for military history enthusiasts. For more information visit the museum website at: [www.wisvetmuseum.com](http://www.wisvetmuseum.com)

**Jim Hillestad operates under the name The Toy Soldier Museum. His museum, containing more than 35,000 figures and a large collection of militaria, is located in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. For directions and hours, call him at 570 629-7227, or visit his website: [www.the-toy-soldier.com](http://www.the-toy-soldier.com)**