

Man of the Hour

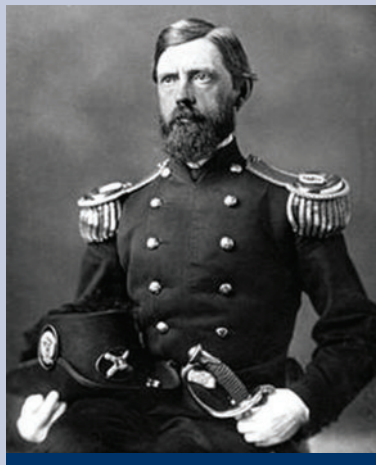
James H. Hillestad, Member No. 6, highlights the role of Gen. John F. Reynolds at the battle of Gettysburg.



The outcome of the battle of Gettysburg would involve, among other factors, fearless and skillful leaders. In the case of the Army of the Potomac, names such as Meade, Hancock and Chamberlain quickly come to mind.

In the shadows lies the pivotal role played by Maj. Gen. John F. Reynolds.

Had it not been for Reynolds, it is more than likely that the forces of Robert E. Lee would have swept on to occupy the high ground of



Cemetery Ridge -- and in doing so, control the battlefield.

John Reynolds was born in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, in 1820. He was a West Point graduate, trained in artillery. He served with the army in Florida, Louisiana, South Carolina, Texas and the Utah Territory. Quick and perceptive, he could "read" a battle instantly. At the battle of Buena Vista in the Mexican War, his artillery twice thwarted dangerous flank attacks from fast-charging cavalry.

He was known to lead from the front -- which would have fateful consequences.

When Abraham Lincoln became disenchanted with Joe Hooker as commander of the Union Army, he turned to Reynolds. Reynolds, knowing that he would be saddled with political interference, declined the invitation and recommended that the leadership role go to his

BENJAMIN THORPE

It has been contended that Reynolds was struck down by a sniper. This stems from the accounts of Benjamin Thorpe of the 26th North Carolina Regiment. Thorpe states that he himself shot Reynolds from 800 yards (eight American football fields), and separated from Reynolds by trees in full leaf. Further, he claims the shot was fired at 9 a.m., while Reynolds was actually shot at about 10:30 a.m.

It is more likely that Reynolds was shot in an exchange of volleys with Tennesseans of Gen. James Archer's brigade, which was heatedly engaged with the 2nd Wisconsin.



friend George Meade.

Meade learned of his appointment on June 28, 1863 -- three days before the battle of Gettysburg. Meade gave Reynolds command of the left, or lead, wing of the army. This encompassed three corps (the 1st, 3rd and 11th). His authority would extend to one-third of the Union Army -- more than 20,000 men.

THE BATTLE BEGINS

On July 1, Confederate general Henry Heath's division blundered into Union cavalry under the command of Brig. Gen. John Buford on the western approaches to the town of Gettysburg. Battle was joined. Heavily outnumbered, Buford appealed to Reynolds for support, and he received it in the form of the battle-hardened Iron Brigade (information on the Iron Brigade can be found in the article



Statue of Gen. Reynolds on the battlefield. Note that two of the horse's feet are raised off the ground, signifying that the rider was killed in battle.

"The Black Hats," which appeared in Volume 2, No. 18, of *The Standard*).

It was reported that when the Confederates saw they were being confronted by the Iron Brigade, they grumbled, "There are those damned black-hatted fellows again!" The "black hats" were commanded by Brig. Gen. Solomon Meredith, who stood six feet, seven inches tall, and was the only Quaker general in the army.

It was ironic that the South came in primarily from the north, while the North came up from the south. The ensuing clash resulted in horrific casualties. The 26th North Carolina lost 75 percent of its troops, while the Union 1st Corps suffered losses of 50 percent of those engaged -- one out of two men.

Exhorting the 2nd Wisconsin to repel the Confederate attackers, Reynolds, who was mounted on his horse and thus presented a high-profile target, turned in the saddle



Monument to John Reynolds in McPherson's woods, where he was fatally wounded.

and called out to the troops behind him, "Forward men, forward for God's sake, and drive those fellows out of the woods." In the moment of doing so, he received a fatal wound to the head, and fell dead from his horse.

The general who had committed the Union Army to the battle of Gettysburg was dead, after hardly an hour on the scene.

His efforts, however, were rewarded -- in that the Confederate attack was blunted, thus enabling Union troops under Maj. Gen. Winfield Hancock to secure the high ground of Cemetery Ridge.

Inspired by the renowned Civil War artist Keith Rocco in his dramatic painting "The Chosen Ground," W. Britain has recreated the final moments of Gen. Reynolds, as he looks over his shoulder to inspire the 2nd Wisconsin. Along with the superb figures, W. Britain offers a topographic display base, together with a stunning backdrop. ■

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 new website at www.the-toy-soldier.com.