

“It is the willing horse that is worked to death”

The Union Second Corps in the summer of 1864



Conor Timoney

The reputation of Union Army of the Potomac has largely been shaped by its conduct in the battles of Antietam, Chancellorsville, Fredericksburg and Gettysburg. These conflicts presented Union soldiers with some of the greatest physical and tactical challenges of their organizations. Scholars of the war - both Victorian and modern - have often judged the fighting ability of Union army regiments, brigades, and corps by their actions in these engagements. By the spring of 1864 however, the Union Army of the Potomac was a vastly different entity than that which had engaged Confederates along the mid-Atlantic coast. Due to massive casualties sustained in the first two years as well as to the reorganization of the Army of the Potomac from seven corps into three, the dynamic that had proven successful in commands comprised primarily of veteran troops crumbled with the inability of soldiers to recognize their former commands. Additionally, incessant marching, fighting and entrenching during the Overland Campaign stripped many men of the charisma that had once marked them as reliable soldiers. Casualties, reorganization, fatigue, and the rash dissemination of draftees and raw recruits negatively impacted the fighting ability of even the hardest soldiers within the Army of the Potomac.

The Second Army Corps were first formed by order of the Army of the Potomac's first commander, George B. McClellan.¹ Under the initial command of Edwin "Bull" Sumner, the Second Corps showed considerable determination on the battlefields of Seven Days and Antietam. Equally notable was its resiliency to the fatigue of marching, camping, fighting and enthusiasm for the Eastern Theatre campaign. In the various histories of the Second Army Corps, much of this has been attributed to the sense of "Esprit de Corps" (group morale) held by many of its veteran regiments. In some cases they were drawn together by a thrill for soldiering, while in others regional and ethnic similarities provided a sense of unity. These corps, initially divided

¹ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 105.

into divisions containing three to five brigades each, hosted a vast array of patriots and charismatic fighters.

The first of these three divisions held the most famous ethnic organization of the American Civil War, The Irish Brigade. Formed in the fall of 1861 from the Irish populations of New York, Boston and Philadelphia, this brigade showed an eccentric enthusiasm for combat at Gaines Mill, Malvern Hill and the Sunken Road at Antietam.² In the second division was the Philadelphia Brigade. Raised initially to fight in the name of California, this brigade included regiments such as the 72nd Pennsylvania (otherwise known as Baxter's Fire Zouaves) that included "patriotic, intelligent and brave" members from every fire department in the City of Philadelphia.³ It had fought bravely in Richmond at Fair Oaks, Savage Station, and Glendale.⁴ Within the third division of the Corps was another regionally bound organization, The Gibraltar Brigade, formed largely from Midwestern regiments like the 14th Indiana and the 8th Ohio. At Antietam, the 8th seized the opportunity to flank Sunken Road, pouring devastating fire onto the confederate defenders.⁵ The enthusiasm of these fighting brigades is emblematic of that which consumed much of the corps before and during the Battle of Gettysburg. The determination of the First Division in the Wheatfield, and the Second and Third divisions in their desperate repulses on Cemetery Hill and Granite Ridge, would drive the nail in the coffin as far as the Second Corp's fighting ability was concerned. However, the fortunes of the Second Corps changed when Ulysses S. Grant decided to post himself with the Army of the Potomac in the

² David Power Conyngham, and Lawrence Frederick. Kohl. *The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1994), 4.

³ Charles H. Banes, *The History of the Philadelphia Brigade. Sixty-ninth, Seventy-first, Seventy-second, and One hundred and sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippencott & Co., 1876), 11.

⁴ Anthony W. McDermott, and John E. Reilly. *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment, Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers: From Its Formation until Final Muster out of the United States Service* (Philadelphia: D.J. Gallagher &, 1889), 15.

⁵ Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 250.

early spring of 1864. In the Overland and Petersburg campaigns that followed, the Second Corps exhibited a sharp decline in its fighting ability due to reorganization, infusions of draftees and raw recruits, which stemmed in part from the splitting of these homogeneous groups.

While studying the sharp decline in the fighting ability of the Union Second Army Corps, historians have attempted to assign cause based upon the performance of the corps at Jerusalem Plank Road on June 22nd, 1864 and during the Siege of Petersburg at Reams Station on August 25th, 1864. It is interesting that this drop in effectiveness came at time when the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia was on its last legs and the effectiveness of the Union Fifth and Sixth Corps was rapidly increasing. However, the Second Corps' crucial role in bringing Lee's army to such a state stands as a testament to over three years of hard fighting. In the words of Lieutenant Charles Morgan, "It is the willing horse that is worked to death."⁶ Such is extremely true in the case of this particular Union Corps, as it had been a driving force in a series of battles fought in Maryland and Virginia during the summer of 1864 called the Overland Campaign. At both Jerusalem Plank Road and Reams Station however, Hancock's Second Corps performed poorly, losing more men, colors and artillery than ever before during the war.⁷ While some historians have assigned blame to one cause or another, none have succinctly summed the various causes for the failures of the corps as a whole. By the examination of firsthand accounts, regimental history's and wartime news articles pertaining to the corps, it is clear that these two battles most plainly exhibit the culmination of the effect that casualties, reorganization, raw recruits and the fatigue had on the once gallant Second Army Corps. In both engagements, according to author of *Generals in Blue and Grey* Wilmer Jones, "The Second Corps did something they had never

⁶ Francis Amasa. Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 487.

⁷ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 208.

done before—they turned and ran.”⁸ Historian Ed Bearss argued that by the time gunfire slackened after Ream’s Station on August 25th Hancock “could no longer hide from himself that his once mighty corps retained but a shadow of its former strength and vigor.”⁹ The Second Corps’ ability to both stand and receive fire had indeed been tested in both fights, and found extremely lacking on both occasions.

The decline of the Second Corps is a topic often entertained by scholars. Between the cumulative casualties of the past two years of the war and the Overland Campaign, the Second Corps lost many of its most promising officers and enlisted men by the time it crossed the James River toward Petersburg in June of 1864. These casualties included men killed, wounded or missing in action. One of the earliest scholars to assert that casualties were a significant cause for the decline in the potency of the corps was Hancock’s successor, General Andrew A. Humphreys. According to Humphreys, by the time of the Petersburg Campaign, “the larger part of the officers, who literally lead their commands, were killed or wounded, and a large number of those that filled the ranks at the beginning of the campaign were absent.”¹⁰ By Humphreys’ estimate, decline of the corps came as a result of the fact that the most skilled and qualified soldiers had simply been killed off or rendered unfit for duty. This is corroborated by more modern scholars such as Charles Bowery and Lawrence Kreiser, the latter emphasizing the more recent series of events leading up to the disaster along the Jerusalem Plank Road. Kreiser writes, “For the ten day period June 10-19 [...] the Second Corps losses totaled about 20 percent of the

⁸ Wilmer L. Jones, *Generals in Blue and Gray: Lincoln's Generals*. Vol. 1. (Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 2006), 320.

⁹ Bearss, Edwin C. *The Petersburg Campaign. Volume 1: The Eastern Front Battles, June –August 1864*. Vol. 1. (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2012), 347.

¹⁰ Andrew A. Humphreys, *The Virginia Campaign of '64 And'65*. Vol. 12. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883), 283.

men who had gone into action.”¹¹ The men required to effectively fight pitched battles no longer inhabited the ranks. Their absence was not only the chief reason for the sharp decline in the fighting ability of the corps, but a catalyst for at least three of the other sources attributed to that very decline.

The casualties in killed, wounded and missing sustained by the Second Corps in the years leading up to the spring campaign of 1864 were such that necessitated not only a reorganization of the corps’ veterans, but the accommodation of two whole divisions of the Old Third Army Corps. Realizing the depletion of both corps following the Gettysburg campaign, Major General George Gordon Meade saw fit to combine the Second and Third Corps into one.¹² Ultimately, Meade chose Winfield Hancock to command this force, and it was up to Hancock, to organize it into capable fighting divisions.¹³ One difficulty that Hancock faced was the fact that much of the old Third corps highly resented their transfer to the Second.¹⁴ Hancock responded to this dissatisfaction by grouping these Third Corps men into two divisions, the 3rd and 4th, commanded by former Third Corps Division commanders General David Birney and General Gershom Mott.¹⁵ In command of the first division, Hancock placed General Francis C. Barlow, a 29 year old native of Brooklyn, New York.¹⁶ Continuing his command of the Second Division was General John Gibbon, most famous for the training of the Iron Brigade. Between these two divisions, Hancock dispersed the regiments of the former 3rd Division under General Alexander Hayes, the new 3rd Division under Birney being an entirely different entity. In divisions

¹¹ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 208.

¹² Charles H. Banes, *The History of the Philadelphia Brigade. Sixty-ninth, Seventy-first, Seventy-second, and One hundred and sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippencott & Co., 1.

¹³ *Ibid.* 147.

¹⁴ *Ibid.* 160.

¹⁵ Bradley M. Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett* (Shippensburg: White Mane Books Publication, 1999), 194.

¹⁶ *Ibid.* 147.

comprised of those soldiers native to the Second Corps, consideration toward previous identity was far less prevalent. According to Kreiser, “The re-organization of the Second Corps without regard to previous unit identity had badly hurt morale” and many members of the old Third Division were disgruntled by their transfer.¹⁷ In the Philadelphia Brigade, reorganization came as an affront to their regional identity. The addition of the 152nd New York to a brigade comprised of mostly Philadelphians angered many officers and enlisted men.¹⁸ Both the merging of the Second and Third Corps as well as the compilation and reorganization of veteran units proved both complicated and ultimately detrimental to the fighting ability of the corps. In actions to follow, blame for defeat was often immediately cast upon those faces most foreign to the corps’ veterans in the First and Second Divisions. This tendency to pounce upon one another and incite infighting did little to promote trust for future engagements. Instead, it created a hostile atmosphere that contributed heavily toward the inability of the corps to cooperate, perform effectively in the field, and to sustain its fighting ability until the conclusion of hostilities in Virginia in April of 1865.

Draftees and raw recruits dispersed into the ranks of the Second Corps received about as much scorn as veteran soldiers in the Third Division. However, in the case of this particular demographic such criticism was often well deserved. “By nature,” wrote John Billings, a veteran of the Second Corps Light Artillery, “the term “recruit” in the mouth of a veteran was a very reproachful one, but after one good fight with the enemy it was dropped; if the new men behaved well under fire.”¹⁹ In truth however, both drafted men and raw recruits during this chapter of the

¹⁷ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 147.

¹⁸ Bradley M. Gottfried, *Stopping Pickett* (Shippensburg: White Mane Books Publication, 1999), 192.

¹⁹ John Davis Billings. *Hardtack and Coffee, or The Unwritten Story of Army Life* (Boston: G. M. Smith &, 1887), 198.

war behaved rather poorly under fire. According to Earle Hess, Author of *The Union Soldier in Battle*, “The poor quality of recruits significantly hamper[ed] military operations” and that this “was a major reason that the Second Corps [...] refused to attack the Confederate works at Petersburg.”²⁰ While this “poor quality” can certainly be attributed to both the declining popularity of the war as well as to the simple lack of time that veteran commands had to properly train these men, the widespread inability of recruits to perform well under fire drew criticism from veteran soldiers. Drill and instruction were of no less importance than they had been in previous campaigns and the lack of it performed by drafted man and raw recruits heavily affected the efficiency of veteran regiments. At the start of the Overland Campaign, The Army of the Potomac’s Provost Marshall Marsena Patrick was baffled to find that, “there are men in this army who have been in numerous actions without ever firing their guns, and it is known that muskets taken on the battlefields have been found filled nearly to the muzzle with cartridges.”²¹ This observation came primarily because of the lack of training given to new recruits leading up to the campaign. Soldiers lacking even the most rudimentary instruction of how to load and discharge a rifle often found themselves at a severe disadvantage in a fire fight. Other things recruits must know included a mastery of the evolutions of a company and regiment from column into line, the deployment of skirmishers, and the basic courtesies to be paid toward ranking officers. Soldiers who simply did not seem to grasp the nuances of drill were often organized into “awkward squads.”²² In cases of severe ineptitude, recruits who suffered “defects” in their “intellectual capacity” were weeded out by the Regimental Surgeon.²³ For

²⁰ Earle J. Hess, *The Union Soldier in Battle Enduring the Ordeal of Combat*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 90.

²¹ Susan-Mary Grant, and Brian Holden Reid, *Themes of the American Civil War: The War between the States* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 89.

²² Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 162.

²³ *Ibid.* 162.

those without a firm grasp of the English language drills were taught almost entirely by example.²⁴ Arriving before and during lapses in the Overland and Petersburg campaigns, this caliber of soldier was frequently thrust into battle long before his skill had been refined. In the battles of Jerusalem Plank Road and Reams Station, inadequate training and discipline made itself well known as draftees and recruits streamed from the fighting. Their unfortunate participation (or lack thereof) was marked as one of the primary reasons for the complete lapse in the fighting ability of the Union Second Corps.

Fatigue was not an unknown nemesis to the Second Corps come the spring of 1864. From the fighting at Fair Oaks to Gettysburg in the extreme heat of July, veterans of the corps had known the rigors of an active campaign and the fatigue that followed. What stamina they had dropped as they crossed the James River south toward Petersburg. One soldier in the 152nd New York remarked that as the Second Corps came before Petersburg, “[...] a spirit of demoralization came slowly creeping upon all, who were exhausted from want of sleep, and forced marches. The chances of life were unfavorable.”²⁵ Fatigue came not only as the result of consistent engagement with the enemy, but from marching, entrenchment, and the normal strains of duty. In some cases, such as the destruction of the Weldon Railroad after Ream’s Station, extraneous circumstances provided additional fatigue. According to Corps Historian Francis Walker, the Second Corps that was routed at both Jerusalem Plank Road and Reams Station was simply “worn out by excessive exertions.”²⁶

²⁴ Ibid. 162.

²⁵ Henry Roback, *Veteran Volunteers of Herkimer and Otsego Counties in the War of the Rebellion* (Utica: L.C. Child and Son, 1888), 102

²⁶ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 605.

On the eve of the Overland Campaign, the Second Army Corps numbered 46,363 men strong, with a total of 28,854 men present for duty.²⁷ In the newly compiled corps' first action at the Wilderness, the corps performed adequately. Not surprisingly, the 4th Division of Gershom Mott stalled under the first small arms fire thrown against them on the afternoon of May the 5th.²⁸ On the Morning of May 6th, after a spirited attack on Ambrose Powell Hill's Confederate Corps, the Second Corps was thrown back in confusion by a vicious counterattack by General James Longstreet's Corps. One survivor of Gibbon's Second Division remembered, "Without any apparent cause that could be seen from the position of our brigade, the troops on our left began to give way and commenced falling back toward the Brock road. Those pressing past the left flank of the second division did not seem to be demoralized in manner, nor did they present the appearance of soldiers moving under orders but rather of a throng of armed men who were returning dissatisfied from a muster...by far the larger number acted with utmost deliberation in their movements."²⁹ This minor setback elicited little criticism from Grant or Meade, as General John Sedgwick's Sixth Corps experienced a similar attack on its flank later that same afternoon. By the close of the fighting on May 6th, the Second Corps' losses totaled 5,902 men.³⁰ After a stalemate in the burning woods, Grant turned south in an effort to get between Lee and Richmond. Redeploying the Army of the Potomac, accompanied by General Ambrose E. Burnside's Ninth Army Corps, Grant positioned his army facing Lee's lines on Laurel Hill near Spotsylvania Courthouse. Here, the most noteworthy action of the Second Corps during the

²⁷ Ibid, 406.

²⁸ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 168.

²⁹ Anthony W. McDermott, and John E. Reilly, *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment, Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers: From Its Formation until Final Muster out of the United States Service* (Philadelphia: D.J. Gallagher &, 1889), 39.

³⁰ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 438.

entire campaign took place on May 12th at the aptly named Confederate position, The Mule Shoe. While the corps withdrew after 22 hours of sustained close quarters combat, its initial assault was met with great success. Pouncing upon unsuspecting confederate defenders, the corps captured nearly four thousands prisoners, eighteen pieces of artillery, and thirty colors.³¹ Of the fighting that followed, one soldier in Gibbon's Division remembered "It was not only a desperate struggle, but it was literally a hand-to-hand fight."³² At the close of the action, the combined loss of the Second Corps numbered 5,159.³³ To bolster this loss, as well as the recent disbanding of Mott's Division, Grant added to the Second Corps, a division of Heavy Artillerymen under the command of General Robert Tyler.³⁴ In their first action at Fredericksburg Road, the Heavy Artillerymen fought desperately, though they struggled to maintain formation and often fired upon one another.³⁵ In addition to these untested regiments, Grant bolstered Hancock's Corps with veteran regiments of Brigadier General Michael Corcoran's Irish Legion.³⁶ Realizing that a breakthrough at Spotsylvania was by no means imminent, Grant again moved south around the flank of Lee's army. In this attempt, Lee acted quickly and positioned his force south of the North Anna River. In the small actions that ensued following the Army of the Potomac's crossing, the Second Corps lost 1,651 men.³⁷ The next collision of the armies came upon the old Gaines Mill battlefield in an engagement known as "Cold Harbor." In the Second Corp's assault on the Confederate works on June 3rd, the toll of killed, wounded and missing mounted to

³¹ Charles H. Banes, *The History of the Philadelphia Brigade. Sixty-ninth, Seventy-first, Seventy-second, and One hundred and sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: J.B.

³² Joseph R. Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1906), 251.

³³ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 490.

³⁴ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 180.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 180.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 180.

³⁷ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 503.

3,550.³⁸ Some of the greatest losses were felt by regiments of the newly added Heavy Artillery Regiments such as the 8th New York.³⁹ Hancock's Chief of Staff, Lieutenant Colonel Charles Morgan, lamented that the losses of Cold Harbor represented a "blow to the corps from which it would not soon recover."⁴⁰ Hancock himself later attested that after the battle of Cold Harbor, the Second Corps "was never again was the same body of men."⁴¹ By the assessment of both Hancock and his staff, Cold Harbor had severely checked the Second Corps. Reflecting on the past triumphs of the corps, Francis Walker remarked that, "the historian feels that, as he concludes the story of Cold Harbor, he is, in a sense, writing the epitaph of the Second Corps."⁴² Walker's sentiment was not unwarranted, as the Second Corps soon found itself in a series of engagements that marred their reputation and demonstrated the Overland Campaign's suffocating effect on this veteran force. From May 5th to June 12th 1864 cost the Second Corps over half of its most reliable and talented officers and enlisted men.

In the days following the conclusion of the Overland Campaign at Cold Harbor and Grant's crossing of the James River south toward Petersburg, the Second Corps engaged in two consecutive battles leading up to its disastrous fight on June 22nd on the Jerusalem Plank Road east of the City. In a combined assault with General William "Baldy" Smith's Eighteenth Army Corps of Major General Benjamin Butler's Army of the James, the Second Corps fought admirably against the sparsely defended fortifications outside Petersburg on June 16th.⁴³ In a

³⁸ Ibid, 521.

³⁹ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 187.

⁴⁰ Ibid. 188.

⁴¹ Ibid 188.

⁴² Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 523.

⁴³ Anthony W. McDermott, and John E. Reilly, *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment, Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers: From Its Formation until Final Muster out of the United States Service* (Philadelphia: D.J. Gallagher &, 1889), 45.

renewed attack on the 18th however, the energy that had enlivened the corps on the 16th had all but drained from the ranks. When ordered to advance on the afternoon of the 18th, they did so with severe hesitation.⁴⁴ Halting under considerable fire, Meade ordered yet another advance on Birney's front. This time however, many regiments of the corps simply refused to move forward. One of the few who did push forward was the 1st Maine Heavy Artillery. Unsupported in their advance, the 1st Maine lost over 600 of its 900 members in its dash across the Hare Farm.⁴⁵ The failure of the Corps to support the attack of the 1st Maine cost the regiment over two thirds of its number, but permitted Lee enough time to reinforce this line and establish impregnable fortifications surrounding the city of Petersburg. Though Meade was "satisfied" with all that the corps had done, hesitation on the part of the Second Corps had cost Grant the city of Petersburg and a timely conclusion to the war in Virginia.

The engagement that followed four days later on June 22nd would long be remembered as "the saddest day ever experienced by the Second Corps." In an effort to cut off all rail lines leading into the city of Petersburg, Meade ordered the Union Second and Sixth Army Corps facing west against Lee's Lines to wheel northward and sever the Weldon Railroad. In doing so, the combined corps moved over heavily wooded terrain and whole divisions failed to maintain formation.⁴⁶ After some time, a gap appeared between the left flank of Barlow's First division and the right flank of General Horatio Wright's Sixth Corps.⁴⁷ Realizing how easily such a gap might be exploited by the enemy, Birney's Chief of Staff, Lieutenant Charles Morgan informed

⁴⁴ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 199.

⁴⁵ Horace H. Shaw, Charles J. House, and Clarence Woodcock, *The First Maine Heavy Artillery, 1862-1862, A History of its part and place in the War for the Union, with and outline of causes of War and its results to our country* (Portland: 1903.), 129.

⁴⁶ Edwin C. Bearss, *The Petersburg Campaign. Volume 1: The Eastern Front Battles, June –August 1864*. Vol. 1. (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2012), 148.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 148.

Meade of the danger. Meade replied “Each corps must look out for itself.”⁴⁸ Another who realized the importance of this gap was Confederate Division Commander, General William Mahone.⁴⁹ Utilizing a deep ravine that lay just shy of Barlow’s left flank, Mahone pushed his division through the gap, instructing the division of General Cadmus Wilcox to distract the attention of Wright’s Sixth Corps.⁵⁰ Suddenly, the rebel yell filled the trees to the left of Barlow’s men and the division, outflanked, tumbled northward in confusion through the ranks of Mott’s Third and Gibbon’s Second Divisions. One soldier in Gibbons Division remembered, “The men did not run directly to the rear, but ran more lengthwise toward the right and rear of our regiment.”⁵¹ Minutes before the attack, Private “Charley” Barth of the 116th Pennsylvania had just gone to fill canteens when, “Zip! A ball went into the water” and Charley made “a blue streak for the regiment.”⁵² Mahone’s men moved rapidly forward taking thousands of prisoners before them. Few regiments of the Second Corps had the opportunity to change front and commence any sort of firing before being enveloped by the gray mass. Many regiments, such as the 106th Pennsylvania in Gibbon’s Division scarcely had time to save their colors before capture.⁵³ To the right of the 106th, the men of the 69th took flight. Sergeant William White of the 69th Pennsylvania remembered, “There was a grand rush through the woods and the shells [were] flying all around.”⁵⁴ Reestablishing his line in the entrenchments constructed along the

⁴⁸ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 201.

⁴⁹ St. Clair Augustin Mulholland, *Story of the 116th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1903), 274.

⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 274.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 207.

⁵² St. Clair Augustin Mulholland, *Story of the 116th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1903), 276.

⁵³ Horace H. Shaw, Charles J. House, and Clarence Woodcock, *The First Maine Heavy Artillery, 1862-1862, A History of its part and place in the War for the Union, with and outline of causes of War and its results to our country* (Portland: 1903.), 131.

⁵⁴ William C. White, William White to Parents. June 26, 1864. William C. White Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17). (Philadelphia: Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center, 2001)

Jerusalem Plank Road the night before, Gibbon stemmed the route of the corps. Francis Walker recalled that, “The whole affair was over in a very short time,” and that “the Second Corps had been defeated almost without being engaged.”⁵⁵ By the time the corps had fallen back to Jerusalem Plank Road, prisoner loss had been quite severe. According to Walker, “There had been very little fighting, and comparatively small loss, except in prisoners. Of these the Second Corps had lost seventeen hundred: more than it had on the Peninsula; more than it had at Antietam, Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville combined. Four guns, moreover, the only ones ever taken from the Second Corps by the enemy, except that abandoned, disabled, on the banks of the Po, were the trophies of the confederate triumph.”⁵⁶ The disaster on the Jerusalem Plank road exhibited an exceedingly poor performance on the part of the corps, which, in wake of its failure to advance on the afternoon of the 18th, exhibited a traceable decline in battlefield effectiveness of the combatants. However, reason for this lapse in ability cannot be attributed to one factor but to the casualties, reorganization, the infusion of draftees and raw recruits and fatigue of persistent campaigning.

The casualties sustained in the Overland Campaign proceeding the disaster on the Jerusalem Plank Road answer largely for the timely route of the Second Corps on the afternoon of June 22nd. According to Walker, “but for the hideous losses of fifty proceeding days, now aggregating nearly twenty thousand, the confederates might have found it dangerous to go “fooling around the flank of the Second Corps in the fashion they did.”⁵⁷ The losses sustained at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, North Anna and Cold Harbor immediately made themselves felt as

⁵⁵ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 545.

⁵⁶ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 545-546.

⁵⁷ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 544

men rushed from the sound advancing confederates on the afternoon of the 22nd. Additionally, the fighting on June 16th and 18th had severely checked the ability of the corps. Between these two engagements, the Second Corps suffered four thousand, three hundred and twenty two casualties.⁵⁸ Barlow lamented on the 16th that “there are scarcely any officers left in the brigades.”⁵⁹ Of equal impact were the casualties sustained in the midst of the fighting on June 22nd. Combined, the corps lost more men captured than in any other engagement during the war up until that point. The total number, according to their captor General William Mahone, was 1,650.⁶⁰ This unusual number of men captured over those killed and wounded remains consistent across the three divisions of the Second Corps. In the 183rd of Pennsylvania of Barlow’s First Division, the regiment suffered 24 killed, 189 wounded and 59 captured.⁶¹ In the 69th Pennsylvania of Gibbon’s Division, “the losses were eight men killed, twenty-six wounded and 72 captured.”⁶² In the 1st Maine of Mott’s Third Division, the loss amounted to 4 killed, 15 wounded and 21 captured.⁶³ In the days following the engagement, one soldier in the Philadelphia Brigade remarked that “The remnants of the other three regiments [of the Brigade] gathered together would not make a regiment.”⁶⁴ In Barlow’s Division, another soldier remembered, “in sorting the regimental mail that had accumulated for weeks, almost half the

⁵⁸ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 196.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.* 197.

⁶⁰ St. Clair Augustin Mulholland, *Story of the 116th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1903), 275.

⁶¹ "183rd Regiment List of Killed and Wounded." *Philadelphia Inquirer*. Accessed February 5, 2018. <http://www.pacivilwar.com/newspapers/philadelphiainquirer18640623.html>.

⁶² Anthony W. McDermott, and John E. Reilly, *A Brief History of the 69th Regiment, Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers: From Its Formation until Final Muster out of the United States Service* (Philadelphia: D.J. Gallagher &, 1889), 46.

⁶³ Horace H. Shaw, Charles J. House, and Clarence Woodcock, *The First Maine Heavy Artillery, 1862-1862, A History of its part and place in the War for the Union, with and outline of causes of War and its results to our country* (Portland: 1903.), 132.

⁶⁴ Joseph R. Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1906), 280.

letters were returned to the writers with the endorsement: “Absent”, “wounded”, or, still worse, “Killed.”⁶⁵ The casualties, primarily in those who were captured or willingly threw down their arms, stand out as one of the greatest causes for the defeat of the corps on June 22nd.

The reorganization of the corps leading up to the engagement on June 22nd also played a significant role in its poor performance. The replacement of Hancock by Birney worried many soldiers leading up to the fighting. One soldier in the 11th New York battery remarked that Birney, “never went to the front during all the fight.”⁶⁶ Corporal John Day Smith of the 19th Maine argued, that in regards to “one of the most humiliating disasters that ever befell the Nineteenth Maine [...] The fault lay with the officer in command of that day [...] General Birney.”⁶⁷ Veterans of the corps placed equally little faith in members of the Third Division. Even after the slaughter of the Overland Campaign, a lack of trust persisted that incited frequent blame between them. William White of the 69th Pennsylvania remembered, “The third or ‘Red Diamond Division’ was on our left,” and that, “as soon as the rebs commenced firing they got up and flew and left our regiments flank and rear exposed to the rebs.”⁶⁸ Though members of the Third Division were forced to yield as quickly as any other soldiers in the corps that afternoon, that did not spare them from blame. Such a lack of faith in one another, even after all that the consolidated corps had been through, provided a weak sense of “Esprit de Corps” that contributed heavily to the Second Corps disorderly withdrawal on the afternoon of June 22nd.

⁶⁵ St. Clair Augustin Mulholland, *Story of the 116th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1903), 279.

⁶⁶ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 196.

⁶⁷ John Day Smith, *History of the Nineteenth Regiment of Maine Volunteer Infantry, 1862-1865* (Minneapolis: Great Western printing company, 1909), 206.

⁶⁸ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 202.

Draftees and raw recruits did not fare well in the fighting on June 22nd. Being attacked from the left flank so suddenly and so quickly made even veteran soldiers bolt. According to Walter Wood, the Second Corps as a whole, “fought with much less determination and fire [...] partly due to the deterioration in the quality of the recruits, who were steadily pouring in. These being either substitutes, or obtained through the “draft,” were very inferior to the volunteers of the earlier year of the war, and tended to impair the efficiency of the organizations to which they were assigned.”⁶⁹ In response to the route at Jerusalem Plank Road, Joseph Ward of the 106th Pennsylvania wrote that “the efficiency of the federal army had [...] been greatly impaired. Its numbers had been kept up, but it had lost well-nigh the best officers and men. Not a few recruits brought in by the enormous bounties, were poor material for soldiers. Even the tried veterans lacked much of their old determination.”⁷⁰ In the 19th Maine alone, 15 of the recruits who had joined the regiment in the past year became prisoners of war on June 22nd. While the circumstances were certainly not desirable for any soldier, draftees and raw recruits bore no less of the blame for the swift dispersion of the corps on June 22nd. In most cases, these men held neither the knowledge nor the experience to respond to such a surprise and their impulsive reactions contributed deeply toward the sharp decline in the fighting ability of the Second Corps.

The fatigue experienced by the Second Corps in the months and weeks leading up to the route on June 22nd also played a considerable role in the stampede of the corps. The combined strain of the Overland Campaign, the oppressive heat of Southern Virginia and the constant marching and entrenching had simply worn them out. According to General Andrew Humphreys “the incessant movements, day and night, for so long a period, the constant close contact with the

⁶⁹ Walter Birkbeck Wood, *History of the Civil War in the United States, 1861-5*. (London: Methuen & Edmonds & Co.), 649.

⁷⁰ Joseph R. Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1906), 281.

enemy during all of that time, the almost daily assaults upon entrenchments having entanglements in front, defended by artillery and musketry in front and flank, exhausted officers and men.”⁷¹ Other officers in the corps expressed similar sentiment in the days leading up to the disaster. In a letter home proceeding the fight, Brigadier General Nelson Miles of Barlow’s First Division remarked that one simply “cannot imagine how tired our Army is.”⁷² To make matters worse, the creeks and streams that ran through the woods west of the Jerusalem Plank road were few. According to Miles, to dig in search of a spring yielded only “warm milky colored” fluid.⁷³ It is likely that dehydration, heat stroke and other factors brought on by the weather contributed heavily to the fighting readiness of individual soldiers, though few medical records exist that pinpoint this. Combined, the effects of the Overland Campaign and the oppressive heat fatigued the men of the Second Corps quite heavily. By the time Mahone’s Division appeared on the flank of Barlow’s Division on June 22nd, officers and enlisted men alike simply did not maintain the energy to sustain a fire fight. As a result, their drowsy disposition contributed to the sharp decline in the effectiveness of the corps.

In the interim between the fight on June 22nd the fight at Ream’s Station on August 25th, the Second Corps participated in a diversionary movement north of the James River in an effort to draw Confederate forces from a mine being dug by soldiers in the Union Ninth Corps. During their excursion the corps engaged briefly at Deep Bottom, gaining little success and taking very few casualties.⁷⁴ After returning to their works along the Jerusalem Plank Road, the Second Corps endured the monotony of siege warfare. Of considerable torment were Confederate

⁷¹ Andrew A. Humphreys, *The Virginia Campaign of '64 And'65*. Vol. 12. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883), 225.

⁷² Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 200.

⁷³ *Ibid*, 200.

⁷⁴ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 205.

sharpshooters and artillery, incessant in their work against the soldiers in the opposite trench. In regards to life in the trench, a Connecticut soldier in Gibbon's Division remembered, "casualties became so frequent that officers and men moved about with an ever present consciousness that they might fall the next minute, and every nerve was kept on tension by this sense during the waking hours-hardly quieted even in sleep when the patter of bullets gave shape to troubled dreams."⁷⁵ In a Second attempt to draw Confederate troops away from Petersburg, Grant ordered the Second Corps (now commanded by Hancock again) to reattempt the Deep Bottom movement on August 14th.⁷⁶ Though the Corps did not engage in any significant action, the men suffered terribly on the march northward.⁷⁷ Not long after reaching their objective, Grant judged that the corps might better be utilized further south on the Petersburg front in the destruction of Weldon Railroad near Reams Station.⁷⁸

Ordered to commence in the destruction of the Weldon Railroad as far south as Rowanty Creek, Hancock set the corps to tearing up on the 23rd.⁷⁹ Having only recently returned to command, Hancock left Mott's Division in the works near the Jerusalem Plank Road taking with him only Miles (replacing Barlow), Gibbon, their artillery, and a detachment of Cavalry under General David Gregg.⁸⁰ By the time that the Corps reached the previously destroyed Reams Station, their activity was detected and Lee dispatched the Corps of General Ambrose Powell Hill to check their progress. Under the pressure of this force, Hancock withdrew his men to the

⁷⁵ Joseph R. Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1906), 283.

⁷⁶ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 207.

⁷⁷ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 205.

⁷⁸ Donald Ernsberger. *Paddy Owens Regulars: A History of the 69th Pennsylvania Irish Volunteers* (Xlibris Corp, 2004), 889.

⁷⁹ Ibid 889

⁸⁰ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 205.

poorly constructed, water filled trenches of the Sixth Corps that had been erected at the start of the Siege. Similar to the Mule Shoe that the Confederates constructed at Spotsylvania, this salient position would expose the rear of its defenders if one side was breached. According to Walker, “the story of the 25th of August cannot be understood without reference to this most unfortunate line of works.”⁸¹ After sending word back to Meade that he intended to hold his position, Hancock received best wishes from Meade who replied, “I hope you will be able to give the enemy a good threshing.”⁸² Combined, Hancock’s force consisted only of about “six to seven thousand infantry, with perhaps two thousand cavalry”⁸³ The artillery that accompanied Barlow’s and Gibbon’s divisions suffered heavily from the position in which they found themselves. Positioning their guns opposite the rail bed and their limbers behind, the artillerists would have to run a considerable distance to reload their pieces after each successive shot.⁸⁴ After three successive attacks by Hill’s Corps on the position, troops on the tip and left flank of the salient gave way allowing the Confederates to come swarming into the breach. Gibbon struggled desperately to contain his command and establish a new line however, “re-establishing the line proved fruitless” and men swarmed to the rear.⁸⁵ Amidst the mass, Hancock’s horse “received a bullet in the neck, from the effects of which he fell forward dismounting the general.”⁸⁶ Moving forward on foot, Hancock beckoned to his fleeing soldiers,

⁸¹ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 582.

⁸² Ibid, 590.

⁸³ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 585.

⁸⁴ Edwin C. Bearss, *The Petersburg Campaign. Volume 1: The Eastern Front Battles, June –August 1864*. Vol. 1. (El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie, 2012.), 345

⁸⁵ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 596.

⁸⁶ John Davis Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee, or The Unwritten Story of Army Life* (Boston: G. M. Smith &, 1887), 327.

“Come on! We can beat them yet!”⁸⁷ The flight of his corps astonished Hancock as “never before had he seen his men fail to respond to the utmost when he had called upon them personally for a supreme effort.”⁸⁸ On the right flank of the salient, Miles succeeded where Gibbon had failed. Using the 183rd Pennsylvania as his anchor, Miles established a new line before pushed back by the mass of fleeing union soldiers and their oncoming attackers. This would be the only success of the day. According to Walker, “The fact remains undisputed and indisputable, and freely confessed by the commander of the Second Corps that the Infantry engaged, with few exceptions, did much less than their duty.”⁸⁹ By the conclusion of the fighting, the Second Corps lost over 2,073 captured, 130 killed, 529 wounded, 8 pieces of artillery, 12 stand of regimental colors and lastly, 134 horses.⁹⁰ In the wake of the disaster at Jerusalem Plank Road, the route of the Second Corps at Reams Station demonstrated a complete inefficiency of the corps.

Like in the fighting at Jerusalem Plank Road, the overwhelming majority of the casualties taken at Reams Station were those taken prisoner. The total number missing at the conclusion of the fighting was not only significantly more than those captured on June 22nd, but constituted a significantly greater percentage of the troops involved. Whereas the total loss of three divisions at Jerusalem Plank road cost the Second Corps 1,650, the two divisions present at Reams station lost an aggregate of 2,073.⁹¹ Just as was the case on June 22nd, the casualties taken by the corps

⁸⁷ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 208.

⁸⁸ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 599.

⁸⁹ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 605.

⁹⁰ Edwin C. Bearss, *The Petersburg Campaign. Volume 1: The Eastern Front Battles, June –August 1864*. Vol. 1. (El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie, 2012.), 405.

⁹¹ Edwin C. Bearss, *The Petersburg Campaign. Volume 1: The Eastern Front Battles, June –August 1864*. Vol. 1. (El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie, 2012.), 404.

in the months leading up the battle played a significant role as well. According to one soldier in Mile's First Division, "At least thirty brigade commanders had fallen during the three and a half months ending at Reams Station, and at the latter end of October thirty seven brigade commanders had been killed and wounded, an average of three to each of the brigades and in the second corps in this one summer campaign of less than six months."⁹² Francis Walker, who was himself captured in the engagement lamented, "could the killed and wounded officers of but one-half hours fighting at Cold Harbor have been called back to the Second Corps on the afternoon of the 25th of August, Heth might have charged till the sun went down, all to no purpose [...] and Hill would have gone back to his entrenchments with none but his own colors and guns."⁹³ Combined, the losses of August 25th represented the comparative willingness of even veteran soldiers to simply thrown down their arms and surrender. In very few cases, members of the Corps went to extreme lengths to avoid captured. Private Timothy Sloan of the 116th Pennsylvania, "while in the act of loading his rifle, was ordered by a big fellow to surrender. Sloan had just got his load down but the ramrod stuck and he could not withdraw it, so he let him have it, ramrod and all. (When it came to a question of surrender Tim Sloan was ever ready to enter a very earnest protest)." Such a "protest" seems to have been exceptional on during the fighting on August 25th. The larger part of those seized during the fighting appear to have been rather willing. Unlike at Jerusalem Plank Road however, there was no surprise or unexpected attack that seemed to necessitate the quick surrender of such a large number of men. Many of the men, Tim Sloan exempted, appear to have been dismayed by their position in the trenches while others engaged with both confederates in their front and rear simply had little choice in the

⁹² St. Clair Augustin Mulholland, *Story of the 116th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1903), 293.

⁹³ Francis Amasa Walker. *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1891), 605.

matter. What is certain however, is that the second mass surrender of such a large portion of the corps in the span of two months plainly exhibited that the fuse of the Second Corps' effectiveness had finally reached its end.

The reorganization of the corps following the fighting on June 22nd was an affront to the Second Corps' morale on the eve of Reams Station. Hancock, having resumed command of the corps on June 27th, responded to the route of his corps by way of hasty reorganization.⁹⁴

According to Lieutenant Colonel Sinclair Mulholland in Miles' First Division, "the transfer of regiments and the consolidation of brigades was rendered necessary at this time by the heavy losses of men and officers."⁹⁵ Though necessary, little consideration seems to have been given to previous unit identity. In the case of Mulholland's regiment, this reorganization saw the removal of his regiment from the Irish Brigade and "although the regiment was composed almost entirely of American-born citizens, the men had learned to love and esteem the men of the Emerald Isle."⁹⁶ One of the most deeply affected brigades by this was the Old Philadelphia Brigade. Private Joseph Ward in the 106th Pennsylvania recalled that upon the transfer of his own regiment and the 69th Pennsylvania to the Third Brigade of Gibbon's Division that, the new troops designated as the second brigade took "from us our name and brigade flag that we had fought under so long, in so many hard fought battles, in which the flag was pierced by thirty nine bullets [...] making them the second brigade of the second division of the second army corps, that had such a brilliant record won by the three years' service and bitter fighting of the Philadelphia regiments."⁹⁷ Such a blow was taken rather seriously by the Philadelphians and

⁹⁴ Francis Amasa Walker. *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York, NY: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 547.

⁹⁵ St. Clair Augustin Mulholland, *Story of the 116th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1903), 279

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* 279.

⁹⁷ Joseph R. Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1906), 280.

resulted in their comparatively poor showing at Reams Station. Added to the Brigade of General Thomas Smyth, the brigade fared as poorly as any in Gibbon's Division. After fleeing from their works on the left flank, Smyth reported to Gibbon that he simply "could not again reform his line for an advance."⁹⁸ Smyth's consolidated command did not perform as well as they had with their former commands and the effects of Hancock reactionary response to the disaster at Jerusalem Plank Road were sharply felt. Though the compacting of brigades seemed necessary at the time, it certainly seems to exhibit a wide array negative outcomes, most specifically in the increased waning of the corps fighting capacity.

By far the most frequently referenced cause to the quick defeat of the Second Corps at Ream's Station is the poor showing on the part of newly drafted men and raw recruits. Joseph Ward of the 106th Pennsylvania wrote that the "these raw recruits in some cases formed a large majority of those present for duty in old regiments of high reputation, and sometimes completely changed their characters temporarily, and not only the characters of regiments, but even of brigades and divisions" and that with "very different motives from those that had influenced the men who had voluntarily filled the ranks before [...] had very little heart in the work."⁹⁹ Another soldier in the 20th Michigan spoke to the caliber of these men stating that "these men were not of the same quality as those who had enlisted as volunteers in 61 and 62, and no corps had suffered more than the gallant second. Many of these recruits, substitutes and conscripts were rushed to the front without drill or discipline, and with the purpose to "flunk" or desert at the first chance."¹⁰⁰ At Reams Station, these men were among the first to take flight. In *The First*

⁹⁸ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York, NY: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 597.

⁹⁹ Joseph R. Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1906), 280.

¹⁰⁰ Byron M. Cutcheon, *STORY OF THE TWENTIETH MICHIGAN INFANTRY, JULY 15TH, 1862, TO MAY 30TH, 1865: Embracing... Official Documents on File in the Records of the S. S.I.*: (FORGOTTEN BOOKS, 2016), 152.

Division, Mulholland noted that Artillery fire proceeding the infantry attacks “demoralized to a great extent many of the recruit and substitutes who had recently joined the second corps.”¹⁰¹ Hancock himself later admitted that the loss at Reams Station came partially as a result of the fact that “several of the regiments were largely made of recruits and substitutes.”¹⁰² One new regiment to the Second Corps, the 8th New York Heavy Artillery, performed so poorly that after the loss of their regimental colors Gibbon demanded that they be “published to the army as having rendered themselves unworthy to carry colors.”¹⁰³ Another novice regiment of “heavies”, the 4th New York Heavy Artillery were among the first to break, “giving up the works to the rebels.”¹⁰⁴ One demographic that elicited severe criticism from Officers such as Nelson Miles were immigrant soldiers. According to Miles, “It was the fault of a few Dutch cowards that did we did not win a glorious victory.”¹⁰⁵ Colonel James Beaver, commanding the 148th Pennsylvania attested to this accusation stating that “a full regiment, mostly drafted men, seized with panic, broke from the line and ran, like a flock of sheep.”¹⁰⁶ Another regiment that seems to have been disadvantaged by a large number of immigrant troops was the 20th Massachusetts of Gibbons Division. Artillerist John Billings, remarked that, “In referring to the disastrous battle of Reams Station....the Twentieth Massachusetts Regiment had received an accession of about two hundred German recruits only two or three days before that battle, not one of whom could understand the orders.”¹⁰⁷ While discrimination based on previous nationality would seem a

¹⁰¹ St. Clair Augustin Mulholland, *Story of the 116th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1903), 279.

¹⁰² Joseph R. Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1906), 289.

¹⁰³ *Ibid*, 289.

¹⁰⁴ Charles W Cowtan, *Services of the Tenth New York Volunteers (National Zouaves) in the War of the Rebellion*. (Bethesda: University Publications of America, 1992), 316.

¹⁰⁵ Lawrence A. Kreiser, *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), 209.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid*, 209.

¹⁰⁷ John Davis Billings, *Hardtack and Coffee, or The Unwritten Story of Army Life* (Boston: G. M. Smith &, 1887), 208.

culprit for such actions, there is no debate that both the 7th New York and the 20th Massachusetts performed terribly in the battle of Reams Station. It is more likely, however, that their failure to act is most attributable to the time that they had been in service and a language barrier that prevented them from thoroughly understanding drills. Such incompetency for drill was not limited to these German Soldiers as draftees and recruits from both of the divisions engaged at Reams Station failed to fight determinedly. Just like at Bull Run in 1861, the inexperience of fresh troops proved disastrous for the union and shows yet another reason for the Second Army Corps' sharp decline.

Fatigue also plagued a majority of the soldiers who participated in the action. Even Hancock, who had tried so desperately to rally his stampeding men, confessed that at Reams Station his men had not yet “recovered from the fatigue of their long marches” and that the loss was due “principally to their great fatigue and to their heavy losses during the campaign.”¹⁰⁸ Walker corroborates this stating that, “Worn out by excessive exertions, cut up in a score of charges against entrenched positions, their better officers and braver sergeants and men nearly all killed or in hospital, regiments reduced to a captain’s command, companies often to a corporal’s guard- this was the state to which one hundred days of continuous campaigning, on the avowed policy of ‘hammering,’ had reduced the old divisions of Richardson and Sedgewick.”¹⁰⁹ In the weeks that followed, news reached the northern home front of the tragedy at Reams Station. One soldier who wrote to *the New York Times* had his work published on August 31st. “The men of the two divisions we had there were so exhausted by fighting, hard marching and their laborious

¹⁰⁸ Edwin C. Bearss, *The Petersburg Campaign. Volume 1: The Eastern Front Battles, June –August 1864*. Vol. 1.(El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2012), 347; Joseph R. Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1906), 289.

¹⁰⁹ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac*. (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 605.

work on the railroad that their effective strength had been very materially reduced,” he wrote.¹¹⁰ Reference to casualties as a source of fatigue on the corps as a whole represented a more cumulative source of wear. In regards to the literal strains upon the men of Gibbon’s and Miles’s divisions, Hancock remarked that the march to Reams Station, “was one of the most fatiguing and difficult performed by the troops during the campaign, owing to the wretched condition of the roads.”¹¹¹ Francis Walker too added that, “the roads from Deep Bottom to Petersburg were in miserable condition, even for Virginia”¹¹² Poor roads not only affected the progress of infantry, but of cavalry and artillery as hooves and wrought iron churned the sandy soil. Altogether the march to the station left Hancock’s men, as Miles put it, “fagged out.”¹¹³ Between the cumulative effects of the recent campaign, the march to the fight and the strenuous nature of railroad destruction, the Second Corps had little energy to improve the earthen works allotted to them, much less defend them. This lack of energy coupled with the overbearing heat of the August sun, was likely the chief reason as to why even veteran soldiers ran.

Following the defeat at Ream’s station, Hancock was horrified by the performance of the Second Corps. According to Morgan, “It is not surprising that Hancock was deeply stirred by situation, for it was the first time he had felt the bitterness of defeat during the war. He had seen his troops fail in their attempts to carry the entrenched positions of the enemy; but he had never before the mortification of seeing them driven, and his lines and guns taken, as on this

¹¹⁰ "THE BATTLE AT REAM'S STATION.: Interesting Description of the Struggle." *The New York Times* (New York), August 31, 1864. Accessed April 1, 2018. <https://search.proquest.com/docview/91814029/pageviewPDF/9DAD8AF743EF458EPQ/1?accountid=29140>.

¹¹¹ Joseph R. Ward, *History of the One Hundred and Sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1906), 289.

¹¹² Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891), 581.

¹¹³ Edwin C. Bearss, *The Petersburg Campaign. Volume 1: The Eastern Front Battles, June –August 1864*. Vol. 1. (El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie, 2012), 347.

occasion.”¹¹⁴ To quell his anxiety, Meade reassured Hancock stating, “I am satisfied you and your command have done all in your power, and though you have met with a reverse, the honor and escutcheon of the Old Second is as bright as ever, and will, on some future occasion, prove it is only when enormous odds are brought against them that they can be moved. Don’t let this matter worry you, because you have given me every satisfaction.”¹¹⁵ Meade, however, was incorrect in his assertion that the Second Corps would prove itself “on some future occasion.”¹¹⁶ When suggested by Grant that Hancock’s corps assume yet another offensive that September, Hancock replied that the Second Corps, “would not be available for any serious work.”¹¹⁷ In the months that followed however, the Second Corps saw limited involvement in the battles of Hatcher’s Run, Boydton Plank road and the pursuit of Lee’s Army to Appomattox under the command of General Andrew A. Humphreys. Succeeding Hancock following his transfer to independent command in Washington D.C., Humphreys led the Second Corps from November 1864 until the Grand review of the Armies following the war’s end in 1865. Though more than capable as a corps commander, Grant relied little on Humphreys in the campaigns of the 1865. On multiple occasions, it was made perfectly clear, that the Second Corps no longer maintained the stamina, manpower or proficiency to move the enemy as it once did.

The sharp decline in the fighting ability of the Second Army Corps is one clearly traced via the corps’ performance during the spring and summer of 1864. While the corps exhibited a mixed performance in Ulysses S. Grant’s Overland Campaign proceeding the Siege of Petersburg, the battles of Jerusalem Plank Road on June 22nd and Reams Station on August 25th

¹¹⁴ Francis Amasa Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891) 598.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 547.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid*, 547.

¹¹⁷ Donald Ernsberger. *Paddy Owens Regulars: A History of the 69th Pennsylvania Irish Volunteers* (Xlibris Corp, 2004), 895.

serve as primary examples of the corps inability to drive the enemy as it once did at Antietam and Gettysburg. On both occasions, the influence of casualties, reorganization, draftees and recruits and fatigue had made their impact severely felt. While the cumulative effects of the previous three years of the war certainly had a significant impact, Grant's overuse of the Second Corps during the Overland Campaign contributed heavily to the various reasons attributed to its sharp decline in effectiveness. Never before had the corps endured so many casualties, marched so far and endured so much in such a short period of time. The casualties sustained by the corps leading up to and between the battles of Jerusalem Plank Road and Reams Station severely disadvantaged the Second Army Corps' performance. While historians up to this date have aimed to provide reasonable justification for the Corp's sudden drop off in effectiveness, they have often concluded on singular factors for this decline. However, this singular approach simplifies an issue caused by a wide variety of factors that all had an equal hand. Massive casualties, morale destroying reorganizations, inexperienced recruits, and crippling fatigue all led to the downfall of even the most proficient Second Corps regiments. While exceptions did exist, and heroes did emerge, the Second Army Corps' performance in the battles around Petersburg lead to an end of their spotless reputation within Meade's Army of the Potomac.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- "183rd Regiment List of Killed and Wounded." Philadelphia Inquirer. Accessed February 5, 2018. <http://www.pacivilwar.com/newspapers/philadelphiainquirer18640623.html>.
- Banes, Charles H. The History of the Philadelphia Brigade. Sixty-ninth, Seventy-first, Seventy-second, and One hundred and sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers. Philadelphia: J.B. Lippencott & Co., 1876.
- Billings, John Davis. Hardtack and Coffee, or the Unwritten Story of Army Life. Boston: G. M. Smith & Co, 1887.
- Humphreys, Andrew A. The Virginia Campaign of '64 And '65. Vol. 12. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883.
- McDermott, Anthony W., and John E. Reilly. A Brief History of the 69th Regiment, Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers: From Its Formation until Final Muster out of the United States Service. Philadelphia: D.J. Gallagher &, 1889.
- Mulholland, St Clair Augustin. Story of the 116th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion. Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1903.
- Roback, Henry. Veteran Volunteers of Herkimer and Otsego Counties in the War of the Rebellion. Utica: L.C. Child and Son, 1888
- Walker, Francis Amasa. History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1891.
- Ward, Joseph R. History of the One Hundred and Sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers. Philadelphia: F. McManus, 1906.
- White, William C. William White to Parents. June 26, 1864. William C. White Letters, 1861-1869 (MC17). Philadelphia: Philadelphia Archdiocesan Historical Research Center, 2001. "THE BATTLE AT REAM'S STATION.; Interesting Description of the Struggle." The New York Times, Accessed February 6, 2018. <http://www.nytimes.com/1864/08/31/archives/the-battle-at-reams-station-interesting-description-of-the-struggle.html>.
- Shaw, Horace H., Charles J. House, and Clarence Woodcock. The First Maine Heavy Artillery, 1862-1862, A History of its part and place in the War for the Union, with and outline of causes of War and its results to our country. Portland:1903

Smith, John Day. History of the Nineteenth Regiment of Maine Volunteer Infantry, 1862-1865. Minneapolis, MN: Great Western printing company, 1909

Secondary Sources

Bearss, Edwin C. The Petersburg Campaign. Volume 1: The Eastern Front Battles, June – August 1864. Vol. 1. El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2012.

Conyngham, David Power, and Lawrence Frederick. Kohl. The Irish Brigade and Its Campaigns. New York: Fordham University Press, 1994.

Cowtan, Charles W. Services of the Tenth New York Volunteers (National Zouaves) in the War of the Rebellion. Bethesda, MD: University Publications of America, 1992.

Ernsberger, Donald. *Paddy Owens Regulars: A History of the 69th Pennsylvania Irish Volunteers*. Xlibris Corp, 2004.

Gottfried, Bradley M. *Stopping Pickett*. Shippensburg: White Mane Books Publication, 1999.

Grant, Susan-Mary, and Brian Holden Reid. *Themes of the American Civil War: The War between the States*. New York: Routledge, 2010.

Hess, Earle J. *The Union Soldier in Battle: Enduring the Ordeal of Combat*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005.

Jones, Wilmer L. *Generals in Blue and Gray: Lincoln's Generals*. Vol. 1. Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, 2006.

Kreiser, Lawrence A. *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012.

Sears, Stephen W. *Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003.

