

Defeating Lee: a History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac

John Daley

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr>

Recommended Citation

Daley, John (2012) "Defeating Lee: a History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac," *Civil War Book Review*. Vol. 14 : Iss. 1 .

DOI: 10.31390/cwbr.14.1.12

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol14/iss1/34>

Review

Daley, John

Winter 2012

Kreiser, Lawrence A. Jr. *Defeating Lee: A History of the Second Corps, Army of the Potomac*. Indiana University Press, \$34.95 ISBN 978-0-253-35616-1

Re-Assessing the Second Corps

Not since Francis Walker's *History of the Second Corps in the Army of the Potomac* appeared in 1887 has anyone attempted a general history of the Army of the Potomac's Second Corps. That a scholarly revision of Walker's useful but at times hagiographical classic has appeared only now is itself instructive. Unlike the regiments whose histories have appeared by the hundreds over the past century and a half, a corps is, at bottom, a headquarters to which army commanders add and subtract subordinate units as each new situation demands. That periodic reorganization, in turn, often affects organizational composition and character profoundly. Also, the corps is an army's highest tactical echelon and its staff, high enough up the chain of command so that any sense of identity more often orients upward. As Kreiser (Stillman College) notes, only when Second Corps staff officer Charles H. Morgan had rejected a request to write its history, on the grounds that the identities of field armies and their component corps were indistinguishable, did Walker undertake the assignment. Exactly how many details had been obscured by this late start cannot be known, and Walker himself sensed that danger. Had Kreiser merely unearthed a few of those details, his contribution would have been significant enough; he accomplished much more. Walker argues that the Second was the most effective corps in the Army of the Potomac, but Kreiser uncovers that distinction's causes, effects, and limitations.

However tempting it might have been to frame Second Corps' unsurpassed combat record solely in terms of leadership, Kreiser begins with demographics. Like other corps in the Army of the Potomac, the Second comprised regiments drawn mostly from the Northeast, yet a higher percentage of its original regiments were ethnic and most of those, from New York, Philadelphia, and

Boston. Known as the "Democratic Corps" long before the Democrat Hancock rose to command it, the majority of its volunteers fought for the Union to defend their own liberties. Leading a force that contained fewer Republicans and abolitionists than its counterparts was a cadre of field grade and general officers with more military and business experience than was the army-wide norm. Perhaps most important, the Second's first commander, Edwin V. "Old Bull" Sumner did not denigrate volunteers, trained them well, and led them by example in their first major engagement at Fair Oaks, where other union corps fared less well. By the end of the Seven Days, Second Corps had added sound performances at Savage Station and Glendale but here, too, Kreiser, unlike Walker, emphasizes the poor performance of other Union corps and sloppy Confederate coordination as partial causes for success. Regarding Lincoln's appointment of a 63 year old to corps command in the first place, Kreiser makes a compelling case: no one had more experience, charges of favoritism might have come with the appointment of someone younger and, despite his infirmities and the tactical stolidity he would later demonstrate at Antietam, Sumner was still the most able of McClellan's four original corps commanders. Readers familiar with Marion V. Armstrong's *Unfurl Those Colors! McClellan, Sumner, and the Second Army Corps in the Antietam Campaign* will see no such thorough rehabilitation of Old Bull here, but are likely to agree with Kreiser that at least a partial one is warranted.

Ethnically concentrated, politically distinctive, and successful, if partly by default, Second Corps continued to benefit from better unit cohesion than McClellan's other corps and, save for Sumner's assignment of the blue-blooded 29th Massachusetts to the Irish Brigade, the grouping of additional regiments preserved that cohesion. Rather than follow the standard practice of intermingling a new regiment with experienced ones in the same brigade, Sumner kept his most battle-hardened formations undiluted, an organizational scheme generally followed by his Second Corps successors until after the Overland Campaign. But, as Walker observed in 1887, Kreiser reminds us that the hardest fighting yields the highest losses, and the Second sustained more than its share at Antietam, Fredericksburg, and Gettysburg. Command shakeups followed major battles and, whereas Walker sometimes protects reputations unduly, Kreiser commends and chastises with a more even hand. For example, despite the Second's horrendous losses at Fredericksburg, both Sumner and his immediate successor in corps command, Darius Couch, maintained their professionalism by distancing themselves from the more highly politicized

efforts to have Burnside removed. While the subsequent transfer of Sumner and relief of Couch come as no surprise in the midst of post-Fredericksburg and post-Chancellorsville finger-pointing, severe losses among experienced subordinate commanders dating from Antietam posed a far larger problem. The looming expiration of three-year enlistments compounded this problem in the Spring of 1864, giving Couch's replacement, Winfield Scott Hancock, a leadership challenge as thorny as any he had faced in battle.

One of North's premier field commanders, "Hancock the Superb" had impressed McClellan, Hooker, and Meade with an uncommon coolness under fire since his days as a brigade commander on the Peninsula. His admonition to a nervous staff officer that "[t]here are times when a corps commander's life does not count" fittingly approaches legend, and Kreiser detracts from none of that. However, unlike Walker's Hancock, Kreiser's makes avoidable and occasionally inexcusable mistakes that contribute to his command's disintegration just as surely as had its casualty count. As to exactly when the physical and psychological effects of that casualty count became terminal, the author offers an alternative to Morgan's frequently accepted assessment. The high combat losses following Cold Harbor, Kreiser argues, indicate that Petersburg, not Spotsylvania, was the breaking point. Given that severe losses sometimes stem from other causes than aggressiveness, a point that the author compellingly makes elsewhere, that conclusion is impeachable. At Petersburg, Hancock attributed the uncharacteristic sluggishness to fatigue, an explanation that Walker takes at face value. Noting well-documented instances where worn-out veterans in long-serving regiments not only refused to attack, but urged their untried counterparts in newly arrived units to hunker down as well, Kreiser casts serious doubt on Hancock's explanation. Whether the "Petersburg syndrome" that took hold in the summer of 1864 stemmed more from the degradation of Second Corps' component formations or improved Confederate defensive positions -- no longer mere stone walls or sunken roads -- remains indefinite (199).

The reevaluation of Hancock and some of his major subordinates as leaders is more clearly presented and difficult to rejoin. Some of the excessive casualty counts from June 1864 on were their fault. At Cold Harbor, Francis Barlow (First Division) and John Gibbon (Second Division) purposely placed new regiments in the first wave because they correctly suspected that combat-wise veterans of the Wilderness and Spotsylvania might be less willing to press an assault against improved defenses and, one can infer, long odds. Hancock advised his superiors against further attacks as that situation deteriorated, but the

same tactical sense eluded him in key instances during the Petersburg Campaign. Perhaps more surprising, his feel for organizational cohesion left him as well. After Second Corps had advanced with an unsecured flank at Jerusalem Plank Road and suffered the consequences, Hancock reacted by "ruthlessly consolidating units," even though allowing Second and Sixth Corps to advance without mutual support had been Meade's idea (203). Hancock's crackdown only disrupted unit integrity and morale further. In the wake of an even more ignominious defeat at Ream's Station five weeks later, Gibbon deprived several poorly performing Second Division regiments of their right to carry colors. This calculated humiliation proved too extreme even for Hancock, but Meade soon instituted the policy on an army-wide basis. Although later rescinded, authorization for mass punishment of this sort aptly expressed the frustrations of an ever more static war of position; a war increasingly at odds with an entire army's training and prior combat experience.

If we accept Kreiser's carefully supported arguments -- that the Second's demographic characteristics, better leaders, and pride transcendent of the usual regimental loyalties had made it the linchpin of an army prior to Petersburg -- it follows that those frustrations must have been all the more grievous for its own soldiers. And although the author is to be commended for staying focused on the organization rather than its most famous commander, Hancock understandably occupies center stage at key moments. No longer do we see Walker's superhero, but a protagonist who, in feverishly seeking redemption for a handful of eleventh hour reverses, destroys much of what he had helped build.

A former Armor officer, John Daley is an Associate Professor of History at Pittsburg State University in southeastern Kansas, where he teaches military history courses.