The Turning Point of the Civil War

The Battle of Gettysburg took place in Pennsylvania between July 1-3rd, 1863. This battle was a significant turning point of the Civil War because as one of the bloodiest battles in American history, it caused major losses for both sides and swayed the war in favor of the Union. Both Armies in total lost around 55,000 troops, not counting the injured. As the Confederate forces retreated to Virginia, defeated and war-weary, they never fully recovered, leading to a triumphant victory for the Union.

How it Started

The Battle of Gettysburg was considered one of the most important engagements of the Civil War, and it happened completely by chance. No one ever talked about the battle before hand. The opposing troops met up outside of Gettysburg, and the conflict began. After his victory at Chancellorsville in Virginia, against the Army of Potomac, Confederate commander Robert E. Lee decided to focus on invading the Northern states to relieve pressure on war-weary Virginia. Virginia experienced many battles before Gettysburg; Lee called this one the Gettysburg campaign. After the battle of Chancellorsville, Union General Joseph Hooker resigned and was replaced by George Meade. The Confederate troops came in contact with one another outside of Gettysburg. By noon, the battle had started. The sound of war soon attracted other Confederate units.¹

The Armies

George G. Meade (leading the Army of Potomac) was the leading general of the Union. He had only been heading the army for 3 days before a stunning defeat at Gettysburg. The Union numbered around 93,000 at the beginning but lost nearly 23,055 troops. Confederate General Robert E. Lee (leading the army of Northern Virginia) was originally from the north, but after he learned about the battles around Virginia, he wanted to help protect his beloved home state. The Confederate forces numbered approximately 71,000, but they lost nearly 28,000 troops in battle (more than one-third of Lee’s troops).

July 1, 1863

The engagement at Gettysburg started a battle between the isolated units of the Confederate forces and the Union forces. After about an hour of fierce battling, the Union noticed they were outnumbered, so the remaining forces retreated to high ground south of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. The first day proceeded in three phases as troops continuously arrived at the battle. It was Confederate General Heth that ordered the first attack on the troops that were defending Gettysburg on top of McPherson’s Ridge. McPherson’s Ridge was one of the vantage points that the Union forces used to help them. Two Confederate brigades moved forward, with the intention of quickly defeating the Union. However, the Union troops fought brilliantly as they held off the Confederate forces for two hours. Soon after, Union General John Reynolds arrived with his infantry troops. John Reynolds was said to be killed upon arrival; however, his troops fought hard, driving the Confederate
forces away from McPherson’s Ridge and making a great number of casualties in the process. During this time, the casualties numbered around 3,000 soldiers. Around two o’clock pm, a second attack was launched. Confederate Lieutenant Richard Ewell’s corps charged the Union line from the right flank. After seeing this as a successful strategy, Robert E. Lee ordered an attack along the entire line. The Unions troops were quickly overwhelmed and fled to Cemetery Ridge. George Meade realized they were in a great defensive position and decided to stay put. This decision not only led to day one coming to a close, but it also gave the Union the advantage regarding troop numbers.

July 2, 1863

The night of July 1st, reinforcements arrived at the battlefield for both the Union and Confederates. As the numbers increased, the confidence was boosted tremendously. The first movement on the second day was made by Robert E. Lee when he ordered General James Longstreet to attack the Union’s left flank. Lee’s assumption was that his forces would be able to surprise the Union when they were preoccupied with the Confederates in plain sight on Culp’s Hill. Longstreet didn’t believe the plan would be effective, but he went through with it anyway. When he arrived and found the whole Union Corp, they had to fight. The attack on the main Union began with an artillery bombardment executed under the leadership of General Hood. This progressed with very bloody fighting, and oftentimes hand-to-hand combat, as the Confederates fought their way through Devil’s Den and forward to Little Round Top.

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Confederate General Richard Anderson began his attack on the Union lines in the center of Gettysburg. Unfortunately, this section had been thinned out as the troops were moved to reinforce other areas to receive the brunt of the attacks. The rebels had initial success; however, it didn't last long as the First Minnesota regiment arrived and successfully held off the rebels, making time for the generals to strategize. The last attack of the day was executed at 7 p.m. Similar to many of the Confederate attacks that day, it was short-lived as the Union reinforcements left the rebels at a disadvantage and eventually led to the confederate’s retreat.\footnote{Gettysburg Tours Day 2 page 2} While Lee came close to breaking past the Union’s lines, he ultimately failed to do so on the second day of this bloody battle. Casualties were up to at least 10,000 on each side. Shaken by this realization, the Union generals called a meeting to vote on what they should do: remain at Gettysburg or withdraw from battle. Almost every general of the Union army was at the meeting and
even though it would be tough, they wanted to win. The vote was unanimous - stay and fight.

July 3, 1863

On the night of July 2nd, both the Union and the Confederate forces received reinforcements. The numbers on each side were almost equal to the amount at the beginning of the war. The Union was the first side to attack by sending troops to retrieve Culp's Hill from the Confederate in hopes of gaining ground from the previous day. The battle lasted around 8 hours and concluded with the Confederate forces retreating. Meanwhile, Lee was busy planning the final attack on Gettysburg, which we now know today as Pickett's Charge. The tactic was to attack the middle of the Union force while sending in reinforcements to attack the rear at the same time. Lee thought this would end with the splitting of the Union troops. General Lee thought if this went the correct way, the entire battle would be theirs. At around 1 pm, the Confederate artillery opened fire on the Union center, which led to one hour of the most massive artillery bombardment in the entire Civil War. Around 2 pm, the Union forces slowed their firing to attempt to trick the Confederates into thinking the Union forces had decreased. At 3 pm the trick worked as the Confederates ceased fire. The commander of the Confederate artillery convinced Pickett that they needed to charge now, which lead to Pickett seeking and receiving

permission from General Longstreet to carry out the charge. Over 12,000 troops lined up and started to march across a field heading toward a small area of trees behind Federal lines. Before they made it halfway across the field, the Union fired upon the Confederates from their positions on Cemetery Ridge and Little Round Top. The Confederates bravely pushed forward toward a small stone wall which was their destination. The remaining men rushed the small wall and brutal hand-to-hand combat ensued. The Union quickly reinforced their lines and prepared for a counterattack. The rebels expected reinforcement, but they never came. The rebels had no choice but to retreat to original lines. Once they arrived, General Lee warned them to be ready for a counterattack that never came. An entire day passed without any movement from either side. The battle finally came to a close on the night of July 4th.

"Cemetery Ridge." World History Group 1

The Gettysburg Address

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On November 19, 1863 President Abraham Lincoln made a famous speech at the National Cemetery of Gettysburg. In this speech, known as the Gettysburg Address, he called what happened in Gettysburg "new birth of freedom," a phrase that made its way into our national poetry and the wall of his memorial. In this speech, Lincoln honored the men who had held their position against a furious assault.

Why is it the Turning Point of the War

The Battle of Gettysburg is known as the turning point of the War for two main reasons. The first reason is that after the Confederate forces were defeated, they were forced to switch from offense to defense as they retreated from Gettysburg and travelled through Maryland, over the Potomac River, and to the safety of their home base in Virginia. The Confederates never again pushed so far into the Union’s territory. Gettysburg stopped the Confederacy’s last full-scale attack on the north. The second reason is that if Lee’s defeat would have never happened, the Confederate forces would have been able to keep heading North, which could have given the war to the south.

Conclusion

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In Pennsylvania between July 1-3rd, 1863, the Union army, led by General George G. Meade, triumphed after a fierce battle against the Confederate forces, led by General Robert E. Lee. Even though this important battle took place merely by accident, it is still known as the most bloody battle to ever occur on American soil. The Battle of Gettysburg was very important to the Civil War as it diminished almost the entire army of Northern Virginia, as well as pushing the confederate forces south back to Virginia.