



GETTYSBURG—AN EPILOGUE

by Lawrence Elliott

HISTORIANS still debate the role of chance at Gettysburg. Neither commander wanted to fight there, but in the tides of war, the unforeseen often becomes the reality. On an order shouted through the din of battle, on a sudden spate of fury or courage, the fate of a nation sometimes hangs.

Today, men ask what would have happened if Jeb Stuart had not raced off on a cavalry raid, robbing Lee of the eyes of his armies? What if Stonewall Jackson had still been alive to demonstrate his tactical wizardry?

What if Lee had noted that Little Round Top commanded the battlefield? Unoccupied until July 2, its importance was suddenly recognized by both sides. Then the 20th Maine threw the Rebels back and a Confederate commander mourned: "Another lost opportunity!"

What if Lee had heeded a subordinate's warning that Pickett's troops were doomed? Longstreet told him before the ill-fated charge: "General, I have been a soldier all my life. It is my opinion that no 15,000 men ever arrayed for battle can take that position."

But Lee stood firm. Federal batteries on Cemetery Ridge were silent, and the Southern leader believed they had expended their ammunition. Only after Pickett's men moved out and the fearful cannonading began, did Lee learn the truth—the Yankees had husbanded their shells for the charge.

And Northerners were to lament lost opportunities, too. Federal

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raiders had cut the Confederate line of retreat, and for days after the battle, Lee waited fearfully for his disheartened troops to be smashed. But Meade hesitated.

Lincoln, who had wanted to come to Gettysburg and spur the army forward, spoke sadly when he heard that Lee's forces had escaped. "We had only to stretch forth our hands and they were ours. And nothing I could say or do could make the army move."

And so Lee withdrew, to continue the Confederacy's futile struggle for two long years more . . .

At Gettysburg, the heat broke at last, and rain fell on July 4. As doctors and ambulances moved onto the scene, neither retreating Confederates nor jubilant Northerners recognized the great issue that had been decided on that field. Only a few sensed that the twilight of the Confederacy had come.

Today, Gettysburg is again a placid town. Its population has increased only a few thousand since the fateful days of 1863. Sloping hills and tended trees might be those of any park, for time has rubbed away the scars of war. But markers tell the story of the men who lie, untroubled now, side by side:

Position held by the 1st Regiment, Delaware Volunteer Infantry.

A council of war was held in this house on the night of July 2, 1863.

These, and the ever-burning torch of peace on Oak Ridge, are the last and lasting tributes to the men of valor "who here gave their lives that that nation might live."