DEFEATING LEE

A HISTORY OF THE SECOND CORPS ♣ ARMY OF THE POTOMAC ♣

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1 BEGINNINGS

THE ORGANIZATION OF THE SECOND CORPS

The Second Corps officially came into existence on March 8, 1862, when President Lincoln ordered the creation of the first four Union army corps. Yet the history of the Second Corps dates back to the Confederate bombardment of Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861. Over the intervening eleven months, the Union high command debated when to create army corps, how they should be organized, and who should command them. All the while, the soldiers who first served in the Second Corps received their introduction into military life and discussed why they fought. The events that occurred across the Union in 1861 and early 1862 had a significant influence on the Second Corps, and any analysis of its history most properly begins with them.

CREATING THE SECOND CORPS

Major General George McClellan remembered seeing only an armed rabble when he arrived in late July 1861 to take command of the Union forces stationed in and around Washington, D.C. The Union army had suffered a near-rout around Bull Run, Virginia, only a few days earlier, after going into battle for the first time. The results still told when McClellan arrived. Stragglers skulked through the streets of Washington, while their officers found shelter in nearby barrooms. Soldiers who had enlisted for three-month terms of service in the spring, as long as many northerners expected the fighting to last at the time, began to stream home. Everything appeared in disarray. An exasperated

McClellan later claimed that he had no army to command, "only a mere collection of regiments cowering on the banks of the Potomac."[1]

McClellan certainly believed himself capable of bringing order from confusion. McClellan was vain and, often, petulant. But he had reason to express pride in his professional accomplishments. Graduating second in his class from West Point in 1846, McClellan had served with distinction as an engineer in the Mexican War. He traveled to Europe in 1855, as part of a commission appointed by the War Department to study military organization and development there. McClellan resigned from the army two years later, to accept a job as chief engineer of the Illinois Central Railroad. Success also came quickly in the civilian world, and by 1861 McClellan served as president of the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad. With the start of the Civil War, McClellan received appointment as the second-ranking officer in the Union army. Assigned to protect the strongly pro-Union residents of western Virginia, McClellan won battlefield victories at Rich Mountain and Corrick's Ford. The two battles marked some of the few Union military successes to date and won McClellan praise across the Union as a "young Napoleon."[2]

The laurels continued outside Washington, where, displaying superb organizational and administrative skills, McClellan built the newly named Army of the Potomac from the ground up. Regiments enlisted for two- and three-year terms of service arrived daily. Regiments fielded ten companies, each with an authorized strength of one hundred officers and enlisted men. McClellan grouped three to four regiments into brigades, a tactical formation most recently employed by Americans during the Mexican War. McClellan brigaded together regiments as they arrived in Washington, a practice with some drawbacks. The battlefield experience varied widely between brigades. Some brigades fielded regiments that all had participated in the Bull Run Campaign. In other brigades, the regiments had only recently arrived in Washington. Soldiers in these units had yet to experience life in the field, let alone the sounds and sights of battle. The payoff to the quick organization of brigades came with the army soon ready to take the field. This was no small consideration to McClellan, who feared that a quick Confederate strike northward might capture Washington. The worry exaggerated Confederate offensive capacities at the time, but McClellan

correctly recognized the disaster that such a blow would deal the Union war effort.[3]

Grouping brigades into divisions was the next organizational task to occupy McClellan. He determined assignments by the geographic proximity of brigades in camp to create as little disruption to his deployments as possible. The three brigades that served in Brigadier General Charles Stone's division—and that later fought in the Second Corps—all were stationed along the upper Potomac River when brought together in early October. Stone's command numbered about 11,140 men as created, nearly as large as the American army that had captured Mexico City in 1847. The numbers of men in Stone's division were similar to the other divisions created by McClellan, an indication of the magnitude of the Union war effort in the East. The ten divisions assembled by the late fall of 1861 ranged from the largest (Brigadier General Nathaniel Banks's) at 14,882 men to the smallest (Brigadier General Joseph Hooker's) at 8,342 men.[4]

McClellan began to think about organizing his divisions into army corps by the late summer. First created in the early 1800s by the French emperor Napoleon Bonaparte, army corps had dramatically altered the conduct of war in Europe. Armies to that time had attempted to maneuver massive numbers of men and equipment, sometimes nearing 200,000 soldiers and hundreds of guns, as a single unit. Seeking a war-winning advantage, Napoleon grouped his infantry, cavalry, and artillery into corps that numbered between 20,000 and 40,000 men. These forces maneuvered independently of one another, greatly increasing the French army's operational mobility. Napoleon boasted that, with good leadership, one of his corps "could go anywhere." Napoleon brought his corps back together when battle loomed, thereby gaining the twin benefits of concentration of force and tactical maneuverability. The corps system helped the French to win smashing victories over the Austrians and Russians at Austerlitz in 1805, the Prussians at Jena in 1806, and the Russians again the next year at Friedland. The defeated European powers quickly learned the lesson. Between 1809 and 1815, the Allied nations organized their armies into corps. Campaigns now emphasized material and endurance, rather than decisive battle. By the Battle of Waterloo and the end of the Napoleonic Wars, the use of corps had helped European armies evolve into modern fighting forces.[5]

McClellan recognized the benefit of organizing corps within the Army of the Potomac. He was in uncharted territory, because no previous American army had been large enough to warrant their creation. Not everyone recognized the need for army corps, even as the Union forces swelled in strength. General Winfield Scott, the general in chief of the Union army and the chief military advisor to President Lincoln, argued that the Army of the Potomac need only take the field organized into brigades. Scott was not someone to discount lightly. A veteran of every American war since 1812, Scott had achieved national fame for his bravery and leadership in the Mexican War. McClellan could not see it. Privately he grumbled that Scott "understands nothing, appreciates nothing, and is ever in my way."[6] In meetings with Scott, McClellan correctly pointed out that fighting forces "all the world over" were organized into armies, corps, and divisions. McClellan hardly helped his cause, however, by reminding Scott that the Mexican War was "a very small affair" by comparison to the Civil War. Scott remained unconvinced, perhaps not surprisingly in the face of a perceived professional attack.[7]

The split with Scott became increasingly acrimonious, fueled largely by McClellan. Believing that two generals was one too many to command the Union army, McClellan was determined to come out on top. Here he found unlikely political allies. McClellan was a conservative Democrat, and he fought primarily to preserve the Union. Radical Republicans in Congress, however, called for a no-holds barred struggle to smash the South and destroy slavery. Many Radical congressmen believed Scott too old and feeble to lead a war of conquest. McClellan captured their support by publicly offering that the Army of the Potomac should march quickly and "crush the rebellion at one blow."[8] McClellan could afford such boasts because, at the moment, the military decision making was Scott's. But the Radicals believed that in McClellan they had found their man. Under mounting pressure from Radical leaders, Lincoln allowed Scott to retire for health reasons in late October. McClellan now carried a dual job, as both commander-in-chief of the Union army and commander of the Army of the Potomac. When Lincoln worried whether the burdens and responsibilities of leadership might be too great for any one man, McClellan replied otherwise. "I can do it all," he guaranteed.[9]

The pressures of command cowed many Civil War generals, but none, arguably, as much as McClellan. With Scott gone, McClellan had his way clear to organize army corps, but now he cautioned delay. He maintained that the best time to introduce corps was after the army had gone into battle; only then would he know who among his top generals were "best fitted to exercise these important commands."[10] The argument held some validity, but the problem was that McClellan gave no indication of when he might take the army into a campaign. As commander-in-chief, McClellan imagined swarms of Confederates in northern Virginia. And not only were these conjured-up Confederate battalions present in large number, they were, in McClellan's mind, preparing to launch a full-scale attack on Washington. Boasts of a swift campaign to end the war in Union victory disappeared with the fall leaves.[11]

The delay in organizing army corps doomed McClellan with the Radicals. The congressmen saw nothing good in the failure to organize the army's divisions into higher formations. The Radicals feared that McClellan might use the lack of corps as an excuse to continue to delay launching a campaign to capture Richmond. Or, perhaps worse from their perspective, McClellan might advance the army into the field still organized into divisions. Away from Washington and any Radical influence, McClellan might consult only with subordinate officers sympathetic to his political viewpoints. Democratic generals would wage the war according to their political philosophies, as well as reap any of the martial glories.[12]

The Radicals attempted to regain the upper hand in their standoff with McClellan by creating the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War in December 1861. Members of the Joint Committee had the authority to investigate any aspect of the Union war effort, and they quickly took up the question of whether the Army of the Potomac should be organized into corps. The one-sided debate featured a procession of star-studded witnesses. Brigadier General Irvin McDowell, the commander of the Union forces at the Battle of Bull Run and a former instructor of tactics at West Point, argued that corps needed to be created before the army could launch a war-winning offensive. Each corps should number up to 30,000 men, and once in the field, they should maneuver parallel

to one another. That way, if one corps suffered attack, "there would be one on each side to come to its assistance." Brigadier General Silas Casey, who had recently penned a manual on infantry tactics widely read throughout the Union army, agreed. Casey instructed that all of the "great generals" since Napoleon had found army corps necessary to effectively operate "large bodies of men in the field." The only resistance continued to come from McClellan. The general reminded members of the Joint Committee that appointing officers to command army corps was a tricky business. These men "could not be stowed away in a pigeon-hole" if they proved incompetent. Best for the Union cause to wait and see, rather than guess and be wrong.[13]

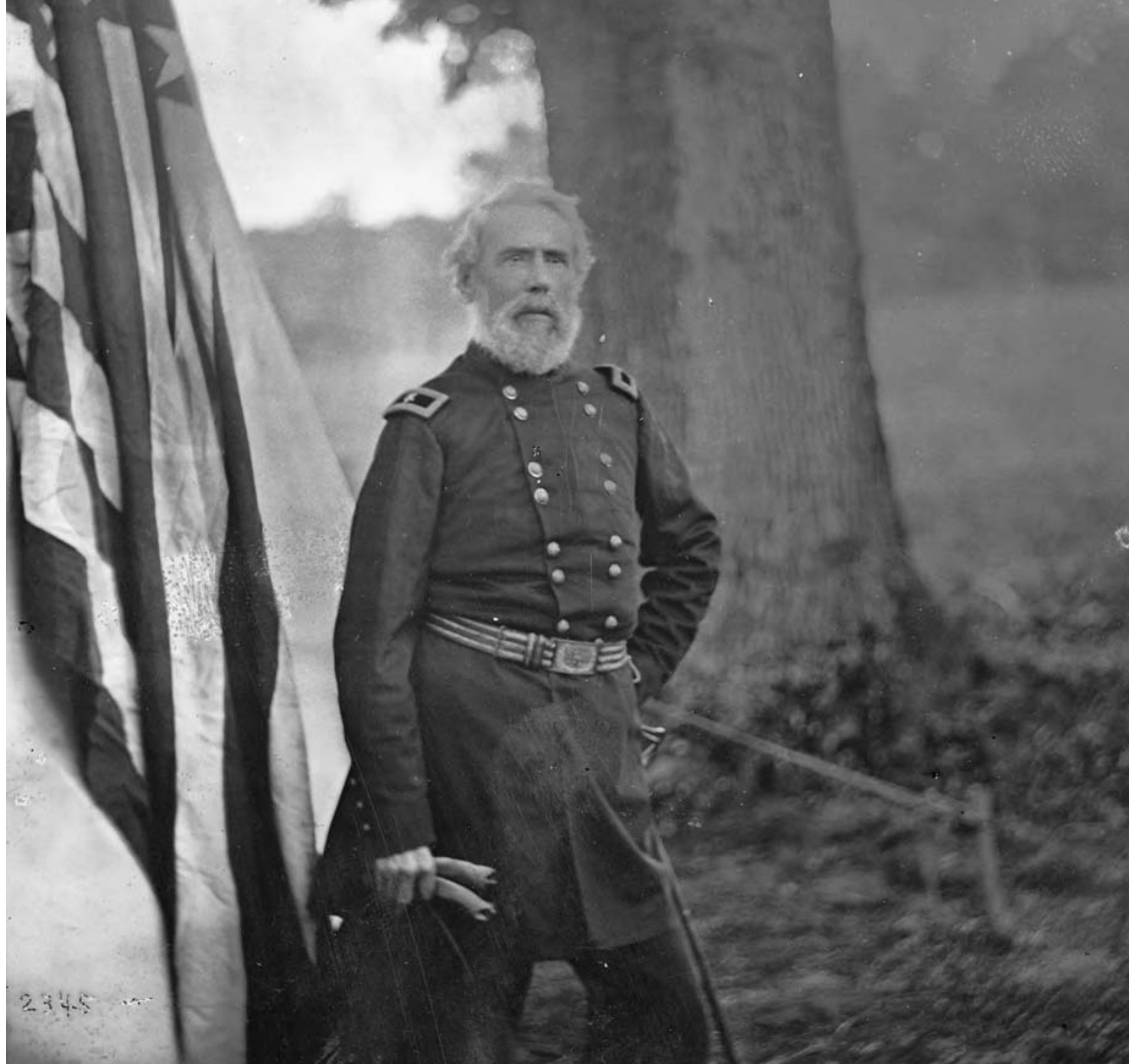
President Lincoln ultimately ordered the creation of army corps and broke the deadlock. He did so in part for military reasons. Secretary of War Edwin Stanton and members of the Joint Committee repeatedly pressed upon Lincoln the point that the creation of corps was vital to winning the war. Otherwise the Union army "would not be efficient."[14] Stanton's argument in favor of army corps likely carried special weight with the president. Stanton had taken over the office from the corrupt Simon Cameron in January. A brilliant administrator, Stanton was also a Democrat. That he agreed with the Radical Republicans about the necessity of creating army corps kept the matter in a military light. This is not to say that politics did not come into play. Lincoln, too, feared the specter of a Democratic clique dominating the high command of the army. Lincoln avoided the possibility by appointing McDowell to the First Corps, Brigadier General Edwin Sumner to the Second Corps, Brigadier General Samuel Heintzelman to the Third Corps, and Brigadier General Erasmus Keyes to the Fourth Corps. The four generals were the senior-most division commanders in the army, as well as Republicans. If need be, the new corps commanders might serve as a counterbalance to the political intrigues of McClellan.[15]

Lincoln has received some present-day criticism for his decision to advance the army's senior-ranking division commanders to corps command. Doing so "cursed" the army for much of its early career with "hidebound" officers.[16] And, in truth, none of the four initial Union corps commanders went on to win an independent command. Yet it is hard to see what Lincoln might have done otherwise. Advancing

generals based on battlefield talent would have been tricky, because few battles had yet been fought. Additionally, Lincoln wanted generals who were, if not openly supportive of his Republican administration, at least politically neutral. Bumping forward younger officers would only have opened Lincoln to charges of political favoritism. Going with the senior-ranking generals was the easiest option, and filled the otherwise vacant leadership positions.[17]

For an officer generally not widely remembered today, Edwin Sumner provoked strong response from his contemporaries when he assumed command of the Second Corps. No one would deny that Sumner had perhaps the greatest range of military experience of any high-ranking officer by the late winter of 1862. Born in Boston in 1797, Sumner had joined the army as a second lieutenant in 1819. He had served continuously over the next forty-three years, including fighting Indians and Mexicans while serving in the 1st Cavalry. The wear and tear had taken its toll. By the outbreak of the Civil War, fellow Union officers claimed that Sumner was increasingly short-tempered. McClellan thought worse. The army commander publicly praised his top-ranking subordinate as "an ideal soldier." In private, however, McClellan was scathing. Sumner was a "fool," barely fit to command a regiment, let alone an army corps.[18]

McClellan seemingly had a point. Other observers in the Army of the Potomac believed Sumner was in over his head as commander of the Second Corps.[19] In fairness, however, Sumner was the best of the four newly appointed officers. The career of Irvin McDowell was on the wane when he assumed command of the First Corps, after the disastrous Union defeat at Bull Run. McDowell held command in the East only through the end of the summer, when he received transfer to a succession of backwater departments. In the Third Corps, Samuel Heintzelman had compiled nearly as many years in the regular army as Sumner. Heintzelman was a thorough soldier. Subordinates whispered, however, that he lacked dash and, worse, imagination. Erasmus Keyes, the Fourth Corps commander, owed his seniority in rank to his prewar friendship with Winfield Scott. Keyes was more widely known throughout the army in 1861 and early 1862 for his vocal support of the Republican Party than for his leadership skills. McDowell, Heintzelman, and



Edwin Sumner. The oldest of the four Union corps commanders appointed by Lincoln during early 1862, Sumner brought with him considerable prewar military experience and an aggressive battlefield spirit. Library of Congress.

Keyes all were brave. But none possessed the charisma to inspire the men, and no contemporaries considered their subsequent departures a great loss to the army.

A more legitimate criticism of Sumner was that he simply was too elderly to exercise a field command. By the winter of 1862, Sumner was sixty-four years old. The next oldest corps commander was General Heintzelman, at only fifty-four years of age. Sumner had gained fame in

the prewar army as "Old Bull" for his physical vitality and vigor.[20] The change by 1862 was startling. Sumner sometimes seemed languid, and took longer to catch his breath. Compounding the decline in energy, Sumner was thrown from his horse while riding across a field that winter. The Union general had remounted and continued to ride, to the cheers of onlookers. But in the fall Sumner had badly bruised his lungs and shoulder. He had not yet recovered, making an open question how well he might confront the physical and mental challenges that would come once the army entered into active operations.[21]

Gray hair notwithstanding, Sumner made an attractive choice for high command for reasons beyond his prewar military experience. In a war that would require at least some Union offensive action to win, Sumner was undeniably aggressive. Lincoln gained firsthand insight into Sumner's all-or-nothing mentality in mid-February 1861, when traveling as president-elect from Springfield, Illinois, to Washington, D.C. Rumors swirled that southern sympathizers planned to kill Lincoln while he switched trains in Baltimore. Most of the assembled entourage, including Allan Pinkerton, the head of the Pinkerton National Detective Agency, urged Lincoln to wait until well after nightfall to enter the city. Sumner, who led the military escort, was one of the few dissenting voices. The former cavalry officer declared the suggested delay "a d_____d piece of cowardice." Instead, Sumner recommended that regular army soldiers clear a path through Baltimore, by force if necessary. Lincoln ultimately chose caution, passing through the city during the dead of night. He later regretted the decision because of the aspersions of cowardice cast upon him by much of the northern press. Although never mentioning the episode during the winter of 1862, Lincoln likely remembered Sumner's good judgment when appointing officers to corps command.[22]

Also making Sumner a strong choice for corps command was his belief that volunteers, with training, made good wartime soldiers. Like many other Civil War generals, Sumner had seen citizen-soldiers in action during the Mexican War. Unlike all but a handful of his colleagues, Sumner also had inspected professional armies raised through conscription while on a tour of Europe in late 1854. Upon returning, Sumner had been asked by Secretary of War Jefferson Davis to compare

the two methods of recruiting troops. Sumner acknowledged that, during peacetime, when routine dominated, "soldiers raised by conscription are superior to those raised by volunteer enlistment." He made the important qualification, however, that during wartime, "when good men enter the service for patriotism or from a spirit of adventure, they are superior."[23] The attitude was important, because volunteers made up the vast bulk of the Union army.

Going beyond the appointment of corps commanders, Lincoln ordered that each of the Union corps field three divisions. This equally divided the army's now twelve divisions and made for, at least on paper, about 30,000 soldiers in each corps. Showing sound military insight, Lincoln instructed that each corps commander receive his former division—now known as the First Division.[24]

How McClellan determined the remaining two divisions for each army corps is open to speculation, as he made the assignments without official explanation. Francis Walker, in his *History of the Second Army Corps,* argues that McClellan chose the Second and Third Divisions through "casual selection." Walker's claim appears plausible on the surface because none of Sumner's three divisions had contiguous encampments in the winter of 1861–62.[25] The haphazard approach would, however, be out of character for McClellan, who was too able an organizer to do things on a whim. In assigning the Second Division to the Second Corps, McClellan likely was trying to reestablish a prewar connection between Sumner and Brigadier General John Sedgwick. Sumner and Sedgwick had served together as field officers in the 1st Cavalry before the war.[26] McClellan, like Lincoln, presumably recognized the benefits of putting together officers who were already familiar with one another.

McClellan's personal feelings toward Sumner may have colored the assignment of Brigadier General Louis Blenker's Third Division to the Second Corps. Lincoln informed McClellan in late February that he might transfer Blenker's division from the Army of the Potomac to the Department of the Mountains, in western Virginia.[27] When the transfer occurred one month later, Sumner's command was reduced to two divisions, the smallest in the army. The turn of events might have been more than happenstance. By assigning the Second Corps a division with a dubious future in the Army of the Potomac, McClellan may have been

attempting to limit the opportunities of his next in command. More likely, McClellan believed that Sumner's advanced age left him out of touch with current military thinking. Whatever the reason, either jealousy or dislike, or both, McClellan stuck Sumner with the only division transferred from the army during the winter of 1862.

Israel Richardson brought a strong reputation as one of Sumner's two remaining division commanders. Richardson had gained abundant military experience after graduating from West Point in 1841. The Vermont native had served in the Seminole War and the Mexican War before settling down in the mid-1850s to farm outside Pontiac, Michigan. Richardson helped to raise the 2nd Michigan at the outbreak of the Civil War, and became the unit's colonel. He commanded a Union brigade during the First Bull Run Campaign, winning promotion to brigadier general for his solid performance.[28] Richardson achieved an ease among his men that quickly won their respect. The general made little display of his rank and often was nearly indistinguishable in dress from an enlisted man. "I am told that this is a characteristic of the western officers," one private wrote, "and would that more of them would come amongst us and bring their manners with them." In addition to being levelheaded and unassuming, Richardson led by example. When soldiers of one brigade hesitated before crossing a stream while on maneuvers near Washington in the winter of 1862, Richardson plunged into the icy water. He called for the men to follow, which they did at a rush. On another occasion, Richardson shared his supplies with soldiers who were without. Word of such incidents spread, earning Richardson praise for making "his men believe that he was one of them."[29]

John Sedgwick also looked after the welfare of the men in his division, but he never achieved the same level of rapport. Sedgwick, like Richardson, had graduated from West Point, but in 1837. Sedgwick saw service in the Mexican War and, after, along the western frontier. He was considering leaving the army by early 1861, only to have the outbreak of the Civil War delay his plans. Sedgwick returned East and, in the late summer, received promotion to brigadier general. His declining enthusiasm for military life may have been obvious to the men. One disgruntled soldier claimed, "Our first impressions of Sedgwick were not happy. I have heard that a smile occasionally invaded his scrubby

beard, but I never saw one there."[30] Moreover, Sedgwick was replacing the popular Charles Stone as commander of the Second Division. Stone had suffered arrest and imprisonment by Federal officials following the Union defeat at Ball's Bluff in late October, on thinly based charges of treason. Sedgwick realized that replacing a fellow officer under controversial circumstances was anything but easy. The knowledge was sometimes nearly overwhelming. In a moment of self-doubt, Sedgwick worried that the whole job of division command was "above my capacity."[31] If Sedgwick seemed brooding and introspective, it was because circumstances more than desire had thrust him into the spotlight of high command.

The brigade commanders of the Second Corps were exceptionally well qualified given the selection criteria of the day. Above all, secretaries of war Cameron and, later, Stanton wanted men with prior military experience. As a result, throughout the Union army, about two out of every three high-ranking officers (major generals and brigadier generals) had served either in the regular army or during the Mexican War or, in many cases, both.[32] The stock of past military experience was even higher in the Second Corps. Four officers had graduated from West Point (Brigadier General William French, 1837; Brigadier General Napoleon Dana, 1842; Brigadier General William Burns, 1847; and Brigadier General Oliver O. Howard, 1854), and the three who took their degrees in time had served in Mexico. Also fighting during the Mexican War was Brigadier General Willis Gorman, a civilian who had raised and led a volunteer regiment. The only exception to these patterns was Brigadier General Thomas Meagher, the commander of the Irish Brigade. Yet Meagher was not completely without military experience. In the spring of 1861, he had helped to raise a company of the 69th New York State Militia. Meagher had commanded the men during the fighting at First Bull Run, winning praise for his battlefield gallantry.[33]

Cameron and Stanton also wanted officers with previous managerial experience, given that they now had several thousand men under their charge. Four brigade commanders of the Second Corps came from a business background, two in the military and two in civilian life. By comparison, only about one of four officers throughout the rest of the Union army could claim as much. Burns had served in the 1850s as a

staff officer in the commissary of subsistence. Howard had taught mathematics and worked as an ordnance officer at West Point during these same years. Among the brigade officers coming from a civilian business background, Dana had left the army in 1855 and worked as a banker in St. Paul, Minnesota. More distinguished, at least professionally, Gorman had been elected to Congress from Indiana in 1849. After serving four years, Gorman had received an appointment as governor of the Minnesota Territory from President Franklin Pierce. Taken all together, the managerial skills possessed by most of the brigade officers of the Second Corps did not necessarily guarantee success on the battlefield. The experiences did, however, give each officer at least some preparation for coordinating the activities of their staffs and dealing with their many logistical and administrative demands.[34]

McClellan assigned artillery and cavalry units to each of his four corps, an attempt to emulate the combined arms capabilities that had enabled Napoleon to achieve such stunning military successes in Europe. The results never came up to the expectations, at least during the early war years. McClellan attached an artillery brigade to each division, with four batteries fielding a total of twenty-four guns. The pieces ranged in type, but the most common were smoothbore Napoleons and rifled Parrotts. The Napoleon was deadly at close quarters, firing canister rounds loaded with grape shot. The Parrott served better at longer range, throwing its projectiles on a straight trajectory. Recognizing the learning curve required to man any type of gun, McClellan assigned one battery of regular artillery to each brigade.[35]

Four batteries fielded an impressive number of guns, but the artillery brigades never achieved a concentrated weight of fire to blast holes through the enemy's lines. In a glaring oversight, the highest-ranking battery commander, usually a colonel, served as the corps artillery chief. The lack of rank for the artillery chief was at the insistence of the War Department. Union military officials in Washington argued that because artillery batteries mustered only a relatively small number of men, their commanding officers should not receive rank higher than a colonelcy. The practical result was that infantry generals had battlefield authority over any artillery within sight, regardless of their experience, or lack thereof. The artillery would go into a spring campaign to

serve as infantry support, rather than as a potentially decisive battlefield weapon.[36]

How to deploy the cavalry proved even more problematic. McClellan originally intended to assign a brigade of cavalry to each corps. These troopers would serve as scouts when the army was in the field. When a battle started, the horse soldiers might exploit any successes won by their foot-bound comrades. A paucity of cavalry regiments thwarted these plans, to McClellan's frustration. He later grumbled that his cavalry force "was never as large as it ought to have been." Rather than concentrate his few available cavalry units into their own formations, as in the Confederate army, McClellan assigned a regiment to each corps. In doing so, he reduced the initial role of the cavalry to little more than observer status.[37]

Hopes for combined arms operations received a final blow when McClellan gave Sumner and the other corps commanders little staff support. McClellan initially had pushed for swarms of staff members to accompany each corps, including a brigadier general to serve as an adjutant general. He backed down when meeting opposition from Winfield Scott, and never again picked up the point. McClellan may have underestimated the demands that directing relatively large numbers of troops placed on his corps commanders. But McClellan had seen professional armies at war during his tour of Europe in the mid-1850s, where he had witnessed some of the last days of the Crimean War. More likely, McClellan was simply too busy attempting to plan for a spring campaign. Rounding up staff officers slipped to secondary importance amid the numerous last-minute tasks necessary for the army to take the field. When the army did open a new campaign in mid-March, the Second Corps listed only a handful of aides for Sumner, primarily to serve as couriers.[38]

Whether combined arms operations were possible should not detract from the significant Union accomplishment in creating army corps. The presence of the First Corps, Second Corps, Third Corps, and Fourth Corps by the late winter of 1862 gave McClellan a far more streamlined control over his forces than otherwise would have been possible. That the Army of the Potomac pushed to the very gates of the Confederate capital at Richmond that spring and summer, as will be

discussed, is a testament to the powerful military organization that it had become.

SERVING IN THE SECOND CORPS

For all the attention that the Union high command poured into whether and how to create army corps, few soldiers paid much attention. The formation of the Second Corps received only passing mention in soldiers' writings, if any at all. Since army corps were new organizational creations in the American military, they had little historical resonance with soldiers. Geographic distance only compounded the lack of emotional connection. Richardson's division was encamped just outside Washington, while Sedgwick's division was encamped along the upper Potomac, several miles to the west. Soldiers of the two divisions of the Second Corps would not even see one another until the army first went into battle that spring.[39]

Soldiers instead most closely identified with their regiments and brigades, reflecting the American method of raising troops in time of national need through the mid-nineteenth century. The regular army numbered only 16,000 officers and enlisted men in 1860, one of the smallest land forces in the Western world. The War Department made the decision to keep the regular army intact soon after the outbreak of the Civil War, as it had in all past conflicts. The thought was that the regular units would provide a trained nucleus to build the larger, if hastily mobilized, American army. This soon proved impossible in the Civil War, given the scale of the conflict. But the recruitment process worked the same as in past wars, with state and local officials taking up the slack in raising regiments and companies. The citizen-soldiers who volunteered went to war with men from their same village, neighborhood, and city. The connection between those in the military and those at home remained strong throughout the fighting. The sense of their regiment as an extension of their home community allowed Civil War soldiers to endure an enormous amount of bloodshed and physical hardship.[40]

Yet, by virtue of the regiments assigned to it, the Second Corps acquired several distinct differences from the rest of the Union army. Soldiers of the Second Corps came from across the Union, but those

Table 1. Area of Recruitment and Manpower of the Sixteen Urban Regiments of the Second Corps, by Region, 1861

Regiment (by Region)	Primary City of Recruitment	Secondary City or County of Recruitment	Date of Muster	Number of Men at Muster
Middle Atlantic				
42nd New York	New York City	None	June 22–28	1,019
52nd New York	New York City	None	August 3–November 5	1,000
57th New York	New York City	Dutchess and Kings Counties	August 12–November 19	751
61st New York	Albany	Madison County	September–November	770
63rd New York	New York City	Albany, N.Y., and Boston, Mass.	September–November	1,000
66th New York	New York City	None	November 4	900
69th New York	New York City	Buffalo, N.Y., and Chicago, Ill.	September 17–November 17	745
82nd New York	New York City	None	May 26–June 17	832
88th New York	New York City	Brooklyn, N.Y.	September–December	800
69th Penn.	Philadelphia	None	August 19	952
71st Penn.	Philadelphia	New York City	May 16	1,100
72nd Penn.	Philadelphia	None	August 10	1,485
81st Penn.	Philadelphia	Carbon and Luzerne Counties	August–October	900
106th Penn.	Philadelphia	Bradford, Lycoming, and Montgomery Counties	August–September	1,020
New England				
19th Mass.	Boston	Essex, Middlesex, and Suffolk Counties	August 28	1,050
20th Mass.	Boston	Nantucket, Mass.; and Norfolk and Suffolk Counties	July 29–August 29	750

Note: All sixteen regiments mustered for three-year terms of service.

Sources: The areas of recruitment and date of muster of each regiment are taken from corresponding regimental histories and rosters, as well as Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion,* vol. 3. The manpower strength of each regiment is taken from sources cited in the text.

from New York, Philadelphia, and Boston were the most numerous (see table 1).[41] The urban cast was not unique to the Second Corps. Soldiers in the Army of the Potomac came primarily from the Northeast, the most heavily urbanized region of the nation by 1860.[42] The Excelsior Brigade of the Union Third Corps is a notable example, with five regiments raised in New York City during the spring of 1861.

Where the heavy urban presence did set the Second Corps apart was in giving it a decidedly ethnic flavor. Ethnic regiments fielded a majority of foreign-born and first-generation soldiers.[43] The 52nd New York was German, one of twelve German regiments eventually raised in New York. The 63rd New York, 69th New York, 88th New York, and 69th Pennsylvania were Irish. The four Irish regiments represented a staggering one-fifth of the Irish regiments raised in the Union. In early 1862, no other Union corps fielded as many ethnic regiments as the Second Corps.[44]

Thomas Francis Meagher was one of the Union's most successful ethnic recruiters, helping to raise the three regiments of the Irish Brigade in New York City during the summer and fall of 1861. Born in Ireland in 1823, Meagher developed a colorful personality. He took part in an uprising in 1848 that unsuccessfully sought independence for his homeland. The British government sentenced Meagher to death for his role in the rebellion, but commuted the punishment to life exile in Tasmania. Meagher eluded the fate in 1852 and escaped by sea to New York City. By the outbreak of the Civil War, Meagher had won acclaim within the Irish-American community for his work practicing law and editing an ethnic newspaper. Meagher added to his fame by serving as a captain in the Irish-American 69th New York State Militia, a three-months regiment that fought at the Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861. Meagher portrayed the Civil War as an opportunity for his fellow Irish in America to gain the military experience necessary to one day launch a new war of liberation for their homeland. "Today it is for the American Republic we fight," Meagher tantalizingly promised at one recruiting rally, "to-morrow it will be for Ireland."[45] Meagher also emphasized that Irish Americans owed the United States loyalty for providing shelter from English persecution overseas. The appeals reached beyond the Irish wards of New York City. Men volunteered from as far away as

Buffalo and Pittsburgh to fight in the Irish Brigade, an unusually wide range of recruitment.[46]

Soldiers of the Irish Brigade and the other ethnic soldiers of the Second Corps attempted to maintain their distinct identity. German soldiers in the 52nd New York referred to their regiment as the "Sigel Rifles." The reference was to Franz Sigel, a nationally known German exile turned antebellum politician and Civil War general.[47] Soldiers of the Irish 69th Pennsylvania adopted the same numerical designation as the 69th New York State Militia had borne into battle at First Bull Run. The green flags carried by the four Irish regiments of the Second Corps were the most visible symbol of ethnic pride. The banners depicted an Irish harp over a wreath of shamrocks, and were the only ones of their kind in the Union army. Meagher reminded his men that the flag clearly marked the Irish regiments in camp and on the battlefield. The very conspicuousness should steel the resolve of the Irish soldiers to "die if necessary, but never surrender."[48]

In addition to a strong ethnic flavor, the heavy urban presence gave the Second Corps many other regiments with distinctive backgrounds. City populations had increased to where men with compatible interests formed entire regiments. Members of the Tammany Society, a well-oiled Democratic political machine in New York City by the 1850s, banded together to raise the 42nd New York. Capping the achievement, Grand Sachem William Kennedy, the leader of the Tammany Society for 1861, won command of the regiment.[49] In Philadelphia, supporters of Edward Baker, a Republican senator and close friend of President Lincoln, joined the 71st Pennsylvania. Not to be outdone were the city's volunteer firefighters. Boasting that they were "patriotic, intelligent and brave," they worked together to raise the 72nd Pennsylvania.[50] The two Pennsylvania regiments received brigade assignment in the fall with the 69th Pennsylvania and the 106th Pennsylvania. The result was the Philadelphia Brigade, the only brigade in the Union army named after the home city of most of its soldiers.[51]

Diverse backgrounds characterized soldiers recruited in the countryside (see table 2). Members of the 64th New York, a prewar militia unit, came from dizzying range of jobs and occupations. The list included men "from the varied professions, also the mechanic, the artisan,

the tradesman, and tiller of the soil." Ethnic diversity characterized soldiers of the 1st Minnesota. Men from England, Ireland, and France served in the regiment alongside soldiers from Spain, Italy, and Russia. In one company alone, forty-eight men traced their family lineage to central and northern Europe. The 5th New Hampshire had its share of foreign-born soldiers. Nearly one hundred men came from either Canada or England and Ireland, in about equal parts.[52] Political diversity characterized soldiers of the 15th Massachusetts, to the seeming surprise of all. Democrats and Republicans who previously had squared off bitterly during the presidential election of 1860 now mingled together freely at recruiting rallies held in Worcester County. For the first time in recent memory, Worcester was a "unit on a great political subject." Political unity spurred cooperation among different religious faiths in nearby Clinton, Massachusetts. Soldiers found their wives, daughters, and sweethearts sewing extra flannel shirts for them at a Baptist church and an Eastern Orthodox church. One soldier proudly remembered that every scrap of flannel in the town soon was stitched and ready to wear.[53]

Chance for political cooperation was more rare throughout the rest of the Second Corps, because the majority of soldiers were Democrats. The political leanings of the men became well known to their comrades, earning the Second Corps a reputation as, in the words of one field officer, the "Democratic Corps" of the Union army. By contrast, most other Federal soldiers either supported the Republican Party or came from households that supported the Republican Party.[54] Soldiers coming from New York and Philadelphia contributed to the political flavor of the Second Corps. The two cities were strongholds of the Democratic Party by mid-nineteenth century. Most recently, residents of both communities had given strong support to Stephen Douglas in his failed bid to capture the White House.[55] Irish-American soldiers from New York and Philadelphia were especially staunch Democrats. Irish immigrants feared that their economic livelihood would be threatened should the abolitionist wing of the Republican Party achieve its goal of liberating the slaves.[56] Soldiers of the 20th Massachusetts had strong leanings toward the Democratic Party, even though the Republican Party dominated their home state by mid-century. The men were outspoken in their criticism of Lincoln and his policies. The politicking did not go over well

Table 2. Area of Recruitment and Manpower of the Seven Rural Regiments of the Second Corps, by Region, 1861

Regiment (by Region)	Area of Recruitment	Counties of Recruitment	Date of Muster	Number of Men at Muster
Middle Atlantic				
34th New York	Upstate New York	Herkimer	June 15*	786
64th New York	Upstate New York	Allegany, Cattaraugus, and Tompkins	December 10	849
53rd Penn.	Eastern Penn.	Juniata, Luzerne, Montgomery, Northumberland, Potter, and Westmoreland	November 7	940
Midwest				
7th Mich.	Southeastern Mich.	Lapeer, Monroe, Tuscola, and Oakland	August 22	854
1st Minn.	Southeastern Minn.	Dakota, Goodhue, Hennepin, Ramsey, Rice, Wabasha, Washington, and Winona	April 29**	950
New England				
15th Mass.	Central Mass.	Worcester	July 12	1,011
5th New Hamp.	Northern and Central New Hamp.	Carroll, Coos, Grafton, and Merrimack	October 26	1,010

Notes:
*The 34th New York mustered for a two-year term of service, while the remaining six regiments mustered for three-year terms of service.
**Soldiers of the 1st Minnesota mustered for three months on April 29 and for three years on May 10. The War Department later dated the start of their three-year term to April 29.
Sources: The counties of recruitment and date of muster of each regiment are taken from corresponding regimental histories and rosters, as well as Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion*, vol. 3. The manpower strength of each regiment is taken from sources cited in the text.

throughout the rest of the Union army, where the Bay Staters earned reprobation as the “Copperhead” regiment.[57]

Coming from largely Democratic political backgrounds, soldiers of the Second Corps fought primarily to preserve the Union. The men recognized that the United States likely would continue even if the Confederacy established itself as an independent political entity. Yet they believed that the freedoms guaranteed white Americans by a republican form of government would suffer a fatal blow. The awareness prompted soldiers to declare that they were fighting to protect “our great and free government” and the “best government that ever was instituted.” If they died in the effort, they did so “in the heart of my great country’s defense.” Captain Casper Crowninshield was a twenty-three-year-old student at Harvard when the war broke out. He quickly dropped his books to volunteer, arguing that the triumph of the federal government would demonstrate to foreign observers that the American Republic was a viable form of nationhood. He would not feel worthy of enjoying the benefits of citizenship if unwilling to fight for them in time of need. Jonathan Stowe, a farm laborer from Massachusetts, was equally zealous. He declared that southerners who took up arms against a freely elected government were not only “my country’s enemy,” but “base traitors to humanity and the world.”[58]

Many soldiers looked to the American past and future for inspiration. Volunteers from Red Wing, Minnesota, drew inspiration from the Declaration of Independence. They pledged “our lives, our fortunes and our sacred honor” to defend the “Government to which we justly owe our allegiance.” Private Herbert Willand recognized that military life was full of dangers and privations, but he never regretted that he had enlisted. That was a hard commitment for Willand to make because his wife, ill and at home, wanted him back. “If it is my fate to fall by bullet or otherwise,” Willand consoled, “I shall have given only that which thousands have given before me.” Private George Beidelman, a former printer’s apprentice from Philadelphia, believed that Union soldiers were defending not only their own liberties, but those of their children. This was because the present contest transcended the “North against the South; it is government against anarchy, law against disorder, and truth and justice against falsehood and intolerance.”[59]

Talk about freedom and liberty did not extend to African Americans enslaved in the South. It is unclear whether the sentiment made soldiers of the Second Corps distinct from the rest of the Union army. A recent and well-received study suggests that Union soldiers voiced more support for emancipation in 1861 than previously acknowledged in the scholarship.[60] If so, these men were few and far between in the Second Corps. Private Edward Bassett of the 1st Minnesota was one of the few men who mentioned the institution of slavery and the prosecution of the war in the same breath. Peace would come only when slavery came to an end. Recognizing that the Confederacy never would voluntarily relinquish its source of labor, Bassett grimly warned, "There is no alternative but to fight."[61] Although certainly debatable, Bassett might have based his comments as much on pragmatic assessment as humanitarian spirit.

Fighting for the Union rather than emancipation, soldiers still had no trouble confidently predicting God on their side. Across the way, Confederate soldiers shared the belief with equal fervor.[62] Soldiers of the Second Corps had good reason to make the connection between God and Union, having gone to war with sermons full of "Patrick Henry oratory" ringing in their ears. Private Gorham Coffin of the 19th Massachusetts recognized the formidable military task that the Union had in subduing the Confederacy, with its thousands of miles of territory. Still, northern arms would triumph because "God is on the side of the right, and right will in the end prevail." Lieutenant Cornelius Moore of the 57th New York also believed the Union might have difficult days ahead. The Confederates were full of confidence after their triumph at Bull Run that summer. The military tide soon would turn, because "God has strong arms on the side of the right." Leaving nothing to chance, Moore asked his family to pray to God to "protect the cause in which your brother is engaged."[63]

Sense of duty bolstered belief in the righteousness of the Union cause. Volunteering in time of national need simply seemed the right thing to do. Soldiers believed that a "solemn sense of duty" pledged them to fight under the national flag "of which we hope to be ever proud." Some men, however, wondered whether duty to country superseded duty to family. Martin Sigman thought it did not, and he continued to work on the family farm in upstate New York. Sigman discovered

an interest in military life only in the autumn of 1861, when his father declared that he would enlist if his son did not. Louis Chapin found himself conflicted whether to serve or stay home. Like many sons from time beginning, Chapin turned the question over to his mother. She took no pause before answering that, in times of "great extremity," need of country took precedence over need of family. Chapin took the advice and enlisted in the 34th New York. Other men saw little point to debate, arguing that duty to nation encompassed duty to family. Samuel Sexton, a regimental surgeon, received a scolding from his wife that "claims of family are above that of country." Sexton chidingly responded, "This is not correct. We owe our duty to our country next to our God."[64]

Some volunteers enlisted for more immediate reason. Economic downturn had hit the North hard in the late 1850s, and at least some men found powerful draw in the prospect of monthly pay and new clothes.[65] Benjamin Chase volunteered instead from a sense of adventure. Chase found himself hard struck by wanderlust after working on the family farm in New Hampshire. He volunteered to "see a little of the world" rather than "stay at home and do nothing." More than a few men likely enlisted with their heads muddled by drink. One recruiting officer found ample numbers of thirsty volunteers in saloons around Philadelphia. Lost in the haze was "how many drinks of bad whiskey" he had forced down. This was not to be held against him, because the drink had been partaken "in the service of my country."[66]

As soldiers discussed why they fought, they underwent drill and discipline that helped to distinguish their experience to at least some degree from the rest of the army. All Union soldiers found the bulk of their day consumed by drill during the winter of 1861–62, but Sumner was relentless. Drawing on his prewar observation that volunteers needed training to make good wartime soldiers, Sumner had the men "drilling violently" from sun up to sun down. A fatigued lieutenant colonel held some hope for respite by late December, because "Genl. Sumner says he shall not be so strict when we become better drilled." Two months later, a private in the 5th New Hampshire still groused about "very severe drilling, the men now think that a soldiers life is not very pleasant." Soldiers soon recognized the payoff for their time and fatigue was increased proficiency in drill. This was important in itself,

but also because strong showings on the parade ground swelled soldiers' pride. The men boasted that it was now "easy" for them "to perform the most intricate movements" and that they "should give good account of themselves in a fight."[67]

Sumner also tightened discipline over the winter encampment. Again, all soldiers found their officers less tolerant of infractions as a spring campaign approached. But Sumner, as on the drill field, seemed almost everywhere in camp. Some men considered Sumner something of a martinet, enforcing regulations for the sake of it. Sumner held himself to the same standards, thereby winning more soldiers' respect. In a notable example, Sumner insisted that all officers avoid sleeping in civilian houses. This might have caused grumbling, especially on cold winter nights, except that Sumner also slept outdoors. The result of Sumner's leadership by example was that the Second Corps had reached a high state of unit discipline by late March. Few soldiers were in the guardhouse, an indication that regimental and company officers had affairs well in hand.[68] By comparison, soldiers in at least two other divisions received reprimand from high-ranking officers for their poor behavior while in camp.[69]

Several regiments in General Stone's former division (now Sedgwick's) received an opportunity to put their training and discipline to the test in the fall of 1861. Soldiers in the 15th Massachusetts, 20th Massachusetts, 42nd New York, and 71st Pennsylvania participated in a Union attempt to occupy the Confederate-held town of Leesburg, Virginia. The Union soldiers bumped into a well-positioned Confederate defense after climbing to the top of Ball's Bluff, a 100-foot-high bank overlooking the Potomac River. After a confused swirl of fighting, Colonel Edward Baker, the overall Union commander, was killed.[70] Any remaining fight quickly went out of Baker's men. Survivors later described the retreat down Ball's Bluff as "wild, disorderly" and a "stampede." They found no relief at the water's edge. Some soldiers desperate to escape the unrelenting Confederate fire overloaded the few boats underway back across the Potomac. Other men threw away equipment, stripped off uniforms, and attempted to swim to safety. By the end of the fighting, the Federals had suffered nearly 1,000 casualties. The great majority of men either were captured by the Confederates or drowned in the Potomac River.[71]

Although a lopsided defeat, the fighting at Ball's Bluff helped to build a unit pride that later served the Second Corps well. Many soldiers believed that they had fought hard against overwhelming numbers. Sergeant Walter Eames of the 15th Massachusetts had fought in the thick of the action while helping to hold the Union right flank. "Eight hours and a quarter we stood before a terrific fire from greatly superior numbers," Sergeant Eames proudly recounted. "The woods were swarming with the fellows." A private in the 71st Pennsylvania thought the Confederates had enjoyed a six-to-one advantage. Given the disparity, "our men fought like tigers." Still, survivors recognized that they had suffered a battlefield defeat. Lieutenant Henry Abbott admitted that he and the other soldiers of the 20th Massachusetts had been "badly licked." That was galling enough. But should the war end and the regiment never get an opportunity to redeem itself, "it would be outrageous."[72] Like Abbott, many other survivors of the battle at Ball's Bluff would go into the spring eager for a chance to redeem their unit's reputation.

Drill and discipline and, for some, the experience of battle remained tolerable because holidays and mail varied the daily routine. Thanksgiving and Christmas won highest place in soldiers' regard, because the holidays often meant a change in diet. Many soldiers feasted upon turkey for Thanksgiving and oyster stew for Christmas.[73] Equally pleasing, the celebrations provided time for socializing and playing games. Officers enjoyed mingling with female visitors from Washington and Baltimore in a log ballroom constructed for Thanksgiving. Enlisted men gathered for athletic contests, such as wrestling, foot racing, and jumping, to mark Christmas morning. Cash awards made participants all the more enthusiastic, with the winner receiving four dollars and the runner-up receiving two dollars. George Washington's birthday ran a surprisingly close third to Thanksgiving and Christmas in soldiers' affections. The holiday likely assumed greater importance in war than in peace because it reminded soldiers that they were fighting to preserve the nation's Revolutionary heritage. Officers made clear the connection by reading to their assembled men Washington's farewell address. Perhaps just as inspiring to soldiers, they listened to band music, cheered the flag, and enjoyed the day off from drill.[74]

Letters and newspapers from home were every bit as welcome by soldiers as holiday celebrations, but for different reasons. Letters from home brought soldiers tangible proof that family and friends remembered them. A Massachusetts sergeant believed that soldiers valued letters from home above any other material possession. This caused some amusement, because the "cry of 'the mail' will cause the boys to move a little more quickly than anything else perhaps excepting bullets." A New York captain nearly broke down in tears after receiving a letter from his family. The updates passed along were nothing out of the ordinary, but that was enough. "You don't know, you cannot know, how such favors are appreciated by me here."[75]

While letters brought reassurance from home, newspapers brought news of the larger Union war effort. The headlines read very well during early 1862. Men excitedly discussed the capture of Roanoke Island and other sites along the North Carolina sounds by Union amphibious forces led by Brigadier General Ambrose Burnside. Soldiers also eagerly read news from the West, where Brigadier General Ulysses Grant led the Union capture of Confederate strongholds Forts Henry and Donelson on the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers. Yet amid word of Union victories seemingly everywhere else but northern Virginia, some men feared that the war might pass them by. Lieutenant Thomas Livermore and his comrades in the 5th New Hampshire were proud of the "deeds of our Western comrades." They worried, however, "lest the work should all be finished without us."[76]

Spirits were high in the Second Corps all the same. In the late winter, McClellan maneuvered Sedgwick's division to occupy Harpers Ferry, and Sumner's division to occupy Manassas Junction. The Federal advance had helped to force the Confederate army in northern Virginia to retreat behind the Rappahannock River, forty miles to the south. Soldiers were delighted at the turn of events. The Confederate retreat meant that the "backbone of the rebellion is broken," and that the "Rebels are about used up in Virginia." Private Arnold Daines found himself caught up in the excitement. He closed a letter to his wife by declaring that, by early summer at the latest, the war would be over and he would be at home.[77]