



Antietam: The Soldiers' Battle

John Michael Priest

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On September 13, 1862, in a field near Frederick, Maryland, four Union soldiers hit the jack-pot. There they found, wrapped carelessly around three cigars, a copy of General Robert E. Lee's most recent orders detailing Southern objectives and letting Union officers know that Lee had split his Army into four vulnerable groups. General George B. McClellan realized his opportunity to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia one piece at a time. "If I cannot whip Bobbie Lee," exulted McClellan, "I will be willing to go home." But the notoriously prudent Union general allowed precious hours to pass, and, by the time he moved, Lee's army had begun to regroup and prepare for battle near Antietam Creek. The ensuing fight would prove to be not only the bloodiest single day of the entire Civil War, but the bloodiest in the history of the U.S. Army.

Countless historians have analyzed Antietam (known as Sharpsburg in the South) and its aftermath, some concluding that McClellan's failure to vanquish Lee constituted a Southern victory, others that the Confederate retreat into Virginia was a strategic win for the North. But in *Antietam: The Soldiers' Battle*, historian John Michael Priest tells this brutal tale of slaughter from an entirely new point of view: that of the common enlisted man. Concentrating on the days of actual battle--September 16, 17, and 18, 1862--Priest vividly brings to life the fear, the horror, and the profound courage that soldiers displayed, from the first Federal cavalry probe of the Confederate lines to the last skirmish on the streets of Sharpsburg. *Antietam* is not a book about generals and their grand strategies, but rather concerns men such as the Pennsylvania corporal who lied to receive the Medal of Honor; the Virginian who lay unattended on the battlefield through most of the second day of fighting, his arm shattered from a Union artillery shell; the Confederate surgeon who wrote to the sweetheart he left behind enemy lines in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania that he had seen so much death and suffering that his "head had whitened and my very soul turned to stone."

Besides being a gripping tale charged with the immediacy of firsthand accounts of the fighting, *Antietam* also dispels many misconceptions long held by historians and Civil War buffs alike. Seventy-two detailed maps--which describe the battle in the hourly and quarter-hourly formats established by the Cope Maps of 1904--together with rarely-seen photographs and his own intimate knowledge of the Antietam terrain, allow Priest to offer a substantially new interpretation of what actually happened.

When the last cannon fell silent and the Antietam Creek no longer ran red with Union and Confederate blood, twice as many Americans had been killed in just one day as lost their lives in the War of 1812, the Mexican War, and the Spanish-American war combined. This is a book about battle, but more particularly, about the human dimension in battle. It asks "What was it like?" and while the answers to this simple question by turns horrify and fascinate, they more importantly add a whole new dimension to the study of the American Civil War.

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