

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



The Race Is On

"[On] March 11, 1863, General Halleck was asked by the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War: 'Had the Army of the Peninsula been brought to cooperate with the Army of Virginia with the utmost energy that circumstances would have permitted, in your judgment, as a militaryman, would it not have resulted in our victory instead of our defeat?' To which he replied: 'I thought so at the time, and still think so.' Upon this opinion chiefly have contemporary historians based the conclusion that the battle of the Second Bull Run was lost through the tardy movements of the Army of the Potomac."

— *Emory Upton*

"commence the forward movement from my present position to-morrow. . . . [T]he whole of the army will move forward to the line of Robertson's River. . . . The position along Robertson's River is strong and easily defensible, in case the enemy assembles a superior force before he can be dealt with. The purpose is to make a considerable demonstration from Stanardsville upon the enemy's rear at Charlottesville, so as to make Gordonsville untenable and force him . . . to fall back upon Charlottesville and abandon the Central Railroad east," read an August 5 message from John Pope to Halleck. Meanwhile, in Gordonsville, Stonewall Jackson became aware of the movement and on August 9th, he attacked Pope's vanguard—Nathaniel Banks's corps—at Cedar Mountain. During that see-saw battle, Banks was ultimately forced to retreat. In the aftermath, Pope's ambitious movement came to a grinding halt at Culpeper, consequently placing the Army of Virginia in a highly precarious position within the V-shape formed by the Rapidan and Rappahannock Rivers. As for Jackson, he returned to Gordonsville, all the while keeping a vigilant eye on Pope.¹

On August 16, Confederate scouts reported that 108 Union vessels were making their way down the James River. "Lee concluded that McClellan's withdrawal involved the whole of McClellan's army, and from that time he gave himself no further immediate concern for the capital," commented Lee biographer

1 Pope to Halleck, *OR* 12/3:527; Pope to Halleck, *OR* 12/3:535–536.

Douglas Southall Freeman. Lee was now free to move against Pope, who remained in his precarious position. It was now a matter of who would reach Pope first—Lee or McClellan. The race was on.²

McClellan was at a significant disadvantage during this race. Whereas Lee was less than thirty miles—hardly a two-day march—from Pope, McClellan was more than two hundred miles away via a circuitous route, which included a fifty-mile march to various ports of embarkation, including Fort Monroe, Yorktown, and Newport News. Upon arrival at these ports, the army had to be loaded onto a slow procession of deep-water craft and transported up the Potomac River to Aquia Creek or Alexandria. To say that this was a massive undertaking would be an understatement, and it is a testament to the Quartermaster Department that it was completed as quickly as it was. The objective having been to rapidly transport as many fighting men as possible to the Rappahannock front, it would have made little sense to hinder the process by also loading artillery pieces and the horses with which to pull them. These would have to wait. Besides, Pope already had ample artillery along the Rappahannock.

Intent on winning the race, McClellan sent a series of urgent dispatches to his subordinates throughout the withdrawal. “You will make use of every vessel that arrives at Yorktown, both during the night and day, to embark your troops. Not one moment must be lost in carrying out this order,” he wired Heintzelman on the 19th. The next day, McClellan urged Porter, “please push off your troops without one moment’s delay. The necessity is very pressing—a matter of life and death.” That same day, he prodded Franklin, “It is highly important that you should reach Newport News with your command to-morrow evening, if possible.” Unquestionably, McClellan made every effort to hasten matters.³

On August 19, following a series of missteps that delayed his advance, Lee learned that Pope had crossed to the north side of the Rappahannock River on the 18th and 19th. His prey having eluded him, all Lee could do was seek out an undefended crossing of the Rappahannock River by which to reach Pope before the Army of the Potomac arrived.

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“The whole of Porter’s corps got off last night. Heintzelman from Yorktown to-day. Franklin commences to embark here and at Newport News tomorrow.

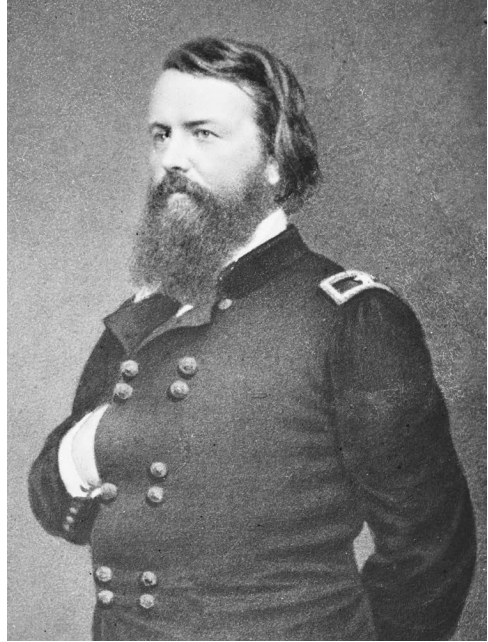
² Freeman, *R. E. Lee*, 283.

³ McClellan to Heintzelman, *OR* 12/3:599; McClellan to Porter, *OR* 12/2:1017; McClellan to Franklin, *OR* 12/3:599.

Major General John Pope

Library of Congress

Sumner will reach here [Fort Monroe] to-morrow and commence embarking as soon as transports are ready, probably in a couple of days," McClellan wrote Mary Ellen on August 21. Between Porter's and Heintzelman's corps, nearly 35,000 battle-hardened men were already on their way to Pope, who was then securely positioned along the north bank of the Rappahannock. An additional 14,715 men (Franklin's corps) were preparing to board transports the following day. As far as the race was concerned, McClellan and Lee were now in a dead heat.⁴

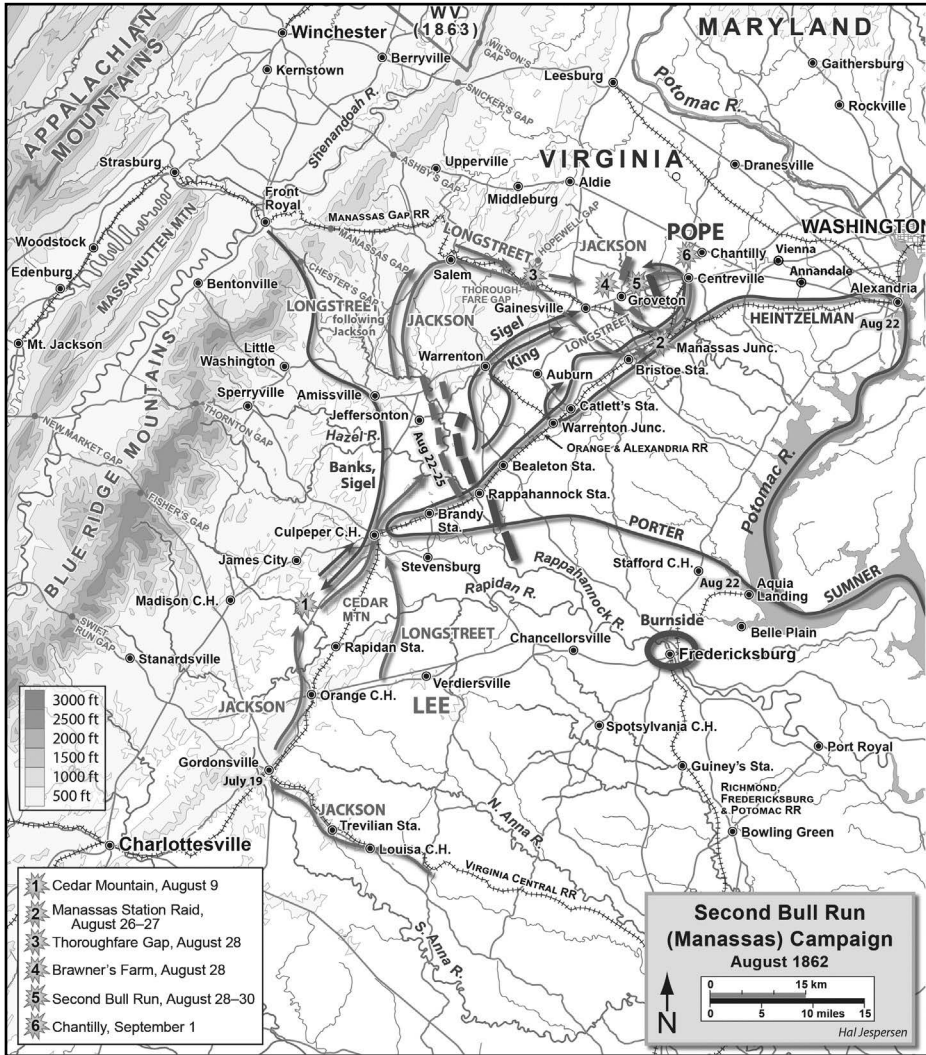


On August 21, Halleck wired McClellan, "Leave such garrisons in Fortress Monroe, Yorktown, &c., as you may deem proper. They will be replaced by new troops as rapidly as possible." Upon receipt of Halleck's order, McClellan had little choice but to assign that task to Keyes's Fourth Corps. Aware that Keyes would not be pleased with having his 13,981 veterans relegated to garrison duty, McClellan messaged him, "The duty intrusted to your corps, while it is no doubt disagreeable, is of the utmost importance. . . . I fully realize how severe a tax it is upon men who have fought so gallantly and worked so hard as your corps to require them now to go upon fatigue duty." Keyes and McClellan could only hope that Halleck would send the new levies to the Peninsula sooner rather than later.⁵

The following day, McClellan telegraphed Halleck. "If ten additional new regiments can be sent here they will not only furnish an ample garrison, but also a reserve for Suffolk or Yorktown in case of necessity," he explained. "The arrangement would permit the whole of Keyes' corps to be removed to the Potomac." To this, Halleck wired back on the 23rd: "New troops will be sent to replace Keyes' as soon as possible; but just now we have no time to make the exchange." Halleck's comment is surprising. This is especially so when considering that, only two

⁴ *MOS*, 469.

⁵ Halleck to McClellan, *OR* 11/1:92; McClellan to Keyes, *OR* 11/3:381.



Modified from Hal Jespersen's original map.

weeks earlier, he had admonished McClellan for supposedly moving too slowly in commencing his withdrawal. "You must send reinforcements instantly to Aquia creek," he had insisted on the 9th. As recently as the 19th, he had reiterated his concerns, imploring McClellan, "It is of vital importance that you send forward troops as rapidly as possible. . . . We want immediately all the men that can possibly be sent." Yet, on the 23rd, when time was truly of the essence, Halleck was suddenly too busy to arrange for the immediate procurement of nearly 14,000 battle-hardened men. Even as late as the 27th, Halleck was still procrastinating, prompting McClellan to write, "If they [5,000 new troops] can be sent I can

withdraw nearly twice that number of old troops. . . . The transportation is ready for these troops. If you can give me 5,000 more I can withdraw the whole of Keyes' corps. I consider it important that the troops should embark at once."⁶

It was not until the 29th, in the midst of the Second Battle of Bull Run, that the first of Keyes's troops were loaded onto transports. Even by September 2, portions of the Fourth Corps remained on the Peninsula. From Washington, a by-then panicked Halleck wired General Dix at Fort Monroe, "The great danger to Washington renders it necessary that the remainder of General Keyes' corps be sent here as rapidly as possible—at least all of it that you can spare." Halleck likely regretted not heeding McClellan's August 27 urging to "at once" embark Keyes's troops.⁷

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While McClellan was pressing Halleck to relieve Keyes's 14,000 men, Porter's and Heintzelman's corps reached the Aquia and Alexandria debarkation ports on August 21 and 22 (Reynolds's division had preceded them on the 20th). All told, these reinforcements amounted to 34,802 PFD men or 29,000 effectives. McClellan had beaten Lee to the Rappahannock, where Pope's army was still safely arrayed. More reinforcements were on the way: Franklin's corps would begin arriving on the 24th and Sumner's (delayed by a severe gale) on the 27th. McClellan had done his job, transferring his army over a distance of more than two hundred miles and reaching the Rappahannock with substantial numbers long before Lee could inflict a single blow on Pope.

In his landmark work, *Return to Bull Run*, John Hennessy writes, "His withdrawal from Harrison's Landing and the Peninsula had been typically McClellan: deliberate to the point of slothfulness." Hennessy's analysis, however, is inconsistent with the evidence. The truth is that McClellan had succeeded in getting reinforcements to Pope with ample time to spare. Consequently, the total Union forces on the north side of the Rappahannock, as of August 22, amounted to just over 94,000 effectives to Lee's 48,527. It now fell to Halleck and Pope to deploy McClellan's newly arrived troops promptly and effectively.⁸

6 McClellan to Halleck, *OR* 12/3:628; Halleck to McClellan, *OR* 12/3:634–635; Halleck to McClellan, *OR* 11/1:85; Halleck to McClellan, August 19, 1862, *OR*, 12/3:599; McClellan to Halleck, *OR* 12/3:691.

7 Halleck to Dix, *OR* 12:798.

8 John J. Hennessy, *Return To Bull Run: The Campaign And Battle of Second Manassas* (New York, 1993), 90; Union forces: Army of Virginia 71,974, Porter's Fifth Corps 19,513, Heintzelman's Third Corps 16,539, Cox's Kanawha Division 4,851, Burnside's Ninth Corps 8,000 for a total of