

General McClellan - Special Orders 191



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Excerpt: Special Orders 191 - On the morning of September 13th of 1862, an envelope containing three cigars wrapped in paper containing orders from General Lee was found lying in a field of clover, about a mile southwest of Fredrick, Maryland. It was discovered by Barton W. Mitchell from the Indiana 27th, as they rested in an area close to where the Confederate troops had been the day before. The order was addressed to Confederate General D.H. Hill, discovered around 10AM. In less than 4 hours, “Special Orders 191” later known as the “Lost Dispatch,” or “Lost Orders,” was in the hands of General McClellan. The dispatch was signed by R. H. (Robert Hall) Chilton, Assistant Adjutant-General to Robert E. Lee, dated September 9th. By further odd coincidence, General Alpheus Williams, and Lieutenant Samuel Pittman, on the Union Side had served with Chilton before the war and could verify his signature. McClellan was reported to have said, “here is a paper with which, if I cannot whip Bobby Lee, I will be willing to go home.” He telegraphed Lincoln informing him that “I have all the plans of the rebels....”

With the “Lost Orders” in hand, McClellan cautiously, and slowly, moved his troops on a course to intercept General Lee, perhaps with lingering concerns on the authenticity of the orders. On September 17 of 1862, McClellan’s troops caught up with Confederate forces near Sharpsburg, Maryland. The battle would be known as the Battle of Antietam , one of the bloodiest battles of the war. Around 87,000 Federal troops were pitted against about 40,000 Confederate troops. The casualties that day of those killed, wounded or missing from both sides were 23,000 men, the highest number for a single day in the Civil War. While the battle had no clear victor, McClellan and his troops were considered the winner as General Lee’s forces withdrew. For General Lee it would be the last time he attempted to attack the Union from the north. The outcome of the battle caused the British and French to delay recognizing the Confederacy. Lincoln used the opportunity to move forward with his Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation.

On September 22nd, 1862, Lincoln shared with this cabinet that he was going to issue the Emancipation Proclamation. To their shock, he informed them that he had made a solemn vow to the Almighty that if God

gave him victory at Antietam that he would issue the decree. Lincoln's colleagues it was said were "stunned" by his statement, which he was asked to repeat to make sure they heard him correctly. Lincoln said that "this might seem strange," but "God had decided the question in favor of the slaves." The likely explanation in hindsight of the events that had transpired was that General Lee's "Lost Orders," which helped McClellan, and the Union Army, at the battle of Antietam was divine assistance from God.

Lincoln made federal policy based on promises he had made to God. He clearly believed with the Union victory at the battle of Antietam, and likely from Lee's "Lost Dispatch," that God had given him a message or an answer to his prayer. We can only wonder if Abraham Lincoln, or others, at the time had noted the symbology with the "Lost Orders." The orders were wrapped around three cigars, where three often represents the Holy Trinity, God, and spiritual perfection. Cigars represent victory; they are a time honored tradition in the military, the "victory cigar". The orders were found on the 13th, which may have represented the 13 colonies or Jesus and the 12 disciples. Odder yet was the fact that after the war, General D.H. Hill had retained his copy of "Special Orders 191." They were never lost at all. Years later after the conflict, and after interviewing, many involved on the Confederate side, and exhaustive historical analysis, it remains, and will remain, one of the greatest mysteries of the war on how Lee's orders came to be in a field of clover that day.



Endnotes:

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