

BRUNSWICK CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

MEETING – November 10, 2020

“SECOND GUESSING RICHARD EWELL: THE FIRST DAY AT GETTYSBURG”

SPEAKER: Chris Mackowski

Lt. General Richard Ewell’s blessing came with a curse: He learned corps command at the elbow of Lt. General Stonewall Jackson. According to Chris Mackowski, Ewell commanded as if Jackson were there, but even that could not rescue him from his greatest failing--he just wasn’t Stonewall Jackson.

If Mackowski thinks Ewell absorbed some Jackson, he is further convinced Ewell takes the blame for Gettysburg failure and protected Robert E. Lee. Down the years Ewell’s vilification most importantly protected Lee’s reputation. The myth of Lee as the greatest general in a war sadly doomed to failure became a cornerstone of the tale of the lost cause. In spite of the general who could make no error, the South could never have won the war. For Lee’s myth to live, Ewell’s reputation had to suffer. And historians and armchair generals have obliged Lee’s myth down the years.

The first brick in Ewell’s wall of shame built on Jackson’s reputation for aggression. Repeatedly, Ewell has suffered criticism that he simply wasn’t aggressive like Jackson. (Shadows can overarch us for a lifetime. Never mind that once in town, Ewell lead his corps to attack the Federals on the north side.) The next brick we could call cowardice. Some have whispered that Ewell feared to find the Yankees waiting to butcher him. (Again, never mind that Ewell set his troops to fighting immediately in town and again the next day on bloody July 2.) A third brick we call faint-heartedness in numbers. Although Lee told the generals generally to eschew a major engagement, he gave Ewell leave to press home an attack “if practicable”. To shore up flanks Ewell asked if AP Hill could help. Hill, thinking his own men blown from their heavy fighting, declined to assist. Ewell had to detach two brigades to watch Union activity on a flank decreasing needed manpower. The final brick in Ewell’s shame said he lacked strategic vision. To this day Ewell stands condemned for not appreciating the strategic importance of Cemetery Ridge and attacking it.

Traditional lore casts Lee as hero with history crediting him with ordering Ewell up Cemetery Hill. Note, however, what orders did Ewell actually hear at Gettysburg? Although they did appear in Lee's written battle summary months later, orders at Gettysburg were all verbal. According to the written battle summary, Ewell was given the option of attacking July 1, however, he declined without better emplacement information and fresher troops.

Ewell, once tarred with the brush of failure, protected Lee's later canonization as the patron saint of the Confederacy, all General Lee's greatness doomed to failure in the face of Ewell's sins in the lost cause.

Sidebar: Chris Mackowski welcomes your Civil War commentary on the Blog for Emerging Civil War at <https://emergingcivilwar.com/tag/blog-series/>

By Jim Medeiros