



High Stakes



*There's no understating the Battle of Antietam's significance, coming as it did during such a crucial period of the war in September 1862, when international support of the Confederacy remained strong. It is also clear that the men on both sides understood just how high the stakes were when they clashed at Sharpsburg, Md., throughout the day September 17. In his new book, **David A. Welker** shows the evidence of those sentiments during the ferocity of battle in and around the section*

of the battlefield known as the Cornfield. The Cornfield: Antietam's Bloody Turning Point (Casemate, 2020, \$34.95) is a fascinating study of this brutal struggle that helped decide the battle for the Union.

1 What interests you so much about the intense struggle for the Cornfield that morning?

From my earliest study of the war, I was fascinated by the idea that its events could transform otherwise mundane spots into unique and special places, with Antietam's Cornfield being one of the most singular. One of my ancestors, Robert W. Austin of the 105th New York, was wounded in the Cornfield, and I wanted to know more about his experience and my family's connection to that hallowed place as well as others. Eventually this all came together as I began studying Antietam in some depth while building a staff ride program for my government job. Most modern accounts of the Cornfield either emphasized only

The 1st Texas Infantry, part of John Bell Hood's Brigade, bulls its way through farmer David Miller's cornfield.

one part of the fight, such as the Iron Brigade's attack, or glossed over the complicated swirl of action before moving on to discuss more straightforward parts of the battle. My growing passion for studying and learning the meaning of the events in the Cornfield finally led me to write this book, to record and share my findings with others.

2 Of all the decisions that commanders made north of Sharpsburg, which probably had the greatest impact?

One of the most interesting and important decisions—as well as underconsidered—was the one by Joe Hooker to change how he used his reinforcements, Mansfield's 12th Corps. Hooker's initial deployment of the 12th corps suggests he intended to send it over the same ground and in the same manner as his by-then battered and spent 1st Corps, attacking directly south through the Cornfield right into the jaws of the Confederate salient Stonewall Jackson had created. Barely after Mansfield began deploying his two divisions—which extended from the Hagerstown Pike to the East Woods—Hooker unexpectedly changed his mind. His revised instructions have one division clearing and securing the East Woods while the second pivots on that position to eventually strike due west toward the Dunker Church and turn the vulnerable end of Jackson's salient defending the Cornfield. Hooker, it seemed, suddenly learned every lesson the early morning's disastrous fighting had to offer. Doing so allowed the Union to finally take the Cornfield and get George McClellan's attack back on track.

3 What does the Cornfield showdown teach us about leadership in the Civil War?

In many respects, the Cornfield action is a microcosm of Civil War leadership challenges because nearly all the many complications, large and small, are present in those few hours of battle. One challenge it most clearly reveals is that communication between leaders—a key element of command unity—is critical to operational success. Every senior officer knows that confusion will intrude to frustrate their plans, even before the shooting starts, and that lacking our modern, constant means of communication, only the transmission of clear, honest communication can begin mitigating that challenge. Throughout the Cornfield fight, communication breakdowns led to failure—between Union commanders from corps though brigade level in Hooker's opening assault; between John Bell Hood and his brigade commanders during his counterattack; between Generals George Greene and "Bull" Sumner before and after the attack into the West Woods; and so forth. At the same time, good communication paved the path to victory in the Cornfield. Communication was coordinated among Jackson, Robert E. Lee, and James Longstreet most of the day, and between Hooker and Mansfield before Mansfield was mortally wounded—and with Alpheus Williams and the 12th Corps commanders who assumed new roles amid the fighting.

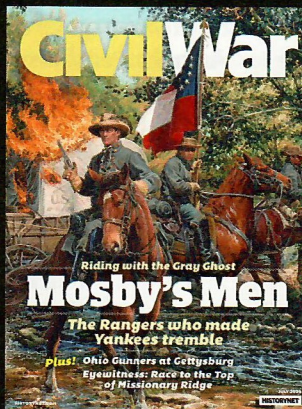
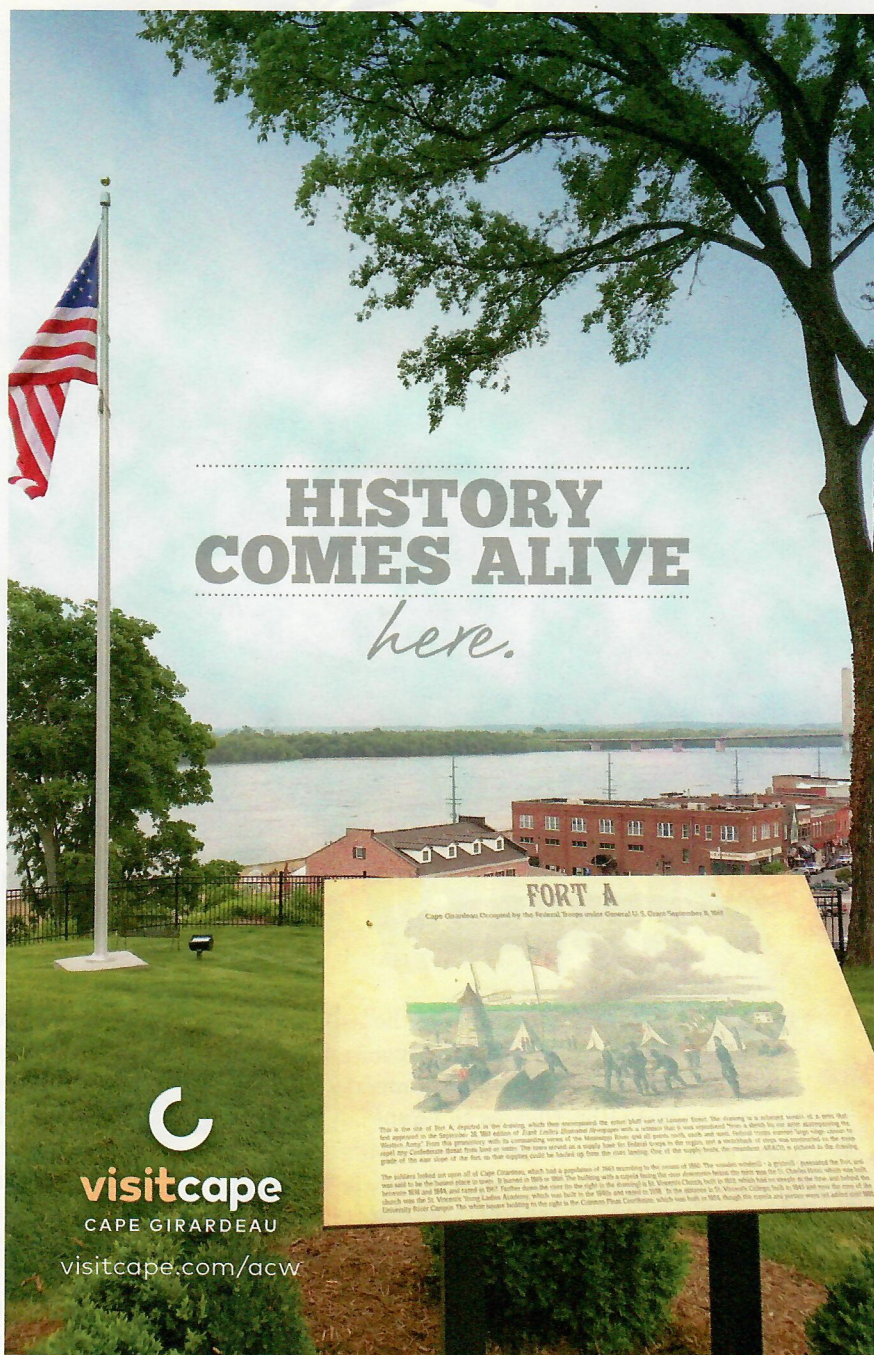
4 What kept the men fighting so hard there for so long?
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For the most part, I think that like in the war's other battles, men were motivated largely by a very personal sense of duty, wanting not to let down their friends and comrades in the ranks, and their loved ones at home. This is frequently mentioned in accounts of those who fought in the Cornfield. Many on both sides also understood the battle's importance and saw a connection between their fighting and higher, national goals. Confederates believed victory would extend their stay in Maryland and advance Southern independence; for Federals, it meant mitigating the sense of failure remaining from Second Manassas and driving the enemy back to Virginia and preserving the union. These men were not automatons, just doing their rote duty; they believed in and were motivated by their respective causes. You frequently see these national objectives mentioned by Cornfield survivors, almost as if they were reminding themselves and those to whom they were writing why they could endure the Cornfield's intense combat experience and suffering.

5 Is there a spot on the battlefield you find especially personal?

I have several, although in many respects the entire battlefield is a national treasure. But two stand out to me. One is at the Cornfield's southern fence, on the battlefield's modern Cornfield Avenue. Being here gives one the same view that Jackson's defenders had at dawn. You can imagine what Brig. Gen. Abram Duryée's Federals must have experienced coming alone through the corn before emerging, and the nearby actions that were spawned. The other is on the western edge of the East Woods, in a swale just north of the Cornfield. Standing there and looking toward the West Woods gives one a real sense of the importance terrain played for Hooker's attackers and throughout this battle—as well as the many missed opportunities.

» To read the full interview with David A. Welker, go to bit.ly/antietamsbloodyturningpoint.



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