Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg

by James A. Hessler

Sickles at Gettysburg: The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg, by licensed battlefield guide James Hessler, is the most deeply-researched, full-length biography to appear on this remarkable American icon. And it is long overdue.
No individual who fought at Gettysburg was more controversial, both personally and professionally, than Major General Daniel E. Sickles. By 1863, Sickles was notorious as a disgraced former Congressman who murdered his wife’s lover on the streets of Washington and used America’s first temporary insanity defense to escape justice. With his political career in ruins, Sickles used his connections with President Lincoln to obtain a prominent command in the Army of the Potomac’s Third Corps—despite having no military experience. At Gettysburg, he openly disobeyed orders in one of the most controversial decisions in military history.

No single action dictated the battlefield strategies of George Meade and Robert E. Lee more than Sickles unauthorized advance to the Peach Orchard, and the mythic defense of Little Round Top might have occurred quite differently were it not for General Sickles. Fighting heroically, Sickles lost his leg on the field and thereafter worked to remove General Meade from command of the army. Sickles spent the remainder of his checkered life declaring himself the true hero of Gettysburg.

Although he nearly lost the battle, Sickles was one of the earliest guardians of the battlefield when he returned to Congress, created Gettysburg National Military Park, and helped preserve the field for future generations. But Dan Sickles was never far from scandal. He was eventually removed from the New York Monument Commission and nearly went to jail for misappropriation of funds.

Hesslers book is a balanced and entertaining account of Sickles colorful life. Civil War enthusiasts who want to understand General Sickles scandalous life, Gettysburg’s battlefield strategies, the in-fighting within the Army of the Potomac, and the development of today’s National Park will find Sickles at Gettysburg a must-read.

About the Author: James A. Hessler works in the financial services industry and is a Licensed Battlefield Guide at Gettysburg National Military Park. He has taught Sickles and Gettysburg-related courses for Harrisburg Area Community College and the Gettysburg Foundation. In addition to writing articles for publication, Hessler speaks regularly at Civil War Round Tables. A native of Buffalo, NY, he resides in Gettysburg with his wife and children.

REVIEWS

The few other Sickles biographies available will now take a back seat to Hesslers powerful and evocative study of the man, the general, and the legacy of the Gettysburg battlefield that old Dan left America. I highly recommend this book. J. David Petruzzi, co-author of Plenty of Blame to Go Around: Jeb Stuart’s Controversial Ride to Gettysburg (2006) and with Steve Stanley The Complete Gettysburg Guide (2009)
This book is a breath of fresh air—it is an objective, thorough and readable examination of the controversial general. Hessler avoids getting bogged down in extreme reactions typically seen in others who write on this subject. Sue Boardman, Licensed Battlefield Guide, GNMP; Leadership Program Coordinator, Gettysburg Foundation; and author of The Battle of Gettysburg Cyclorama: A History and Guide


There are few people in history that stirred up as much controversy in their lifetimes as did Dan Sickles in his, and the subtitle of James Hessler's recent biography, "Sickles at Gettysburg," covers nearly all of it: "The Controversial Civil War General Who Committed Murder, Abandoned Little Round Top, and Declared Himself the Hero of Gettysburg."

Mr. Hessler has written a fascinating biography of Daniel Edgar Sickles. It seems nearly everything in Sickles life is up for debate, even the exact date of his birth, as historical records differ, and even the General contradicts himself in various documents. Though briefly touching on other subjects, Mr. Hessler has done a good job of limiting his biography of Dan Sickles, concentrating it on the action on that fateful second day of July, 1862 and the ensuing controversy of Sickles' actions on that day, and the debate that lasted for decades, while the General lived, and continues on, to a lesser extent, even today.

Even before the outbreak of the Civil War, and the Battle of Gettysburg, Dan Sickles had already made a name for himself, having used New York City's Tammany Hall political machine, he became a United States Congressman. But the rising star of Dan's political career, quickly came crashing to the earth when he, a rumored womanizer himself, shot and killed, Phillip Barton Key, his wife's lover, and the son of Francis Scott Key, the author of "The Star Spangled Banner." Never one to let adversity block his path, Daniel E. Sickles was the first person to successfully use temporary insanity as a defense, and was found "not guilty."

Possibly seeking to rehabilitate his reputation with the public, once the Civil War broke out, he organized four regiments of infantry in New York, soon to be named "The Excelsior Brigade" and was himself appointed as a colonel of one of the regiments. Despite opposition from congress, Sickles was eventually appointed a Brigadier General and given command of the brigade. Shortly thereafter he was promoted to Major General and given command of the III Corps of the Army of the Potomac.
The single most controversial aspect of Sickles military career, and possibly of his life would end up to be his actions on the battlefield of Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, on July 2, 1863, when either by insubordination or a misunderstanding of General George Meade's orders, he abandoned his position on Cemetery Ridge and moved his III Corps approximately three-quarters of a mile forward to the peach orchard, in advance of the line of the rest of the Union Army, and nearly out of supporting distance from it. It was there that Sickles, was struck in the leg by a cannon ball, causing a severe injury, due to which the leg had to be amputated.

Sickles and those who supported him would spend the next five decades defending the move to the Peach orchard, and Mr. Hessler, gives a fair and balanced assessment of the argument in support and against Sickles' actions. The author, is a steady moderated voice, leading his readers through the decades long debate, and doesn't take one side or the other. He instead lets his readers decide the merit of the arguments for themselves, but does point out, that Sickles reputation is forever tarnished, not by his actions on that hot and humid day in July, but in his attempts to bend the historical record, in which ever way he needed, to present himself and his actions in the most favorable light.

Despite the many flaws in Dan Sickles' character, Mr. Hessler also relates how Sickles was largely responsible for the preservation of the battlefields of Gettysburg, and the eventual creation of the Gettysburg National Battlefield, a legacy he left for generations to enjoy and study.

Dan Sickles is a complex historical figure, and James Hessler has done an exemplary job in writing his biography. His book is well researched and easily read. It is easy to hate Dan Sickles for the way in which he conducted his life, but had he conducted his life any other way, he would have never been so interesting. "Sickles at Gettysburg" is biography how it should be written.

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