

## Lee's Star Ascends from Seven Days

Although the tactical effect of Seven Days was to push McClellan's army a relatively short distance further from Richland, it was also the beginning of the ascendancy of Robert E. Lee's star. By war's end, Lee was an icon of American military history, placing him along Abraham Lincoln as a co-hero of the Civil War. To adherents of the Lost Cause, Lee has been, and still is, lionized as one of the nation's greatest generals, a commander who was without equal during the Civil War and one who was cunning but gallant while leading under great handicaps, including having inferior numbers of soldiers and insufficient materiel. In the eyes of many Lee was audacity personified and the most aggressive, combative man in the war.

By almost all accounts he was respected by everyone with whom he dealt, and perhaps more important was beloved by his soldiers, despite their many deprivations and hardships endured under Lee's command. Lee was entirely devoted to the leadership of his command; he was hard working while largely avoiding the internecine backbiting and intrigues that characterized much of the Confederacy's governance and high command. And there can be no doubt that while astride his horse Lee's command presence was magnificent, no small matter in an age of personal leadership. As a defensive tactician, Lee was probably without any peer.

On the other hand, Lee is not without his critics who contend, among other things, that he possessed a blood lust that resulted in a larger casualty rate than any other commander, including U. S. Grant, supposedly a butcher of his troops. Too often, Lee's critics maintain, he engaged in battles or campaigns of attrition that eventually exhausted the South's lifeblood. Lee's critics further contend that he had a narrow strategic viewpoint that ignored the Confederacy's overall needs outside northern Virginia, these critics asserting that much of Lee's battlefield success was due to the extraordinary military skills of his principle lieutenants, specifically Stonewall Jackson, James Longstreet, and J. E. B. Stuart, coupled with engaging Union generalship that ranged from mediocre and weak to pathetically inept, especially during the first two years of the war. Even Lee's admirers admit that he failed to appreciate the improvements of various weapons and munitions, especially that of the Minie` ball. As with most controversies, the truth probably can be found somewhere between these two polar positions; the Seven Days campaign provides ammunition to support arguments for either side.

Lee's life story is told in several biographies, some which are more objective than others. For our purposes it suffices to say that Lee was born in 1807 in Virginia, the son of an American Revolutionary War hero, Henry ("Light Horse Harry") Lee, who eventually died in financial and social disgrace. After graduating second in his West Point class of 1827, Robert was assigned to the Corps of Engineers. During the Mexican

War Lee performed brilliantly as a staff officer for Winfield Scott; in 1852 he began a three-year tour as Superintendent of West Point. By 1859, when he was semi-retired to settle his late father-in-law's estate, Lee was assigned to command a detachment of Marines to quell John Brown's insurrection at Harper's Ferry. As slave holding states began to secede, Lee supposedly spoke to someone, either Scott, still then the Army's General-in-Chief, or Frank Blair, Sr., a veteran Washington figure closely associated with the Lincoln administration, about becoming the Union's principle field commander; if in fact offered, Lee declined the position, instead retiring to his family home in Arlington, Virginia.

On April 20, 1861, six days after the surrender of Fort Sumter and five days after Lincoln's call for 75,000 volunteers to suppress the rebellion, Lee tendered his resignation from the U. S. Army. Shortly thereafter he accepted a major general's commission from the Virginia Special Assembly, but soon after that he became a lieutenant general – third in seniority -- in the Confederate army, being assigned as a military aide to Davis.

Notwithstanding Lee's accomplishments that started to materialize shortly after he replaced Joe Johnston on June 1, 1862, his earlier command reputation was inauspicious to say the least. In late August or early September, 1861, Davis sent Lee to western Virginia to take control of various and sundry C.S.A. units whose commanders were bickering and infighting among themselves. But these mountain areas presented formidable operational, communications, and logistics challenges, which in turn required strong commanders with solid military skills. Unfortunately for the Confederacy, its commanders in western Virginia tended to be politicians with scant military credentials, instead having their own ample personal ambitions.

On September 10, 1861, during heavy rains that impaired unit movements and discouraged his soldiers, Lee's command set out to recover portions of western Virginia, particularly Cheat Mountain. Lee divided his force into two columns that were unable to coordinate the start of their attacks before being repulsed by the Union. As a result Lee was forced to withdraw without dislodging any Federals, "ingloriously" terminating his first campaign. Eastern Virginia newspapers reacted in scathing terms, criticizing Lee for his supposedly timid decisions while deriding him with the nickname of "Granny Lee." Ironically George McClellan was the overall commander of the Union units in western Virginia; the success of these units in repelling Rebel forces from that region soon helped to propel McClellan to higher command around Washington and northern Virginia.

After McClellan, the Union commander, launched his Peninsula Campaign and was slowly advancing toward Richmond, Lee was serving again in Richmond as an advisor to CSA President Jefferson Davis while Joe Johnston commanded the Confederate forces

defending Richmond. When Johnston was seriously injured, Davis appointed Lee to take Johnston's place; Lee renamed his new command, which he will retain for the remainder of the war, the Army of Northern Virginia. Approximately one month later the sides begin serious combat that one week later resulted in McClellan completing his retreat south to Harrison's Landing on the James River. The Union withdrew from Harrison's Landing only after Lincoln, perhaps in a strategic mistake, ordered McClellan to join Pope for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Manassas campaign. This series of battles, to be known as Seven Days, was on its face a great success for the Confederacy and began to create Lee's everlasting fame.

Naturally the residents of Richmond, including governmental authorities, were delighted to be delivered from the threat of occupation and/or destruction by McClellan's army. However this apparent victory was gained at a cost of 20,000 casualties while gaining only seven miles. There are those who might argue that Lee's victory was accomplished primarily because of McClellan's inexplicable decisions to start retreating after the first days action when he might have had relatively easy access to Richmond after Lee had shifted so many of his soldiers to his left. Moreover on two occasions – Beaver Dam Creek & Malvern Hill -- Lee could not resist the temptation for frontal assaults that caused tremendous casualties for CSA while gaining little ground. At Glendale, where there might have been an opportunity to trap and capture a significant portion of the Federal army, any chance to achieve such success was foiled in large part because Lee's planned maneuvers were too complex for his subordinate commanders to implement. Finally at the end of the week Lee failed to take a position above Harrison's Landing that would have caused all sorts of havoc for Union position. But results are what counts in war where there are no style points, and Lee was instantly accorded hero status, a standing among captains of war that would remain long after his death.

We don't know whether Lee was given to introspective analysis about his performance during Seven Days. However, we do know to his credit changes had to be made with the upper command echelons of his army. For instance he quickly realized his command style required subordinate commanders who understood and could act upon Lee's frequently vague directions. Accordingly three of his generals proven to be incapable of such responsibilities were re-assigned to the Trans-Mississippi Department. At the end of the war one of those generals, Prince John Magruder, went to Mexico where he became a major general in Maximilian's army.

D. H. Hill, one of the few Confederate generals showing consistent initiative during the Seven Days, was the exception to his fellow Confederate officers who submitted reports that tended to be deferential, circumspect, and lacking in any meaningful analysis and/or recommendations for important, much needed improvements. Among Hill's observations,

he alone admitted that the C.S.A.'s losses were greater than those of the U.S.A. He also had the temerity to suggest that Malvern Hill would have had a different result but for "the blundering management of the battle," presumably a criticism of Lee's generalship. As a result Hill was sent packing elsewhere.

Lee's subsequent command record shined during an extraordinary thirteen or so months – 2<sup>nd</sup> Manassas, Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville -- until repulsed at Gettysburg. But even after that defeat Lee's army was the bulwark of the Confederacy's military capacity, fighting desperately but effectively during Grant's Overland campaign until eventually cornered in the trenches around Petersburg and Richmond. Regardless of the merits of his generalship, Lee remains in a small cadre of military heroes, a ranking that began to emerge and climb during and immediately after Seven Days.