

Six Common Tactical Reasons that Thwarted Battlefield Success

Civil War attacks were characterized by frequented and repeated failures. Five out of six attacks failed, which does not necessarily mean that five out of six defenses succeeded. There were of course a multitude of reasons for this lack of success: Poor commanders, bad weather, hostile terrain, impregnable fortifications, and even bad luck. But this article attempts identify in a rudimentary manner factors that commonly and often meant that offensive plans did not meet expectations.

Some of the reasons overlap. In any event here are six common reasons, inexact and incomplete, not listed in any particular order, why attacks often failed:

1. **The Lack of Complete Follow Through** -- Sometimes the offensive was on the cusp of success but for one reason or another the commander failed to complete his apparent success thereby losing important momentum and/or allowing the enemy time to bolster its defenses. Three examples quickly come to mind, the first being at **First Bull Run** when Union forces took a two hour break to reorganize their lines. By the time the Federals resumed their advance the Confederates were able to bring reinforcements, led by Thomas Jackson, onto the field. Even with the reinforcements the battle was going back and forth to the extent that Beauregard, the Confederate field commander was contemplating a retreat. However Union green forces began retreating in a pell mell fashion giving the Confederates their first major battlefield victory.

The second example of incomplete follow through occurred during the end of **Day One at Gettysburg** after Ewell's corps had swept down toward the northern part of the village of Gettysburg, driving Federal forces toward the high ground to the east of the village. Notwithstanding their initial overall success, the Confederates nevertheless committed a failure of pursuit, specifically the failure by Richard Ewell's corps to capture either Cemetery Hill or Culp's Hill. Allen Guelzo characterizes this failure "as the most sensational Confederate misjudgment of the war, ..." ¹ Scott Bowden and Bill Ward go even further to determine that "Ewell's failure to pursue the foe he and his troops had vanquished was one of the most costly errors in American military history." ²

As Lee approached the battlefield from the west he became visibly disturbed by the possibility that matters had gotten out of hand. ³ But upon his arrival, Lee was pleased that his subordinate commanders had severely damaged the Federal 11th Corps to the north of Gettysburg and the 1st Corps to the west of the village. But Lee also knew the battle would continue as other Federal troops would arrive and that in all probability these new troops would assume positions along the ridge line extending to the south of the village, a ridge line we now know as Cemetery Ridge.

Notwithstanding his army's initial success Lee's trained eye immediately told him of the importance of seizing Cemetery Hill to the north of the ridge since that prominence could dominate the ridge line where the Federals were likely to establish their defenses. ⁴ More immediately, since the Baltimore Pike ran across Cemetery Hill, Lee hoped to use occupation of the hills with their control of access to the pike to implement his plan to pick off more Union corps as they fed into the Gettysburg battlefield. Furthermore Cemetery Hill would dominate a possible escape route if the Federals were

defeated and forced to leave the battlefield. By courier Lee told Ewell that "... he [Lee] could see the enemy retreating over the hill ..., that it was only necessary to press 'those people' in order to secure possession of the heights, and, if practicable, he wished General Ewell to do this."⁵ Lee's courier caught up with Ewell in Gettysburg sometime after 5:45 p.m.⁶ But Ewell's two available corps commanders collectively became convinced it would not be a simple matter of walking up the hillside to take it.⁷

Shortly after scouts reported that Culp's Hill was apparently unoccupied Ewell decided to concentrate instead upon that elevation,⁸ located across the Baltimore Pike east of Cemetery Hill. However, when Ewell checked with Jubal Early, commander of the division closer to Culp's Hill, Early responded that "*his* command had been doing all the hard marching and fighting and was not in condition to make the move." (My emphasis added)⁹ Early also asserted that it was essential for somebody's soldiers to take Culp's Hill, a remark that Johnson took as an insult.

Leaning upon Lee's phrase "if practicable," coupled with one of his division commander's added protest that "the men were tired & footsore & he did not think would do anything 'one way or the other,'"¹⁰ Ewell determined that the lateness of the day coupled with the fatigue of the soldiers in both available divisions meant it was not practicable to take Culp's Hill either. Furthermore earlier in the day the one-legged Ewell had been knocked to the ground when a shell fragment killed his horse beneath him. Finally a message from Lee made clear to Ewell there would be no support to Ewell's right from Powell Hill.¹¹ Nor can we discount Stuart's absence, and the resultant lack of intelligence about how the hills were lightly defended at time, as another factor in Ewell's decision making process.

Many of Ewell's subordinates, still being accustomed to the late Stonewall Jackson's aggressive style of command, were stunned by Ewell's reluctance to pursue. A Confederate private grumbled, "Why we failed to push on and occupy the heights around and beyond Gettysburg is one of the unsettled questions."¹² In an oversimplified exaggeration one officer claimed, "There was not one officer, not even a man, that did not expect that the war would be closed upon the hill that evening, for there were still two hours of daylight when the final charge was made, yet for reasons that have never been explained nor ever will be ... someone made a blunder that lost the battle of Gettysburg, and humanly speaking, the Confederate cause."¹³

Later that evening Lee met personally with Ewell and his two division commanders who were still with him, Alleghany Johnson -- Ewell's third division commander -- being absent while trying to align his units in front of Culp's Hill.¹⁴ In essence Ewell and his division commanders still agreed that taking either Cemetery Hill or Culp's Hill was important but neither division commander felt his division was then up to the task. According to Jubal Early, Lee's disappointment was evident but was serious about attacking "the enemy as early as possible the next day"¹⁵ thereby implicitly agreeing that the attack would not be made that night.

The next day, July 2, Johnson's division took all of Culp's Hill except for the very crest held by one Union brigade, the rest of their Federal comrades being redeployed to reinforce the Bluecoated left.¹⁶ Arguably this was the real high water mark of the Confederacy but in any event the next day most the Union's 12th Corps retook, repulsed, and reoccupied Culp's Hill for the remainder of the battle

including of course Day Three when Federal artillery on high ground such as Culp's Hill was able to pummel the Confederate infantry that comprised Pickett's Charge.

Another example is known throughout Southern lore as the Fatal Halt, which occurred at **Cedar Creek** during Phil Sheridan's Shenandoah Valley. Sheridan had been leading his army up the Valley but while Sheridan had been called away for a conference to discuss strategy the Confederates, under Jubal Early, launched an early morning surprise attack upon Union forces

On the early morning of October 19 Sheridan awoke in Winchester to the distant sound of artillery.¹⁷ Early's massive attack caught the Federals completely by surprise, some of the Northern lads being still asleep in their tents. Union troops retreated in mass confusion from their fog shrouded camps leaving 18 guns and much of their camps behind while 1,300 Yankees were captured by 7:00 a.m.¹⁸ In the words of one Union officer, it "was a blind, confused, feeble scuffle."¹⁹

Following the Southerners' initial, overpowering success, they paused before reforming while Early met with John Gordon, Early's second in command, sometime between 7:30 a.m. and 10:30 a.m. What transpired next to the Rebel offensive is confused and controverted.²⁰ During this hiatus many of the Rebel soldiers and some of their officers began to plunder the kettles of cooking coffee, food, clothing, blankets, and equipment left in the Union camp. One version is that pillaging caused Rebel discipline to disintegrate to the point that further military action was not feasible. But the prevailing, but not necessarily exclusive or persuasive, version is that Gordon insisted the Federals could be destroyed in an hour but Early decided there had been "enough glory for one day" and that – to Gordon's mortification -- further pursuit was unnecessary, Early having assumed the Federals would continue to withdraw without being pressured. Gordon would later claim he had a "vision of the fatal halt of the first day at Gettysburg."²¹ In any event, within the next hour and half or two the Confederate attack began losing its momentum as units lost their cohesion and soldiers were exhausting after advancing for several hours. Also, to add to the uncertainty about Cedar Creek, by some reports during this time Early either had a change of heart or a change of mind about his army's posture, Old Jube becoming hesitant and apprehensive. According to Douglas Freeman who argued, "... as the forenoon passed, the thought of the wreck of his Divisions by absentees began to say Early's soldierly vigor. His state of mind changed subtly and progressively from one of confidence to one of concern."²²

As new subordinates were attempting to reorganize a new line, Sheridan galloped back to where his soldiers were preparing for a further retreat. At about 10:30 am Sheridan reached the bulk of his army, "the appalling spectacle of a panic-stricken army – hundreds of slightly wounded men, throngs of others unhurt but utterly demoralized, and baggage wagons by the score, all pressing to the rear in hopeless confusion, telling ... plainly that a disaster had occurred at the front."²³ Some of Sheridan's tactical decisions can legitimately be criticized but without doubt his battlefield charisma was hardly equaled as his officers and soldiers responded immediately and with energy to his presence and exhortations. "Retreat hell!" Sheridan assured everyone there would be no further retreat and that they would be back in their camps by that evening.

By early afternoon the Confederates approached the southern outskirts of Middletown where they remained to rest and reorganize their lines depleted by casualties and straggling from the morning's looting. The Confederates did little except to try a reconnaissance in force that accomplished nothing before being easily repulsed, Sheridan having anticipated the Rebel effort. But for whatever reason or its cause, this period of Confederate inactivity has become known as "the fatal halt" in Civil War lore.²⁴

While the Rebel soldiers were celebrating their apparent victory in part by continuing to loot the Union camps, Sheridan was enthusiastically going about the business of reorganizing his lines in preparation for a counterattack. Once the Union infantry began its counterattack by 4:00 pm, the entire Confederate line began to crumble like falling dominos before taking flight. One Confederate later wrote they were "... running as fast as a herd of wild, stampeded cattle. We just had to get out or be captured, and as we saw it, our officers were losing all controls over us."²⁵ As Early watched helplessly, being able to only yell, "Run, run, God damn you, they will get you," the Rebels rushed back across Cedar Creek to Fisher's Hill, leaving 2,000 dead and wounded on the battlefield with another 1,000 comrades captured.

The next day the Confederates withdrew further up the Valley Turnpike to New Market where the seeds of the Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864 had been sowed a little more than five months earlier. Early's explanation to Lee was, "The enemy subsequently made a stand on the pike and in turn attacked my line and my left gave way and the rest of the troops took a panic and could not be rallied, retreating in confusion. But for their bad conduct I should have defeated Sheridan's whole force."²⁶ Early also publically lambasted his army, criticizing it for yielding "to a disgraceful propensity for plunder."²⁷ Early added fuel to the mutual discord with Gordon by implying Gordon had participated in the plundering, remarks that helped to perpetuate the controversy for many years.

2. Piece Meal Attacks -- This might have been the most frequent failing by commanders. Launching units, usually at the division or even brigade levels, unit by unit meant that it was almost impossible to concentrate sufficient mass of troops to overcome defenses. Furthermore, individual units that advances without support from other units were of course vulnerable to becoming overcome by defenses that could be reinforced by deploying reserves or by shifting units from other sectors.

There were several factors, two of which are mentioned in the next two sections, but lack of efficient, reliable communications played a significant part. In this day and age when the lowest ranking soldier can have real time contact with his family and friends around the globe, developments in field communications were only beginning to emerge during the Civil War. Prior to a battle the army commander in the field might issue written orders to his corps commanders who typically would reissue his orders verbally. But the fronts of many battlefields were so long that many times orders to subordinates had to be delivered by couriers who travelled either by foot or horseback. Sometimes these couriers would become lost. Once the battle began communications became all the more difficult and unreliable when subordinate headquarters relocated and/or more difficult to find.

One of the prime examples happened at **Antietam** when McClellan had planned an attack from several points. Instead of several points of attack commencing simultaneously, the first attack

happened, probably prematurely, from the north followed by another attack from the same general direction, followed by an attack in the middle, and finally a much belated attack to the south, that being after the famous crossing at the Burnside Bridge. Although heavily outnumbered, Lee was able to shift his troops from point to point to thwart the individual assaults.

The problem of piecemeal attacks was most dramatically illustrated at **Fredericksburg** in December 1862. Due to the delay in being able to launch the Federal attack, that offense was problematic at best but Ambrose Burnside, the newly appointed army commander, insisted in going forward despite the odds. The main attack was to advance against Marye's Heights with a downstream diversion by George Meade's division to advance in plain view across land that was flat and clear. Meade protested that his piecemeal attack would be Antietam all over again, and that without support his division would not be able to hold any land taken.

Meade's division did advance further than did any Union division at Fredericksburg but once Confederate reinforcements arrived at what became known as the Slaughter Pen Meade had no choice except to retreat. Meade frantically sent for support but none was forthcoming. Later one historian reported, "Meade's division fared as Pickett's division fared at Gettysburg. Having made a most brilliant advance, and penetrated the hostile line more deeply than Pickett's did, it was enveloped by fire closing in upon it from every direction, and compelled to withdraw."²⁸

On the Confederate side, its commanders were unable to fully exploit the initial success of its surprise attack at **Shiloh** in large part because units were fed into the battle in a piecemeal, almost haphazard manner. In subsequent battles Braxton Bragg frequently lost the effectiveness of his attacks because of the piecemeal manner of launching attacks. This defect occurred at **Perryville** and **Stones River**. On another occasion, the Confederate attack at **Corinth II** bogged down as troops were fed into the battle one at a time instead of all at once.

3. Failure to Use All Available Troops -- These deficiencies tended to overlap and be connected. And it is frequently hard to analyze which could be cause and effect or vice versa. But because he kept deploying his infantry in a piecemeal manner at **Antietam**, McClellan never managed to get more than 20,000 of his men into action at the same time while another 20,000 soldiers never were committed.²⁹ This annoyed Lincoln so much that after Antietam he admonished McClellan to be sure to use all his troops in the next battle, advice that was moot since there was to be no more battles for Little Mac before he was relieved once and for all.

Ironically the so-called Pickett's Charge on **Day Three of Gettysburg** shows how attacks can be undone by not using all available troops. The popular image of this assault focuses upon the long line of massive Confederate infantry, flags waving in the breeze, gloriously advancing toward the Union defenders along Cemetery Ridge. One would imagine that Lee had gambled by throwing all his assets into that magnificent, but futile, frontal assault. However apparently this charge of well drilled and disciplined soldiers was not given Lee's intended full support. Lee never said so in so many words but, according to Porter Alexander, Lee envisioned three assault lines of fourteen infantry brigades – initially extending more than two miles in length – would be formed for the charge but for reasons still not

clearly understood only two of those lines of nine brigades participated in the charge.³⁰ Later that night a weary Lee purportedly told a trusted subordinate that "...if [Pickett's Division] had been supported as they were meant to have been – but for some reason, not yet fully explained to me, were not – we would have held the position, & the day would have been ours."³¹ Alexander's conjecture was that Lee's undersized staff simply failed to prepare or distribute the orders necessary to direct the five additional brigades to form a third line.³²

4. Uncoordinated Attacks -- **Antietam** illustrates several miscues. One main reason why the attacks were piecemeal was due to the lack of coordination among McClellan's corps commanders. In this instance McClellan -- who maintained his command post well behind the battle lines -- was largely responsible for this lack of coordination when he failed to disseminate an overall plan to his subordinates. Orders were given verbally; furthermore, if a corps commander was wounded or killed his replacement has little idea of the overall scheme or how or where his new command was supposed to engage in the battle. Despite these offensive miscues, the attrition among Lee's army and the lack of ammunition forced Lee to withdraw from the battlefield, thus giving McClellan narrow tactical victory. However in the view of many others McClellan could have accomplished much more if his attack had been reasonably well coordinated, thus taking advantage of his superior numbers.

Iuka was not one of the major engagements of the Civil War but it demonstrates the difficulties of coordinating attacks. This Union supply base in northern Mississippi was captured in September 1862 by Sterling Price's Confederate force, which occupied the depot, saving the newly captured new guns and ammunition as well as a variety of food stuffs and liquid refreshments.³³ When Sam Grant, overall district commander, and William Rosecrans, division commander, learned of Iuka's loss and its bonanza of supplies, Grant immediately began to make preparations, ordering a reconnaissance to not only retake Iuka but also to capture or destroy Price's Rebel army.

Grant planned that Rosecrans would approach Iuka from the southwest with 9,000 troops while Edward O.C. Ord, accompanied by Grant, would move his division of 6,500 men by rail to Burnsville³⁴ before hitting Iuka from the northwest.³⁵ Ideally these separate columns would converge at the same time in a pincers movement with superior numbers upon Price.³⁶

However, in the Civil War these tactical convergences were almost always fraught with considerable difficulties, as had been the case earlier with the coordination of Union forces trying to capture Stonewall Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley. First and foremost, communications between separated columns were always problematic, usually depending upon couriers who might or might not know the location of the other column. In the instant case the movements preceding the pincers attack would be made across rough, uneven terrain, much of which was still heavily forested, but sometimes through swamps, and without many secondary roads. Accordingly to overcome these difficulties it was a common technique to agree that simultaneous strikes would commence when one column fired a cannon to announce to the other that the attack should start. In this case it was agreed Rosecrans would fire his cannon to let Ord's column begin its attack.

But this plan started to go awry almost immediately. Rosecrans' rate of march was hampered by hard rains that turned Rosey's route into a muddy quagmire. Furthermore, a civilian guide took one of Rosecrans' divisions on a wrong turn, necessitating a countermarch, never an easy maneuver for a couple thousand soldiers with their horse drawn wagons and artillery pieces on narrow, unimproved roads. Rosecrans sent a message to Grant to advise that Rosey would arrive later than planned. As a result Ord, after leaving Grant at Burnsville, halted about six miles from Iuka³⁷ about twenty-four hours before Rosecrans was expected to arrive. Apparently Grant changed the plans so that Rosecrans should begin his attack with Ord to join in once he heard the sounds of the battle. According to Ord, Grant made little other effort to stay in contact with Rosecrans.³⁸

Meanwhile skirmishers in Rosecrans' vanguard emerged from thickets and scrub woods to meet Price's full defensive lines, which immediately launched a full volley of fire.³⁹ Old Rosey had not anticipated his skirmishers would encounter Rebel defenders so soon but after some hesitation and confusion he aligned his troops to give battle. An intense, strenuous struggle, some of it hand-to-hand, ensued in the brush-entangled terrain with the Rebels pushing Rosecrans back six hundred yards by the end of the battle.⁴⁰

And to complicate things further, once Rosecrans began to attack, the sound of his and Price's guns was muffled by a phenomenon known as an acoustic shadow.⁴¹ When circumstances were right Civil War artillery could sometimes be heard about a hundred miles away. But conversely given a combination of certain terrain configurations, including the valleys and density of the forests, and atmospheric conditions, such as humidity and wind direction, artillery barrages would also not even be heard a couple miles away.

Throughout it all Grant and Ord kept waiting for Rosey's signal that the latter's attack had started; neither heard so much as a single shot from the battle raging only six miles distant. Afterwards Grant and Ord, as well as some of their subordinates, claimed the wind blew from the north all day, apparently carrying the sounds of gunfire to the south.⁴² Sharp controversy still remains about the communications breakdown between Rosecrans and Grant.⁴³ However the record is reasonably clear that eventually late at night or early the next morning a courier from Rosecrans reached Grant who immediately ordered Ord to attack first thing in the morning.⁴⁴ Coincidentally, at Iuka Rosecrans also ordered a strike with the bayonet at sunrise.⁴⁵

However, that morning, Rosey's soldiers found only massive bodies of dead soldiers and horses, Price's Confederates having escaped the battlefield.⁴⁶ Ord arrived mid-morning, explaining he resumed his advance toward Iuka as soon as he heard sounds of battle. When Grant arrived at noon he was also disappointed Price had escaped but his subsequent ride over the ground convinced Grant (at least at that time) that Rosecrans simply did not have enough troops to have captured Price by himself.⁴⁷ Thus although the Federals recovered the depot and most of its supplies, the lack of cooperation between the converging divisions prevented Grant from accomplishing his larger objective of putting Price's army out of commission.

5. **Failure to Reconnoiter** -- Two examples involving William Sherman quickly come to mind: The first occurred as Grant had gathered several units, including Sherman's Army of the Tennessee in an attempt to lift the siege at **Chattanooga**. Sherman was assigned the mission to attack , and presumably to advance from, the northern portion of Missionary Ridge while Thomas and Hooker were to hold their positions in the middle and southern portions, respectively. It took some effort to get Sherman's army in position; not only did they have to march north of Chattanooga but then they had to re- cross the Tennessee River before advancing up a slope to the launch position. Sherman's army began to re-cross the Tennessee River the evening of November 23. By noon the next day, Tuesday, November 24, 1863, between the use of a captured Confederate steamer and a hastily constructed 1,250 foot pontoon bridge, Sherman's army was back on Rebel territory on the eastern side of the Tennessee River.

Given only token initial resistance Sherman was easily able to capture two high points along the northern slope of Missionary Ridge.⁴⁸ Sherman's next objective was Tunnel Hill. At first glance it appeared relatively easy to capture so instead of proceeding further on the afternoon of November 24, with only an hour of daylight remaining when Tunnel hill was being defended by only a brigade, Sherman decided not to advance any further but to give his troops a well-deserved rest. But the terrain of Tunnel Hill made it a difficult target. To Sherman's surprise, the next morning he discovered a deep ravine, a mile and half long, with steep, rugged sides separated his new position and Tunnel Hill that in turn could be transversed only through a narrow gap. Sherman's failure to reconnoiter put him into a wrong position.⁴⁹ Furthermore during the night the single Confederate brigade was reinforced by an entire division commanded by the redoubtable Irish-born Patrick Cleburne, considered by some as the "Stonewall of the West."⁵⁰

At Tunnel Hill Sherman had a four to one numerical advantage over the Southern defenders. But Cleburne was deftly exerting command of battlefield management at its finest to take full advantage of outstanding terrain, interior lines, and effective artillery fire to repulse Sherman's repeated thrusts.⁵¹ And so despite repeated assaults thrown against the Rebel defenders at Tunnel Hill little was accomplished except to frustrate Sherman and to irritate the impatient Grant. As Sherman's futility continued without abatement into the late afternoon on November 25, Grant reluctantly turned to Thomas for help with his "demoralized" Cumberlanders. Grant ordered Thomas to demonstrate by advancing Granger's newly formed 4th Corps – comprised of corps that had been routed at Chickamauga – to the triple line of entrenched Rebel rifle pits at Orchard Knob in front of the western base of Missionary Ridge.⁵² The rest is Civil War history as Thomas' army relieved the pressure against Sherman by storming up the front slope of Missionary Ridge to drive Braxton Bragg's army down the reverse slope. Thus although the situation was salvaged by the Army of the Cumberland, together with Hooker's advance along Lookout Mountain to the south, it illustrates nevertheless the difficulties a commander encountered as a result of his failure to effectively reconnoiter the area to his front.

Another instance when Sherman ordered an attack without knowing what was in his front occurred during his **Atlanta campaign**. In early May 1864 Sherman was moving his Grand Army south along the railroad toward Atlanta; Joe Johnston was fighting a defensive battle trying to delay Sherman while looking for an opportunity to counterattack. By Wednesday, May 25, 1864, both armies had

diverted southwest of the railroad to New Hope Church.⁵³ Union cavalry had sighted the Rebel movements; furthermore a Rebel courier had been captured that should have alerted Sherman that Johnston knew the Federals' plans but Cump did not adjust.⁵⁴ Instead of heeding this intelligence Sherman blundered by misjudging the size of the Rebel defenders – actually Hood's entire corps -- becoming impatient to say, "There haven't been twenty rebels there today."⁵⁵ Pursuant to Sherman's orders the Bluecoats' vanguard charged three times across muddy ground and over a rain-filled ditch as Hood's infantry together with 16 massed guns inflicted slaughter upon attacking Hooker's Federals at "Hell Hole," the soldiers' name for the carnage at New Hope Church.⁵⁶ Typical of casualty rates when attacking fortified positions, the Union losses were four times those of the Rebel defenders. And even though he had grossly misjudged the extent of Hood's defenders, Sherman will later blame the "slowness" of the Army of the Cumberland for the failure of the attack at, inexplicably characterizing this situation as a "splendid opportunity."

6. Timid or Hesitant Subordinates. -- Actually in too many instances the timidity or hesitation of subordinate commanders could be called rank insubordination, especially in the ranks of the Confederate Army of the Tennessee. Some of Braxton Bragg's subordinates frequently treated his orders with disdain; for instance during the campaign that eventually led to **Snodgrass Hill/ Horseshoe Ridge** his subordinates either ignored his orders or found ways to delay their implementation. As a result on several occasions large segments of the Union army escaped either capture or annihilation.

But such difficulties were not confined to the Rebel army in the Western campaign. For instance during the **Seven Days Battles**, Lee's first command of the Army of the Potomac. he was repeatedly frustrated by the inability or unwillingness of some of his subordinates, including Stonewall Jackson, to execute Lee's orders. Perhaps the pinnacle of ineffectiveness occurred at **Glendale**, a.k.a. Frasers Farm, the sixth of that series of battles. McClellan's army was vulnerable as it frantically retreated toward the James River but a series of uncoordinated attacks led by timid, even scarred generals allowed the Union army to escape to the point that it was able inflict terrible damage to the Rebels the next day at **Malvern Hill**.

Lee blamed the lack of co-operation among his subordinate commands.⁵⁷ In his report Lee's rebuke stated, "Could the other commands have co-operated in the action the result would have proved most disastrous to the enemy."⁵⁸ The likes of Magruder, Huger, and Holmes hardly met Lee's expectations that his subordinates fully and correctly implement Lee's intentions. But on the 30th one has to wonder why Lee did not try to find out why Huger – not that far away -- was not advancing and starting the attack as had been planned. And while Lee apparently consulted with Jackson earlier on the morning of the 30th there was no reason why Lee should not have sent a courier to Jackson to prod Stonewall into some action, even a demonstration, in support of the assaults further down Quaker Road. Although Lee apparently intended to create a concentration of force against the retreating, strung-out Federals, as it unfolded only 20,000 Confederate soldiers were actually engaged while another 50,000 nearby Rebels were unable to help.⁵⁹

Jeffrey Wert is of the opinion that "Glendale had offered Lee his finest chance to inflict a crippling, if not fatal, defeat upon McClellan's army."⁶⁰ But converging and attacking at multiple points requires

attacks, in order to maximize their effectiveness, be launched at the same time, and once again lack of accurate maps or other means of reconnaissance bedeviled Lee's Army of Northern Virginia as its enveloping units became lost and/or took the wrong roads to their intended destinations. Furthermore Huger was supposed to signal the start of a coordinated attack with cannon fire, always a problematic, erratic means of communication. As a result, only a relatively small portion of Lee's numerically superior army was engaged and the attacks that were launched were uncoordinated and uneven, causing individual attacks to lose potential effectiveness.

E. Porter Alexander, one of the most objective historians of the Civil War, later said seldom when "we were within reach of military successes so great that we might have hoped to end the war with our independence. ... The first was at Bull Run [in] July 1861 ... This [second] chance of June 30th [at Glendale] impresses me as the best of them all."⁶¹ Douglas Freeman has said that "...Frayser's Farm was one of the great lost opportunities in Confederate military history. It was the bitterest disappointments Lee had ever sustained, and one that he could not conceal."⁶² Although Glendale presented the Confederacy an early, and perhaps its best, chance to deal a near fatal blow to the Yankees, by the end of the day the Bluecoats held firm, almost assuring being able to escape safely to the James.⁶³ Soon after Seven Days Lee largely ameliorated the problem of timid or hesitant by transferring his non-compliant generals, Stonewall excepted, elsewhere.

Federal commanders were also frustrated by the timidity or hesitation of their subordinates. For instance, Sherman's Atlanta campaign in 1864 began with an attempt to dislodge Joe Johnston's army from **Dalton**, Georgia. Sherman adopted Thomas' proposal to send one of Sherman's armies through Dug Gap to block Johnston's anticipated retreat. On May 9 the Confederates repulsed five Federal assaults from the crest of Dug Gap, which Sherman called "a terrible door of death." Ironically while Thomas had thoroughly scouted the terrain, Johnston had learned very little about the terrain even though he had been in the area for several months and had claimed that he intended to make his fight at Dalton.⁶⁴

Sherman then sent McPherson through Snake Creek Gap which almost brought McPherson's 20,000 men behind Johnston's lines. When Cump heard of the crossing by McPherson's lead column he yelled, "I've got Joe Johnston dead."⁶⁵ Although Resaca – approximately 15 miles south of Dalton -- was within McPherson's reach, without sufficient cavalry to scout,⁶⁶ he mistakenly worried there was a sizable enemy before him.⁶⁷ Accordingly McPherson over cautiously retired back to the gap and dug in to await his supply train⁶⁸ even without destroying the rail line he had been assigned to disrupt.⁶⁹

When he arrived at the gap Sherman was disappointed to learn his friend had not taken Resaca, commenting three days later, "Well, Mac, you have missed the opportunity of a lifetime."⁷⁰ During the night of May 12, 1864, Johnston retreated from Dalton south along the Western & Atlantic RR to Resaca. Sherman was skeptical that Johnston would abandon his fortifications at Rocky Face Ridge and failed to move sharply thus allowing Johnston to beat him and dig in.⁷¹ Thus while McPherson's timidity meant Sherman had failed to capture Johnston, Sherman's flanking maneuver had at least dislodged Johnston from Dalton, moving the campaign ten miles closer to Atlanta. This was reflected in Sherman's statement that, "The movement was partly, not wholly successful."

Another example of a hesitant or timid subordinate is seen at **Chancellorsville** in May 1863. Joe Hooker, Burnside's replacement as commander of the Army of the Potomac, intended to take advantage of Lee's undersized army -- Longstreet's corps had been temporarily detached -- by attacking from two sides, the first being from Fredericksburg where John Sedgwick's corps was deployed as a diversionary force and from about twelve miles upstream at the hamlet of Chancellorsville where what was left of the main body of Lee's army was located. After some initial success Hooker suffered several mishaps, including Stonewall Jackson's extraordinary flanking attack on May 3 while Sedgwick's diversionary attack against a brigade was stalled at Salem Church. Still hoping to salvage some degree of success, on May 4 Hooker called for Sedgwick to advance from Fredericksburg to attack Lee's army from that side. However moving cautiously Sedgwick allowed himself to be attacked from three sides by the reinforced Rebels before being driven back across the river (while Hooker remained inactive). From the Confederate perspective, Porter Alexander -- referring to Chancellorsville -- chimed in with the opinion that, "I have always felt surprise that the enemy retained Sedgwick as a corps commander after [Salem Church], for he seems to me to have wasted great opportunities, & come about as near to doing nothing with 30,000 men as it was easily possible to do. ...With a little help from McLaws, Wilcox was able to drive the enemy back & recover the position. After this Sedgwick seemed to make no further effort to advance, but went into camp to wait for another day."⁷²

In September 1864 Phil Sheridan was commanding an army tasked to drive the Confederates from Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. After driving the Rebels from Westchester, Sheridan's next target was a place called Fisher's Hill. Again Sheridan anticipated he could force the Rebels to retreat and hoped his cavalry could establish a blocking position to capture the Confederate army. Sheridan's infantry was able to rather easily dislodge the Confederates from Fisher's Hill, and despite the darkness Sheridan's infantry divisions continued their chase up the Valley, albeit with disorganized, broken ranks. The Confederate stampede continued for miles, as described by Jedehiah Hotchkiss, the famous Confederate mapmaker, "The rout of wagons, caissons, limbers, artillery, and flying men was fearful as the stream swept down the pike toward Woodstock, as many thought the enemy's cavalry was aiming to get there by the Middle Road and cut us off."⁷³ That is exactly what Sheridan intended and anticipated!

To help implement his plan of capturing the fleeing Rebels, Sheridan sent his cavalry commander, Albert Torbert, with two cavalry divisions up the Luray Valley east of the Massanutten. Sheridan wanted Torbert to cross the Massanutten at the New Market Gap to be in position at New Market -- thirty miles south of Fisher's Hill -- to block Early's anticipated retreat.⁷⁴ Early in the morning of the 22nd the Union cavalry pushed some Gray horse riders back six miles up the Luray Valley east of the Massanutten before encountering a couple brigades of fortified Rebel cavalry. Rather than to press his overwhelming numerical advantage, and not realizing Sheridan was routing Early from Fisher's Hill, after a couple hours exchanging artillery fire, Torbert broke off before countermarching to return down the Luray Road to Front Royal.⁷⁵ Since Torbert's two cavalry divisions were not in a blocking position, Early's army escaped up the Valley 25 miles to Woodstock, something Sheridan never understood or forgave later commenting, "To this day I have been unable to account satisfactorily for Torbert's failure.

....Torbert ought to have made a fight ... it does not appear he made any serious effort at all to dislodge the Confederate cavalry.”⁷⁶

Note: Since this article is not thoroughly researched, any feedback in the form of questions, additional examples, or even critique would be much appreciated. -- DF

¹ Guelzo, Allen C. *Gettysburg – The Last Invasion* (2013) New York: Alfred A. Knopf pg 216.

² Bowden, Scott & Ward, Bill. *Last Chance for Victory: Robert E. Lee and the Gettysburg Campaign* (2001) Cambridge: Da Capo Press, pg 515; Porter Alexander had a contrary opinion stating that “I think any attack we could have made that afternoon would have failed. ... Gen. Ewell thought the position too strong for assault, & Lee and Col. Long [an aide to Lee] agreed in this opinion.” *Supra*, pg 233.

³ Cottingham, Edwin B. *The Gettysburg Campaign – A Study in Command* (1968) New York: Touchstone, pg 280.

⁴ Guelzo, *supra*, pg 213

⁵ Stackpole, Edward J. *They Met at Gettysburg* (1956) Harrisburg: Stackpole Books, pg 149. There is some minor variation about this word with the other version containing the phrase “if possible, ...” Trudeau, Noah Andre, *Gettysburg – A Testing of Courage* (2002) New York: Perennial, pg 247.

⁶ Trudeau, *supra*, pg 251.

⁷ *Ibid*, pg 252.

⁸ *Ibid*, pg 259; Scott Bowden & Bill Ward have concluded that Ewell’s failure to timely inform Lee of Culp’s Hill’s vulnerability and being subject to capture was the sixth largest reason for the Confederate defeat at Gettysburg.

⁹ *Ibid*, pg 257.

¹⁰ Guelzo, *supra*, pg 218.

¹¹ *Ibid*, pg 69.

¹² Trudeau, *supra*, pg 257

¹³ Eicher, David J. *The Longest Night: A Military History of the Civil War* (2001) New York: Simon & Schuster, pg 71

¹⁴ Trudeau, *supra*, pg 261

¹⁵ *Ibid*, pg 261

¹⁶ Castel, Albert with Brooks D. Simpson. *Victors in Blue – How Union Generals Fought the Confederates, Battled Each Other, and Won the Civil War* (2011) Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, pg 184.

¹⁷ Castel and Simpson, *supra*, pg 287

¹⁸ Rutherford B. Hayes, the future president, barely escaped from being captured after having his horse shot dead under him.

¹⁹ Wert, Jeffry D. *From Winchester to Cedar Creek – The Shenandoah Campaign of 1864* (1987) Carlisle: South Mountain Press, pg 179.

²⁰ The record is far from complete because few after action reports from Southern officers are available. Many of the contending versions were written several years later when writers such as Gordon were anxious to put themselves in the best possible light.

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- ²¹ Bohannon, Keith S. "The Fatal Halt" versus "Bad Conduct," essay pg 64 in *The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864*, edited by Gary W. Gallagher.(2006) Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.
- ²² Freeman, Douglas Southall. *Lee's Lieutenants – A Study in Command Volume III Gettysburg to Appomattox* (1944) New York: Scribner, pg 605.
- ²³ Bernstein, Steven. *The Confederacy's Last Northern Offensive: Jubal Early, the Army of the Valley and the Raid on Washington* (2011) Jefferson, NC & London: McFarland & Company, Inc., pg 197.
- ²⁴ Bohannon's, *supra*, pp 56 *et seq.* To add further confusion about Cedar Creek, it is not clear which period of inactivity, i.e. that which occurred in the morning or that occurring in the morning, was the fatal halt.
- ²⁵ Wert, *supra*, pg 234.
- ²⁶ Eicher, *supra*, pg 751
- ²⁷ Bohannon, *supra*, pg 71.
- ²⁸ Huntington, Tom. *Searching for George Gordon Meade: The Forgotten Victor of Gettysburg* (2013) Mechanicsburg: Stackpole, pp 111-17
- ²⁹ McPherson, *supra*, pg 116.
- ³⁰ Alexander, Edward Porter. *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of Edward Porter Alexander / Edited by Gary C. Gallagher* (1989) Raleigh: The University of North Carolina Press, pp 281-82.
- ³¹ Bowden & Ward, *supra*, pg 500; for a full account of Imboden's recollection see Alexander, *supra*, pp 279-80.
- ³² Alexander, *supra*, pg 283.
- ³³ Woodworth, Steven E. *Nothing But Victory – The Army of the Tennessee 1861-1865* (2005) New York: Alfred A. Knopf, pg 218.
- ³⁴ Castel and Simpson, *supra*, pg 127.
- ³⁵ Varney, Frank P. *General Grant and the Rewriting of History – How the Destruction of William S. Rosecrans Influenced Our Understanding of the Civil War* (2013) El Dorado Hills: Savas Beatie LLC, pg 39.
- ³⁶ Woodworth, *supra*, pg 219.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, pg 132.
- ³⁸ Cozzens, Peter. *The Darkest Days of the War – The Battles of Iuka & Corinth* (1997) Chapel Hill & London: The University of North Carolina Press, pp 127-28.
- ³⁹ Castel and Simpson, *supra*, pg 130.
- ⁴⁰ Hess, Earl J. *The Civil War in the West – Victory and Defeat from the Appalachians to the Mississippi* (2012) Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, pg 136.
- ⁴¹ Also known as an acoustic anomaly.
- ⁴² Cozzens, *supra*, pg 130
- ⁴³ Varney, *supra*, pp 49-53.
- ⁴⁴ Hess, *supra*, pg 137
- ⁴⁵ Cozzens, *supra*, pg 124
- ⁴⁶ One Union soldier described the "scene, and with it that of our dead heroes and those of the enemy lying thickly over the ground and the look of destruction and desolation that abounded in the vicinity, was the grandest and most awful spectacle of war that I viewed during a service of four and a half years." *Ibid*, pg 124.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid*, pp 130-31.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid*, pg 203
- ⁴⁹ Castel and Simpson, *supra*, pg 244.
- ⁵⁰ Symonds, Craig L. *Stonewall of the West: Patrick Cleburne & The Civil War* (1997) Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, pg 164.
- ⁵¹ Symonds, *supra*, pg 169; see also Woolworth, *supra*, pp 191-93.
- ⁵² Woolworth, *supra*, pp 180-81.
- ⁵³ *Ibid*, pp 260-61

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- ⁵⁴ Daniel, Larry J. *Days of Glory: The Army of the Cumberland, 1861-1865* (2004) Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, pg 401.
- ⁵⁵ Daniel, *supra*, pg 401; Cleaves, Freeman. *Rock of Chickamauga – The Life of General George H. Thomas* (1948) Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, pg 215. One of Thomas' staff officers said he felt a "strong urge to shoot Sherman."
- ⁵⁶ Eicher, *supra*, pg 700; Longacre, Edward G. *Worthy Opponents – William T. Sherman & Joseph E. Johnston – Antagonists in War, Friends in Peace* (2006) Nashville: Rutland Hill Press, pg 260.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid*, pg 95.
- ⁵⁸ Wert, Jeffry D. *General James Longstreet – The Confederacy's Most Controversial Soldier* (1993) New York: Touchstone, *supra*, pg 144
- ⁵⁹ *Ibid*, pp 144-45
- ⁶⁰ Wert, Jeffry D. *The Sword of Lincoln – The Army of the Potomac* (2005) New York: Simon & Schuster, pg 116.
- ⁶¹ Alexander, *supra*, pg 110.
- ⁶² Freeman, *supra*, pg 199.
- ⁶³ Rafuse, Ethan S. *McClellan's War* (2005) Bloomington: Indiana University Press, pp 227.
- ⁶⁴ Buell, Thomas B. *The Warrior Generals – Combat Leadership in the Civil War* (1997) New York: Three Rivers Press, pg 361.
- ⁶⁵ Davis, Stephen. *Atlanta will Fall – Sherman, Joe Johnston and the Yankee Heavy Battalions* (2001) Wilmington: Scholarly Resources, pg 44. Longacre, *supra*, pg 250. Cleaves has a slightly different version: "McPherson is through the Gap. Johnston's army is mine." *Supra*, pg 213.
- ⁶⁶ Davis, *supra*, pg 40.
- ⁶⁷ Eicher, *supra*, pg 699.
- ⁶⁸ Woodworth, *supra*, pg 495.
- ⁶⁹ Benson Bobrick – certainly no fan of Sherman – points out that Sherman provided three versions of McPherson's mission: (1) To feint at Snake Creek Gap; (2) to seize and control the railroad; and (3) to cut the railroad before withdrawing to the gap. Bobrick also asserts Sherman suppressed evidence that might have militated in McPherson's favor. *Master of War – The Life of General George H. Thomas* (2009) New York: Simon & Schuster, pp 231-33.
- ⁷⁰ Ecelbarger, Gary. *The Day Atlanta Died – The Battle of Atlanta* (2010) New York: St. Martin's Press, pg 17. Historians of the Atlanta campaign have argued over who was at fault for allowing the Snake Creek Gap to be virtually undefended. Johnston's defenders tend to blame Wheeler's cavalry but the fact of the matter is that Wheeler was deployed to the north observing Schofield's advance from the Knoxville area. See Davis, *supra*, pp 42-44.
- ⁷¹ Buell, *supra*, pg 363.
- ⁷² Alexander, *supra*, pg 283.
- ⁷³ Wert, *From Winchester ...*, pg 127.
- ⁷⁴ Wheelan, Joseph. *Terrible Swift Sword – The Life of General Philip H. Sheridan* (2012) Cambridge: Da Capo Press, pg 117.
- ⁷⁵ *Ibid*, pg 117; Wert, *supra*, pg 131.
- ⁷⁶ Bernstein, *supra*, pg 177.