

UNITED STATES MILITARY ACADEMY

OUT OF HIS ELEMENT: STUART AT CHANCELLORSVILLE

HI301: HISTORY OF THE MILITARY ART

SECTION I5

MAJ CHRISTIAN TEUTSCH

By

CADET JOHN STANFORD '08, CO E1

WEST POINT, NEW YORK

16 NOVEMBER 2007

_____ MY DOCUMENTATION IDENTIFIES ALL SOURCES USED AND
ASSISTANCE RECEIVED IN COMPLETING THIS ASSIGNMENT.

_____ NO SOURCES WERE USED OR ASSISTANCE RECEIVED IN
COMPLETING THIS ASSIGNMENT.

SIGNATURE

The death of Stonewall Jackson during the Battle of Chancellorsville was a great loss for the Confederacy in the long term. However, it also posed the immediate problem of finding a new commander for his corps. Although it may have been unusual for a cavalry commander to command a corps of infantry with artillery assets, J.E.B. Stuart took command and performed well due to his understanding of the importance of key terrain, his charismatic personality, his decisiveness, and his flexibility.

One can consider a commander successful when he accomplishes his mission well under difficult conditions. Looking at the broad picture, it is clear that Stuart accomplished his mission. At 0300 on 3 May, General Lee wrote to Stuart giving him his mission, which was to take Chancellorsville from the Union forces quickly and aggressively in order to allow the two parts of the Confederate army to unite.¹ Stuart's right flank joined with Anderson's right flank by 0800 and Stuart had broken through the Union lines and captured the central point of the Chancellorsville plateau by 1000.² He accomplished his mission as specified by General Lee only seven hours after receiving it and only twelve hours after even finding out that he was going to command Jackson's corps.

J.E.B. Stuart not only accomplished his mission, but he did so under difficult conditions. First, the Confederates had lost some of their momentum as a result of Sickles' night attack in which he joined his right flank firmly to the main Union position at Chancellorsville and Fairview while also recapturing one piece of artillery and three

¹ *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Ser. 1, 25 (2): 769. (hereafter cited as *OR*, unless otherwise noted all citations are from Ser. 1)

² *Confederate Military History* (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1987), Vol. IV: 389. (hereafter cited as *CMH*)

caissons.³ Second, when Stuart took command, Jackson's staff was demoralized at the loss of their commander and Jackson, having a tendency towards secrecy, had left little information on his plan.⁴ When Stuart sent MAJ Pendleton to Jackson for guidance, the wounded general was dull with the opiate the surgeons gave him and only said that Stuart should "do what he thinks best."⁵ Third, the Union army occupied Hazel Grove when Stuart took command. From this position, Union artillery could place enfilading fire on Stuart's corps if he advanced towards Chancellorsville.⁶ Stuart called attention to these difficulties in his report of the battle in which he wrote that he was called to the command at 10 o'clock on the night of 2 May during a night attack by the Union forces, had no knowledge of the ground or the disposition of the forces on either side, and had no officers left in the corps above the rank of brigadier general.⁷ Given these difficult conditions under which to attack the Union army, Stuart accomplished his mission well. MG A.P. Hill recognized Stuart's exceptional performance in his report of the battle in which he wrote, "Called suddenly late at night to a new sphere of action, and entirely ignorant of the positions of the brigades, with indomitable energy [MG Stuart] surmounted all difficulties and achieved a glorious result."⁸

One factor that made J.E.B. Stuart successful was his understanding of the importance of key terrain. This understanding of terrain is to be expected of a cavalry officer who spent so much time conducting reconnaissance operations. Stuart understood how to use the terrain to his advantage better than Hooker did. The actions at Hazel

³ Ernest B. Furgurson. Chancellorsville 1863. (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 210.

⁴ Stephen W. Sears. Chancellorsville. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996), 299.

⁵ John W. Thomason. Jeb Stuart. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948), 382.

⁶ Furgurson, 219.

⁷ *OR*, 25 (1): 889.

⁸ *OR*, 25 (1): 886.

Grove on 3 May are a good example of how he outclassed Hooker in this regard.

Describing the events of 3 May, Abner Doubleday wrote, “The real key of the battlefield now was the eminence at Hazel Grove.”⁹ The aspect of Hazel Grove that made it key terrain was its observation and fields of fire. As long as the Union held it, they could place enfilading fire on a Confederate advance toward Chancellorsville and if the Confederates took it, they could support Anderson’s advance with enfilading fire on Slocum’s line.¹⁰ Sickles held Hazel Grove on the night before 3 May and urged Hooker to incorporate it into the Union line because he realized its significance.¹¹ However, Hooker didn’t want to leave Sickles outside the line by himself and didn’t want to move the Union line to incorporate him, so he ordered him to withdraw.¹²

Presented with this great opportunity, Stuart seized it. On the morning of 3 May, Archer’s brigade cleared Hazel Grove and Stuart immediately had Porter Alexander move his guns onto the hill.¹³ MAJ Pegram described the effect that the artillery on Hazel Grove had on Union artillery in his report on the battle in which he wrote, “The firing was accurate, and had a telling effect on the enemy’s batteries, exploding several ammunition chests, killing a number of men and horses, and soon driving them away from their guns.”¹⁴ In his report of the battle, BG Heth, one of Stuart’s division commanders, described how the guns on Hazel Grove were able to silence a 29-gun Union battery that had been inflicting heavy casualties on the Confederates.¹⁵ The ability of the Confederate artillery to render the Union artillery ineffective was one of the major

⁹ Abner Doubleday, Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1912), 43.

¹⁰ Doubleday, 43-44.

¹¹ Furgurson, 221.

¹² Furgurson, 221-222.

¹³ Sears, 319.

¹⁴ *OR*, 25 (1): 938.

¹⁵ *OR*, 25 (1): 892.

factors that led to victory. All commanders need to understand the importance of terrain, especially commanders of maneuver units. Stuart's understanding of the importance of the key terrain at Hazel Grove allowed him to seize this opportunity when it presented itself rather than wasting it like Hooker did.

J.E.B. Stuart was very charismatic and good at motivating soldiers. This is a characteristic that applies equally to commanding infantry and cavalry units. The Confederate soldiers who fought on 3 May needed charismatic leadership because most of them had gotten only two or three hours of sleep the night before and some brigades had to initiate the attack before rations were distributed that morning.¹⁶ Throughout the fighting on 3 May, Stuart rode up and down the line motivating the troops, waving his hat, and cheering.¹⁷ This high spirit trickled down to the troops under his command. In his memoirs, Porter Alexander described how the disorder and confusion during the battle on 3 May made it so that the troops could only be motivated by the personal examples of their officers and used Stuart as an example, writing that "the men could only be moved by much example on the part of their officers. Stuart himself was conspicuous in this, and was everywhere encouraging the troops with his magnetic presence and bearing."¹⁸ At one point in the battle, J.E.B. Stuart dashed into a retreating regiment, took their flag from the color bearer, turned them around with his powerful command voice, and personally led them against the Union breastworks with their flag in his hands.¹⁹ This kind of personal courage on Stuart's part must have been an inspiring sight for the starving, sleep-deprived soldiers of his command. While riding up and down

¹⁶ E.P. Alexander. Military Memoirs of a Confederate. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907), 345.

¹⁷ Furgurson, 227.

¹⁸ Alexander, 347.

¹⁹ Thomason, 385.

the lines, Stuart also encouraged his troops by shouting “Remember Jackson!”, reminding them of their fallen commander, and by singing “Old Joe Hooker, won’t you come out the Wilderness.”²⁰ J.E.B. Stuart was very charismatic at the battle and showed a lot of personal courage, which had a great effect on the morale of his troops. His powerful and energetic personality was one of the key factors that made him a successful commander of an infantry force despite his lack of experience in commanding infantry.

Decisiveness is a trait that makes both infantry and cavalry commanders successful. J.E.B. Stuart’s aggressiveness and decisiveness were some of the main factors that made him successful in his attack on the Union line. As he rode from Ely’s Ford to take command, Stuart was determined to attack the enemy as early as possible even though he had never commanded an infantry force and had incomplete information about the situation.²¹ He came up with a simple plan and executed it boldly. His plan was for the right side of his line to swing around so that they would be on line with the rest of the corps, then the entire corps would advance towards Chancellorsville together.²² This plan initially seems like it might not have been tactically sound. First, a frontal attack is generally considered to be the least desirable form of maneuver; commanders usually seek to maneuver against the enemy using an envelopment or turning movement. Second, a frontal attack is especially ineffective against a stronger opponent. On the morning of 3 May, Hooker had over 60,000 fresh troops around Chancellorsville while J.E.B. Stuart only had 24,000 and was supported by about 16,000 to the east under Lee.²³ Despite these disadvantages, Stuart knew that time was critical. The Union army had

²⁰ Thomason, 384.

²¹ Furgurson, 220.

²² *OR*, 25 (1): 887.

²³ Anderson, 344.

spent the night of 2-3 May entrenching themselves and building breastworks, which the Confederates knew because they could hear the sound of their axes all night.²⁴ Stuart knew that any delay would give the Union forces more time to rest, reorganize, build fortifications, etc., so he decided that a simple, imperfect plan executed immediately and aggressively was better than a better plan executed later.

In addition to being decisive, J.E.B. Stuart was also flexible. Cavalry commanders and infantry commanders both need to be flexible in order to be able to respond to new developments on the battlefield and take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves. Stuart's plan did not originally call for Archer's division taking Hazel Grove. Archer took Hazel Grove because Stuart's order for the right flank of his force the swing around was mistaken for an order to attack.²⁵ Despite the fact that it was not part of his plan, Stuart saw that Hazel Grove was a perfect location for artillery and that it could support his advance with enfilading fire on the Union line. Once Archer had taken Hazel Grove, Stuart immediately ordered 30 guns to be placed there.²⁶ On the Union side, Hooker's inflexibility caused him to give up this key piece of terrain. Stuart also showed his flexibility when the Union army started putting more pressure on his left flank than he expected and he responded by reinforcing it. BG Iverson was the commander of the brigade on the far left flank and sent Stuart a request for reinforcements when his left flank began to yield.²⁷ Stuart sent Colquitt's brigade to reinforce the left and later sent more reinforcements after his right flank connected with

²⁴ Thomason, 383.

²⁵ *OR*, 25 (1): 887.

²⁶ *CMH*, Vol. IV: 389.

²⁷ *OR*, 25 (1): 985-986.

Anderson's left.²⁸ Stuart's ability to adapt to changing conditions on the battlefield is a characteristic that makes all commanders successful, whether commanding an infantry unit, cavalry unit, or any other kind of unit. This flexibility was a major factor that made him successful at Chancellorsville.

Most of the traits that make commanders successful are not specific to any one branch. Traits like attention to the terrain, aggressiveness, flexibility, charisma, and confidence make commanders successful in all branches of the army. J.E.B. Stuart was successful as a commander of an infantry force with artillery assets at the Battle of Chancellorsville because the traits he possessed were not specific to cavalry, but applicable to command in general. Modern commanders in all branches of the military can learn a valuable lesson from Stuart's performance at Chancellorsville: that once a commander has mastered the fundamentals of military leadership, he or she will be successful even in unfamiliar situations.

²⁸ *OR*, 25 (1): 887.

WORKS CITED

PRIMARY SOURCES

The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901).

E.P. Alexander. Military Memoirs of a Confederate. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1907).

Doubleday, Abner. Chancellorsville and Gettysburg. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1912).

SECONDARY SOURCES

Confederate Military History (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1987), Vol. IV.

Furgurson, Ernest B. Chancellorsville 1863. (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

Sears, Stephen W. Chancellorsville. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1996).

Thomason, John W. Jeb Stuart. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1948).