Lee and the Operational Art: The Right Place, The Right Time

JAY LUVAAS

© 1992 Jay Luvaas

A few days after the battle of Gettysburg, the official Prussian military observer who had accompanied Confederate headquarters during the campaign asked General Robert E. Lee about his command philosophy. "I think and work with all my powers to bring my troops to the right place at the right time," Lee explained, then "I leave the matter up to God and the subordinate officers." To interfere at this stage "does more harm than good."[1]

"The right place at the right time!" This is the essence of the operational art as it is defined in the most recent edition of the Army's Field Manual 100-5, *Operations*:

> Operational art . . . involves fundamental decisions about when and where to fight and whether to accept or decline battle. Its essence is the identification of the enemy's operational center-of-gravity and the concentration of superior combat power against that point to achieve a decisive success.[2]

Until recently Western soldiers and historians have separated military activity into strategy and tactics. The theater of war belonged to the province of strategy, the battlefield to tactics. "Operations" was simply a term loosely applied to any of the various types of combat activity in the field—offensive, defensive, siege, etc. Or, if the theater of war should itself be partitioned into sub-theaters, these might be called "theaters of operations."[3]

But with the insertion in US doctrine in 1982 of a third level of war—the operational level—the word took on added significance. We now

have an additional tool for analyzing generalship, providing fresh insights into old campaigns and perhaps a fuller understanding of history's commanders. To illustrate this point, let us look anew at Lee during Gettysburg.

Lee and Gettysburg

His motives for invading Pennsylvania were mixed. Lee needed a fresh source of food to sustain his army, for after the victory at Fredericksburg on 13 December 1862, shortages in food and forage had forced him to send Lieutenant General James Longstreet's corps south of the James River merely to subsist over the winter. By marching north Lee also hoped to draw his new opponent, Major General Joseph Hooker, northward to cover Washington and thus reduce the immediate prospect of another major Union thrust at Richmond. The problem thus "resolved itself into a choice of one of two things—either to retire to Richmond and stand siege, which ultimately must have ended in surrender, or to invade Pennsylvania."[4]

In February 1863 Lee ordered the best topographical engineer in his army to prepare a map of the Shenandoah Valley "extended to Harrisburg, Pa., and then on to Philadelphia."[5] Such a move, he later reassured the Secretary of War, would offer the best way to relieve pressure on Confederate forces in the west; he had already begun preparations when Hooker crossed the Rappahannock on his vast turning movement toward Chancellorsville. After this brilliant victory, which Lee's foremost biographer described as "perhaps more nearly a flawless battle" than any ever planned and executed by an American commander, Lee reorganized his army, expanding his two corps to three. He had lost Lieutenant General T. J. "Stonewall" Jackson, his most dynamic corps commander, and he questioned whether any replacement could properly handle 30,000 men in the field.[6]

Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania lacked a geographical objective. "It had not been intended to deliver a general battle so far from our base," he wrote in his after-action report, "*unless attacked.*"[7] From this we may infer that he would rely upon what we today would call his operational skills either to catch the enemy off balance and defeat him in detail, or to occupy defensible terrain where the enemy would have to attack. Since he read Northern newspapers and

---

Dr. Jay Luvaas is Professor of Military History at the US Army War College. He is a graduate of Allegheny College (Pa.) and earned the M.A. and Ph.D. degrees at Duke University. Dr. Luvaas taught at Allegheny College from 1957 to 1982, and has been visiting professor of military history at the US Military Academy and at the US Army Military History Institute. Among his major works are: *The Military Legacy of the Civil War* (1959), *The Education of an Army* (1964), *Frederick the Great on the Art of War* (1966), *Dear Miss Em: General Eichelberger's War in the Pacific* (1972), and three volumes in the US Army War College Civil War battlefield series thus far.

---

was aware of the growing anti-war sentiment in the North, he may also have assumed that the political and psychological effects of a victory on enemy soil would be greater than just another battle won in Virginia.[8]

Neither was possible, however, unless Lee had timely intelligence of enemy movements, and for the week preceding the battle of Gettysburg he had heard nothing from Major General Jeb Stuart, his cavalry commander. Stuart, we may recall, had been ordered to take three brigades, cross the Potomac east of the mountains, and then "move on and feel the right of Ewell's troops" at the head of Lee's invading column, collecting information and provisions en route.[9] On 28 June a scout finally brought word that three Union corps were near Frederick, Maryland, on the other side of the mountains—much closer than Lee had assumed. He promptly ordered his three corps commanders to concentrate in the vicinity of Gettysburg, *east* of the mountains that had shielded the Confederate advance.

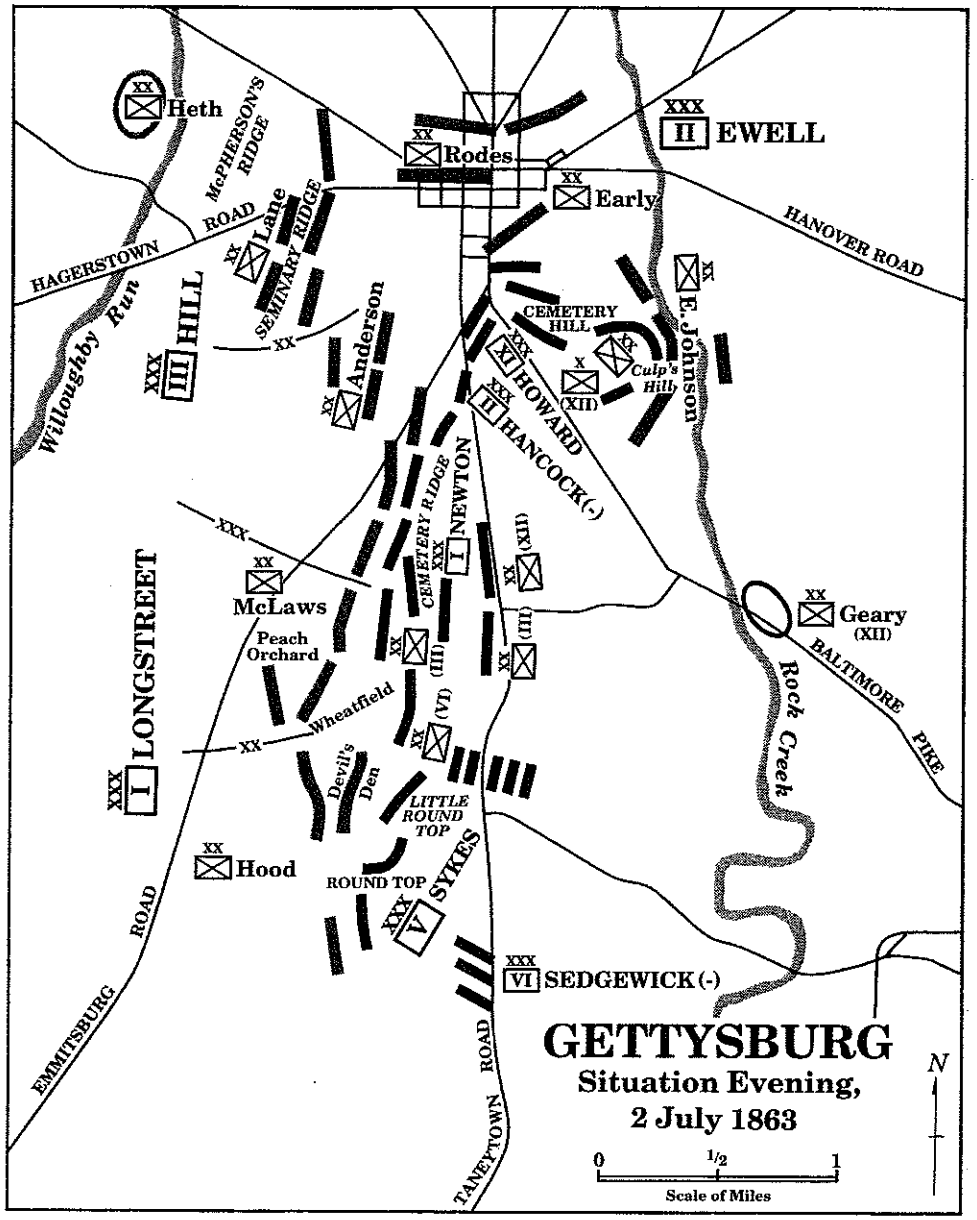
Had Stuart been present on 30 June as Lee accompanied Lieutenant General A.P. Hill's corps over the mountains, or if a cavalry brigade had been present the next day to feel out the Union position, Lee would have had some notion of what he was up against and could have accepted or declined battle as he chose. Instead, it was two Confederate *infantry* brigades that deployed and advanced to determine what force if any lay behind the dismounted Union cavalry screen on McPherson Ridge. Hill subsequently reinforced these units, and by the time Lee reached the scene, about 2 o'clock on the afternoon of 1 July 1863, the battle was under way.

Lee was not a factor in driving the Union First and Eleventh Corps from the field that first day. His subordinates planned and executed the attacks. The Confederates had a numerical advantage, and their well-coordinated assaults on two fronts and the opportune use of reserves explain their success. "Some planning, some luck, and an almost instinctive sense of timing possessed by veteran troops all played a part in determining the outcome."[10]

While Lee was counting on his skill at the operational level to maneuver the enemy into a position where they would have to attack him, circumstances now forced him to function at a lower level. "Coming unexpectedly upon the whole Federal army," he explained,

> to withdraw through the mountains with our extensive trains would have been difficult and dangerous. At the same time we were unable to await an attack, as the country was unfavorable for collecting supplies in the presence of the enemy, who could restrain our foraging parties by holding the mountain passes with local and other troops. *A battle had, therefore, become in a measure unavoidable*, and the success already gained gave hope of a favorable issue.[11]

Thus limited to decisions at the tactical level, Lee ordered Lieutenant General Richard Ewell, heir to Jackson's old corps, to follow up his success



Jim Kistler, USAWC

by assaulting Cemetery Hill "if he found it practicable." What "practicable" meant under these circumstances probably was not as clear to Ewell as to Lee's biographers. Ewell, who at the same time had been cautioned "to avoid a general engagement" until the army had concentrated, decided to wait until his third division, which had been guarding the corps trains west of the mountains, had reached the field. Since Lee stood beside Ewell while scrutinizing the Union position on Cemetery Hill, there is no reason why he

himself should not have given the order to attack, if that is what he intended. Discretionary orders may be essential for success at the operational level; at a lower level they can be counterproductive, especially when dealing with a subordinate who had only commanded a corps for six weeks and was fighting his first battle under the close eye of the army commander. Later that evening Lee ordered Ewell's corps back to Seminary Ridge because the terrain offered better opportunities to attack from that side, but Ewell persuaded him that he should take Culp's Hill, which he mistakenly thought was unoccupied and the possession of which would enable the Confederates to dominate Cemetery Hill.[12] This decision forced Lee to fight the battle on exterior lines, and it is difficult not to agree with the judgment of Edwin Coddington, the foremost authority on the battle: "Responsibility for the failure of the Confederates to make an all-out assault on Cemetery Hill on July 1 must rest with Lee."[13]

The next day Lee decided to assault the Union left flank, which he mistakenly placed "upon the high ground *along the Emmitsburg road.*" At the time he issued his orders to Longstreet there were no Union troops at all in that location; the Union Second and Third Corps were deployed back on Cemetery Ridge, which diverged from the Emmitsburg road as it ran south, with the left flank anchored upon Little Round Top. The high ground along the Emmitsburg road probably concealed the southern portion of this line from Lee, who may also have assumed that when Longstreet attacked northward from the Peach Orchard, as specifically ordered, his lead division under Major General Lafayette McLaws would advance all the way to Cemetery Ridge before wheeling to the left to deploy. As it turned out, Longstreet's countermarch to avoid detection by the Union signal station on Little Round Top cost the Confederates valuable time, during which Union Major General Daniel Sickles disregarded orders and advanced his Third Corps forward to higher ground at the Peach Orchard, thus changing completely the situation that Lee had assumed when issuing orders and greatly extending the battlefield.

On the Confederate left, Ewell was instructed "to make a simultaneous demonstration upon the enemy's right, to be converted into a real attack should opportunity offer."[14] But the distance between Longstreet and Ewell was too great to achieve any effective coordination. One of Ewell's brigades did capture some Union breastworks, but this was only because the defenders had been rushed to the Union left to help defend against Longstreet.

Lee's plan for 3 July called for Ewell to renew the assault with one reinforced division while the main attack would be against the center of the Union line on Cemetery Ridge. Again there was no coordination, which only Lee himself could have assured. At Culp's Hill the reinforced division of Confederate Major General Edward Johnson, who later admitted that "he never wanted to go up [Culp's] hill at all,"[15] was pushed back by repeated Union assaults during the morning, thus ruining any chance for a combined

assault, front and rear, against Cemetery Ridge. In the afternoon Pickett's assault against the Union center failed, with the loss of 54 percent of the Confederates in the process. "It was a second Fredericksburg . . . only the wrong way," wrote one Confederate survivor. "We had to charge over a mile a stone wall in an elevated position."[16]

Lee's conduct of the battle is thus not impressive. Had this been his only battle, what would be the verdict of history? Certainly not that he was a McDowell, Pope, or Burnside, but it is also unlikely that all blame would have attached to Stuart, Ewell, or Longstreet. Lee appeared unsure how much latitude to give to his principal subordinates—he gave operational latitude to Ewell, a new corps commander, and issued specific tactical orders to Longstreet, his most experienced subordinate. On 2 July he sent only one message and received only one report, despite the fact that two of his three corps commanders were new at the job.[17] Lee's theory of command and his conduct at Gettysburg suggest that he felt more comfortable at the operational than the tactical level. A glance at his earlier battles seems to support this conclusion.

Lee's Flowering as an Operational Artist

On 31 May 1862, when Lee assumed command of what soon would be known as the Army of Northern Virginia, Union forces under Major General G. B. McClellan were within eight miles of Richmond. Lee's first concern was to prepare earthworks for the defense of Richmond, an unpopular activity for which he was dubbed "the King of Spades." But in fact he did this primarily for operational considerations: these defensive lines "would enable a part of the army to defend the city and leave the other part free to cross the Chickahominy and operate on the north bank," sweeping down that river to threaten Union communications with the York River.[18] The idea of constructing breastworks to minimize casualties did not occur to him until the end of the year, after the battle of Fredericksburg.

Lee planned also to bring Major General T. J. Jackson's two divisions from the Shenandoah Valley to turn the Union right flank at Beaver Dam Creek, but Jackson's operations failed throughout the Seven Days battles (26 June to 1 July 1862). He was often late, occasionally in the wrong place, and sporadically lethargic, leaving Lee no choice but to emphasize tactical activity. Strategically, it was a victory because McClellan withdrew to a new base on the James River, but repeated frontal assaults cost lee 20,000 men—nearly 5000 more than McClellan lost. Even Douglas Southall Freeman, Lee's greatest admirer, acknowledged that in his first test as field commander "Lee displayed no tactical genius."[19]

Part of the problem was organizational: the largest administrative and operational unit was the division, which goes far to explain why only once during the campaign had two divisions "cooperated for the whole of a bat-

tle."[20] No larger formation was possible under existing Confederate law. But in the following weeks Lee reorganized his nine divisions into two "wings," which officially became "corps" with the passage of enabling legislation later in the fall. Commanded by Longstreet and Jackson, his two best division commanders, the introduction of the corps now enabled Lee to operate effectively at a higher level.

The corps had been an invention of Napoleon in 1800, and doubtless Lee's reading of the Napoleonic wars both inspired the concept and provided some of the detailed features. According to Napoleon,

> a corps of 25 to 30,000 men can be isolated; well led, it can either fight or avoid battle and maneuver according to circumstances without experiencing any misfortune, because it cannot be forced into battle and should be able to fight for a long time. . . . It will contain the enemy, whatever his strength, and will win time for the army to arrive.[21]

Such a corps, Napoleon specified, should contain one brigade of light cavalry,[22] and one might speculate whether Lee himself would not have been better served by following Napoleon's model and including cavalry. A we noted earlier, when Hill's corps marched toward Gettysburg, the presence of cavalry could have made a significant difference.

The new organization paid off at Second Manassas (29-30 August 1862), where the staff work was "superior," the artillery and cavalry were "more effectively employed," the tactics were better, and the intelligence service "was much improved."[23]

But the secret to Lee's success at Second Manassas was his obvious skill at the operational level. A turning movement by Jackson's corps, with one cavalry brigade screening his advance, had led to the destruction of Union supply depots and the dislocation of the army and especially of its commander. Jackson's corps functioned in this campaign the way Napoleon had intended with his organization—it located the enemy army, selected the terrain, gave battle on its own terms, and held on stubbornly until help arrived. On the second day Longstreet anticipated Lee's orders for a general advance, and his smashing attack against the Union right wing produced the victory.[24] Lee's operations were better because they were simpler, and responsibility was in the hands of fewer subordinates—Jackson, Longstreet, and Stuart.[25]

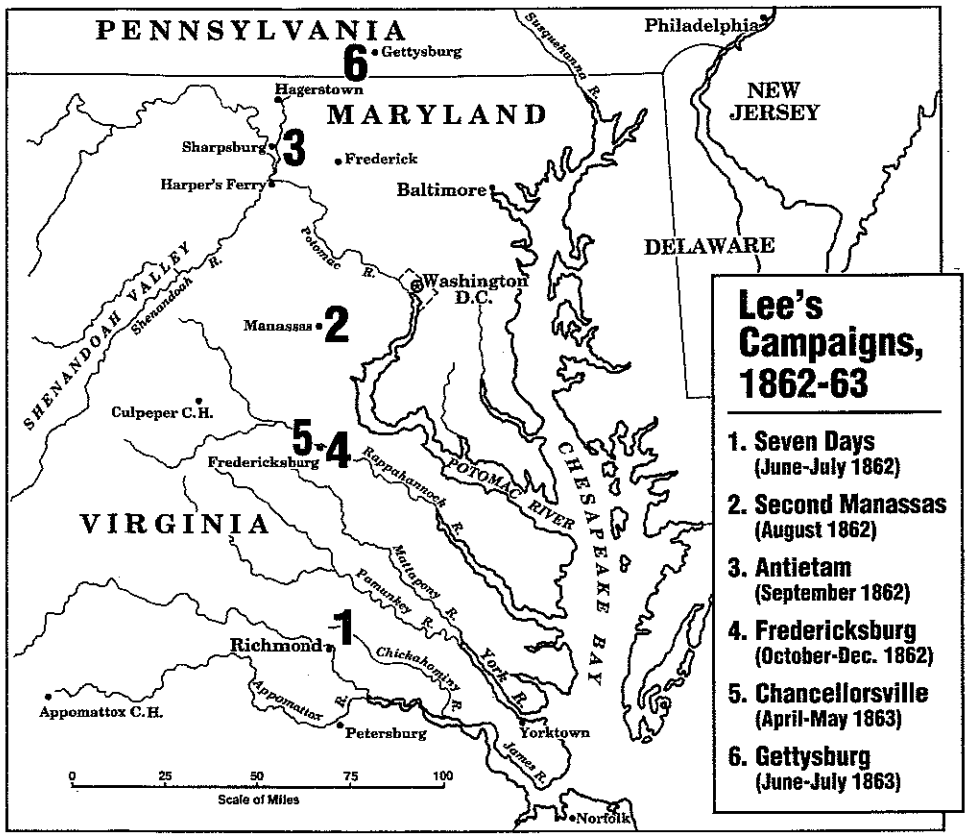
Lee's next major battle, Antietam (17 September 1862), can be understood only within the context of his operational plan. He would move into the western part of Maryland, establish communications with Richmond via the Shenandoah Valley, "and by threatening, induce the enemy to follow, and thus draw him from his base of supplies."[26] But first he would capture Harper's Ferry, which threatened his proposed line of communications through the Valley, sending six of his nine divisions under Jackson to surround the Union stronghold

while Longstreet with two divisions began the march toward Hagerstown. Only one division plus cavalry remained to guard the passes over South Mountain.

But a copy of Lee's operational orders fell into enemy hands, and on 14 September three Union corps fought their way through the South Mountain gaps. Fearful that McClellan, who again commanded the Union army in the field, would turn south to relieve Harper's Ferry, Lee fell back to Sharpsburg, where he could threaten McClellan's right flank and rear should he attempt to raise the siege.[27] Thus he elected to occupy the ground behind the Antietam for operational rather than tactical considerations.

Harper's Ferry was surrendered to Confederate forces on 15 September. The battle of Antietam was fought two days later, and Lee survived because he managed to hold on long enough for the troops at Harper's Ferry to reach the scene. In this desperate conflict Lee let Longstreet and Jackson manage the battle, while he directed each division as it arrived from Harper's Ferry to that part of the field where it was most desperately needed.

At first glance, Fredericksburg, Lee's next battle (13 December 1862), was little more than a successful defense of a fortified position against repeated but separate and uncoordinated Union attacks. Here again, however,



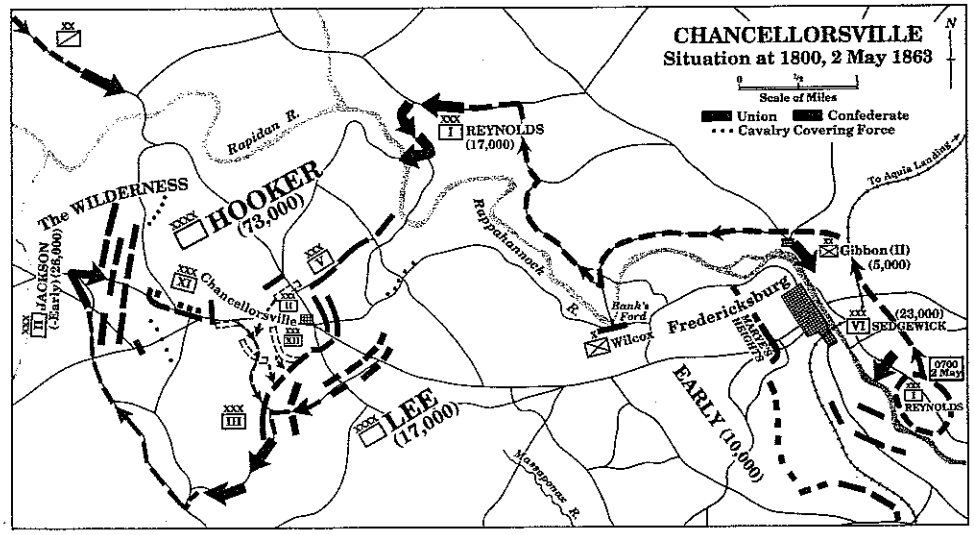
Jim Kistler, USAWC

Lee's success at the operational level was the key. When he moved Longstreet's corps to Culpeper in late October, he left Jackson in the Shenandoah Valley until the enemy's objective could be ascertained. Lee well understood what today's Army doctrine prescribes, that "ideally the initial plan for an operation will establish the commander's intent and concept of operations and the responsibilities of subordinate units."[28] "Should you find that the enemy is advancing from the Potomac east of those mountains," he wrote Jackson, "you will cross by either gap that will bring you in a best position to threaten his flank and cut off his communications." "You must keep always in view the probability of an attack upon Richmond . . . when concentration of forces will become necessary."[29] Lee was good at establishing his intent. When scouts reported that the new Union commander, Major General Ambrose P. Burnside, was moving toward the area between Aquia and Fredericksburg, Lee ordered Jackson to march east of the mountains to Culpeper, and later, on 27 November, to take position south of Fredericksburg along the Massaponax.

Meanwhile Longstreet prepared the battlefield by constructing breastworks, rifle pits, and artillery epaulements, and building a road to facilitate lateral movement behind his lines. On 12 December, convinced that the entire Union army was massing in his front, Lee called in Jackson's divisions. The next day, atop a prominent hill in the middle of his lines, he witnessed the repulse of a serious attempt to break through Jackson's lines to his right, and repeated efforts to storm Longstreet's position behind the Stone Wall at Marye's Heights on his left. Basically he left tactical decisions to his two corps commanders. After the battle Lee ordered a general strengthening of his lines by field fortifications, and as the parapets rose ever higher he reassured authorities in Richmond that the army "is as much stronger for these new entrenchments as if I had received reinforcements of 20,000 men."[30]

Burnside's successor, Major General Joseph Hooker, reached a similar conclusion and decided to fix Lee's forces in Fredericksburg with a frontal attack by three corps while sending another three corps—to be reinforced by a fourth on the eve of battle—on a wide and lengthy turning movement against Lee's rear. In the ensuing maneuvers and combats known collectively as Chancellorsville (30 April to 6 May 1863), Lee, although outnumbered nearly two to one in the theater of operations, utilized superior intelligence and knowledge of the ground, skilled use of field fortifications, and constant movement along interior lines to outmaneuver superior numbers in the wilderness of Virginia and achieve what one authority considered "as much the tactical masterpiece of the nineteenth century as was Leuthen of the eighteenth."[31] Most students of the Civil War would agree that Chancellorsville was Lee's most brilliant achievement.

Chancellorsville was won at the operational level. By keeping the two wings of Hooker's army separated, Lee successfully fought one battle



whereas Hooker mismanaged two. With Longstreet still south of the James with most of his corps, Lee had to deal directly with two of his division commanders who were present at Chancellorsville, and because these were on opposite parts of the extensive battle area, he had to communicate with them at the operational level.

In one remarkable instance he had even to entrust a decision at this level to a brigade commander. Brigadier General Cadmus Wilcox had the responsibility of guarding Banks Ford, decisive terrain in that so long as it remained under Confederate control Hooker would have to advance and fight on two fronts while Lee could concentrate on one and fight a holding action on the other. Knowing Lee's intent, Wilcox observed that the Union sentinels across the river had their haversacks on, "a thing unusual," and, persuaded that no crossing was intended, he decided to rejoin Lee near Chancellorsville. Meanwhile Wilcox received word that the enemy was approaching his old lines on the Union right at Fredericksburg. Rushing here, he deduced from what he could observe that the main attack would be off to his right, at Marye's Heights. He could not get there in time to keep a Union division from seizing this position, but in a series of fall-back and delay operations—in which Wilcox did everything prescribed by today's Army doctrine—he won time for Lee to send reinforcements to Salem Church to throw back the Union Sixth Corps which was marching west in an effort to link up with Hooker.[32] At Chancellorsville Lee—perhaps in desperation—gave brigade commanders more latitude than he was prepared to allow Longstreet two months later at Gettysburg.

The crowning act at Chancellorsville was the movement of Jackson's corps 14 miles across the front and around the right flank of the enemy's army. Lee conceived the idea; "Jackson elaborated it by proposing to use his entire

corps, and then executed the plan with assured genius."[33] A more recent appraisal, written by a student at the Army War College, makes this relevant to the modern soldier.

> Because Jackson understood the intent of his maneuver without receiving specific guidance as to what the final execution would entail, Lee was in effect empowering another operational commander. . . . The number of operational commanders that Hooker would have to face [had now] jumped to no less than three—Lee, Jackson, and the commander of forces overlooking Fredericksburg, [whereas] . . . Hooker's restricted control of the battle invited defeat for his army.[34]

Even Wilcox for a time had functioned as an operational commander.

But at Gettysburg, Jackson was dead, Stuart was absent until the battle was half over, and Longstreet had his own notion about how he should maneuver. Instead it was General Meade who effectively communicated his intent, refused to allow himself "to be drawn into the immediate battle to the point of losing sight of the operational objective," and who successfully transitioned from the tactical to the operational level when he assumed command of the army.[35]

Lee as Apprentice and Autodidact

The question now becomes: where did Lee develop his exceptional operational skills? Certainly not as a cadet at the Military Academy, for contrary to popular notion West Point did not produce any Civil War generals. It produced second lieutenants, some of whom later went on to become generals!

Nor is a complete answer to be found in Lee's early experience. His first assignment upon graduation in 1829 was with the Corps of Engineers at Cockspur Island, in the Savannah River, Georgia. This was followed by successive tours on the staff at Fort Monroe, as assistant to the Chief of Engineers in Washington, and finally as an engineer on the upper Mississippi and Missouri rivers. In 1840 he began a tour of inspection of three forts in the Carolinas, after which he went to work on the defenses of New York Harbor. In August 1846 he was ordered to report for service in Mexico: 17 years after graduation he finally was going to see a war.

Lee served under Brigadier General John Wool in the uneventful march to Chihuahua, and in January 1847 was assigned as a captain to the headquarters staff of General Winfield Scott, whom he accompanied for the rest of the campaign. According to Lee's foremost biographer,

> these were probably the twenty most useful months of his training as a soldier. . . . The lessons he learned on the road to Mexico City he applied in much of his strategy. Warnings he read in that campaign he never forgot. . . . He had acquired his experience under an excellent, practical master. . . . Even more valuable was

> Lee's training in strategy [i.e. operations]. . . . As a member of Scott's "little cabinet," he sat in council when the most difficult of Scott's [operational] . . . problems were being considered.[36]

History has been described as "a trick played by the living upon the dead," and there is a danger in reading too many "lessons learned" into Captain Lee's Mexican experiences. His foremost biographer, Douglas Southall Freeman, probably had these "lessons" more clearly in focus than did Lee. The Mexican War did, however, bring Lee back into the mainstream as a professional soldier, and the insights gained from listening to Scott and his staff discuss military problems and options must have been an invaluable part of his own military education.

Lee, still a captain, returned to West Point as Superintendent in September 1852. Beyond question the next three years did contribute significantly to his military education. He read widely on geography, military biography, history, and the science of war. He developed a special interest in Napoleon's campaigns, and the books he is known to have checked out from the West Point library probably contributed more to his military education than any other experience. On the title page of one of the books Lee read at West Point there is this revealing observation in his handwriting:

> Minute tactics [are] learned from [drill] books which treat on the various arms; General tactics, from duties of arms.
> Strategy [operations], from experience and criticisms on Campaigns and battles.
> Staff duties . . . executive and administrative . . . from the march and operations of an army.[37]

It would be no exaggeration to say that Lee's self-education during his years as Superintendent at West Point was the equivalent of the modern senior service college experience.

For Lee understood, as did Napoleon, that the best time for real learning is when a mature soldier can relate his own experience to what he is reading. He was now 45 years of age—three or four years older than students today at the various war colleges. When he read a military biography he would have had no trouble identifying with the subject or understanding nuances that would elude the young officer. When he analyzed a Napoleonic campaign he would have tried to understand Napoleon's motives and reasoning process, asking what were the options and why Napoleon did not choose another. We know that he checked out Montholon and Gourgaud's *Memoirs of Napoleon*, which would have revealed Napoleon's thought process when analyzing the campaigns of the Great Captains. Only by emulating these great models, Napoleon contended, and especially by understanding the basis for their decisions and the reasons for their success or failure, could modern officers

"hope to approach them." "There are no precise or determined rules," he warned.

> Everything depends on the character that nature has given to the general, on his qualities, his shortcomings, on the nature of the troops, on the range of firearms, on the season, and on a thousand other circumstances which are never the same.[38]

It may be no coincidence that when Lee established the army corps it looked much like Napoleon's—the same size and composition, except for the lack of an organic cavalry brigade—and he used it in much the same way. Certainly there was no American model to follow, and at Second Manassas Jackson's corps, supported by cavalry, accomplished exactly what Napoleon had designed his corps to do—hold off the main enemy army until reinforcements arrived. It may also be relevant that Napoleon paid little attention to tactics, which he usually let his subordinate commanders handle.

Promotions in the Engineers were slow, and when Lee left the Military Academy in 1855 he applied for a position in one of the two newly created cavalry regiments. Overnight he jumped from a captain of engineers to lieutenant colonel of the Second Cavalry, and soon after he was promoted to the rank of colonel and given the First Cavalry. When war broke out in 1861 Lee had spent 32 years in the army, 26 of them on the staff and only three with troops. He had never served with infantry or artillery, nor had he ever commanded more than 300 men in the field. His first assignment after resigning his Union commission on 20 April 1861 and offering his sword to his native state was to command the military and naval forces of Virginia as a major general, "with authority to direct the organization and operations of the troops, under the governor's constitutional control."[39]

This task completed his military education. Lee now had to think and plan at the operational level. He had to defend his native state against the various invasion approaches, distribute limited forces at suitable points to command railroads and rivers, determine the importance of the Maryland Heights and other key points in future operations, plan to defend Norfolk, contain the Union garrison at Fort Monroe, and keep the western part of the state loyal. He developed an early appreciation for good intelligence and the problems encountered in operating in a hostile environment. "The Manassas Junction is a very important point on our line," he declared three months before the opening battle nearby.

> It commands the communications with Harper's Ferry, and must be firmly held. Entrenchments at that point would add to its security, and, in connection with the defense, you must watch the approaches from either flank. . . . The railroad communications must be secured. . . and their use by the enemy prevented.[40]

USAMHI

"I think and work with all my powers to bring my troops to the right place at the right time," Lee explained, then "I leave the matter up to God and the subordinate officers." To interfere at this stage "does more harm than good."

When Virginia ratified the ordinance of secession on 23 May 1861 and state forces were absorbed into the Confederate army, Lee was made a full general and given other responsibilities. He was sent to the western regions of the state to prepare the defense of Virginia in that remote theater. This forced him to think at the operational level. Which approaches should be defended? How could he coordinate the movement and actions of two separate columns, both commanded by fools. "I hope I have been of some service," he would write from this "western front":

> Things are better organized [and] . . . we are stronger. The three routes leading east are guarded. . . . The enemy has been driven back, and made to haul in his horns. . . . This has been done without a battle, but by a steady advance of positions.[41]

His next assignment was to command Southern coastal defenses along a 300-mile front from northern Florida through South Carolina. Here again he quickly formed a coherent system of defense by giving top priority to strong, strategic positions. Lacking troops to garrison the entire coast, Lee decided that all he could do was "to ascertain the points of attack, concentrate

the troops in the district to meet the advance of the enemy, and if unable to drive him, to hold him in check until reinforcements can be forwarded from other districts." He planned to meet any threat by concentrating rapidly on the most defensible lines.[42]

Beginning in mid-March 1862, Lee went to "the Pentagon" in Richmond, serving in the war department as military advisor to the president. He was now officially charged "with the conduct of military operations in the Army of the Confederacy. . . under the Direction of the President." In this capacity his main effort was to arrange for a coordination of troops under Stonewall Jackson to take the offensive in the Shenandoah Valley and play upon Union fears for the security of Washington. As early as 21 April, Lee suggested that Jackson use Ewell's division to attack and drive back the forces under Major General N. P. Banks.[43] Later he advised that "a successful blow" against Banks in Strasburg would delay if not prevent Banks from moving to Fredericksburg or the Peninsula to reinforce McClellan.[44] Although he rarely receives credit for it, from the beginning Lee was heavily involved with Jackson's Valley campaign.[45] He also was in frequent contact with General Joseph E. Johnston, who commanded the main Confederate army during the Peninsular campaign.

Thus when Lee was summoned to replace the wounded Johnston after the battle of Fair Oaks, he had already spent a year coping with threats and problems at the operational level. He had become skilled in assessing enemy capabilities and intentions.[46] He had grown accustomed to accepting a reasonable degree of risk, and he had learned how to communicate his intent to detached commanders. He also understood how to direct operations from afar, when much depended upon circumstances previously unknown and "the exercise of discretion and judgment as to the time and execution."[47]

Lee was well prepared for his new command—much better in fact than were any of his opponents before Meade, yet all of them had commanded divisions and corps on their way to the top. And as Clausewitz described it, Lee possessed the combination of intellect and temperament that together constitute military genius—moral and psychological courage, a "skilled intelligence to scent out the truth," the ability to make sound decisions in the midst of action, determination, presence of mind, and boldness.[48] He certainly understood that his command philosophy, to bring his troops to the right place and at the right time, worked at the operational level.

Implications for Today's Aspiring Operational Artist

Are there lessons here for modern soldiers? Although weapons and therefore tactics have gone through revolutionary changes since the Civil War, the modern soldier can revisit those campaigns and battles—if not on the ground then certainly in books—and still learn something about leadership,

the use of terrain, the role of intelligence, the play of personalities, and the human dimension in combat. What better way is there for a modern soldier to broaden his understanding of the operational art, particularly in peacetime and during an era of shrinking military budgets and opportunities?

This is the way Major D. D. Eisenhower learned. As a major seven or eight years out of West Point he served a tour in Panama, where he came under the influence of Brigadier General Fox Conner. At first Ike showed no interest in military history because of the "out-and-out memory course" he had encountered at West Point, but Conner introduced him to books such as the memoirs of Grant and Sherman and taught him how to read them. Why were specific decisions made, he would ask, and under what conditions? "What do you think would have been the outcome if this decision had been just the opposite?" "What were the alternatives?" It was probably questions similar to those that Lee had asked of the Napoleonic literature. Later when Brigadier General Eisenhower was in charge of the War Plans Division during the early months of World War II, he had to make the same kind of decisions and recommendations that Lee had confronted when he first went to Richmond.[49]

History offers a more comprehensive view of the thought processes of commanders than does a visit to the battlefield and "even active service"—if we can believe G. F. R. Henderson, author of the classic biography of Stonewall Jackson. But such study "must be active and not passive," according to Henderson:

> [The military reader] must put himself in their place, not content with merely reading a lively narrative, but working out every step of the operation with map and compass; investigating the reasons of each movement; tracing cause and effect, ascertaining the relative importance of the moral and the physical, and deducing for himself the principles on which the generals acted.[50]

Lee would have nodded his agreement.

NOTES

1. Justus Scheibert, "General Robert E. Lee, OberCommandeur der ehemaligen Sudstaatlichen Armee im Nord Amerika," *Jahrbucher fur die Deutsche Armee und Marine*, 16 (September 1875), 108-09; *La Guerre Civile aux Etats-Unis d'Amerique* (Paris: J. Dumaine, 1876), pp. 66-67.

2. US Department of the Army, Field Manual No. 100-5, *Operations* (Washington: GPO, 5 May 1986), p. 10.

3. For the original meaning of "operations" see Charles James, *A New and Enlarged Military Dictionary in French and English* (2 vols.; London: T. Egerton, 1810); Baron de Jomini, *The Art of War*, trans. by G. H. Mendell and W. P. Craighill (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott and Co., 1862); E. B. Hamley, *The Operations of War Explained and Illustrated* (4th ed.; Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1878).

4. Wilbur Sturtevant Nye, *Here Come the Rebels!* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Univ. Press, 1965), p. 6.

5. Archie P. McDonald, ed., *Make me a Map of the Valley: The Civil War Journal of Stonewall Jackson's Topographer* (Dallas: Southern Methodist Univ. Press, 1973), p. 116.

6. Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee, a Biography* (4 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1936), III, 2-3; Lee to Jefferson Davis, 20 May 1863, in *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (128 vols.; Washington: 1880-1900), Ser. I, Vol. XXV, pt. 2, p. 810. Hereafter cited as *O.R.*

7. Ibid., XXVII, pt. 2, p. 318.
8. Ibid., pt. 3, p. 881.
9. Lee to Stuart, 23 June 1863, in Clifford Dowdey, ed., *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1961), p. 526.
10. Edwin B. Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), p. 309.
11. *O.R.*, XXVII, pt. 2, p. 318.
12. Ibid., p. 446.
13. Coddington, *Gettysburg*, p. 320.
14. *O.R.*, XXVII, pt. 2, pp. 318-19.
15. McDonald, *Make Me a Map of the Valley*, p.180.
16. *O.R.*, XXVII, pt. 2, p. 645.
17. Coddington, *Gettysburg*, pp. 444-45.
18. *O.R.*, XI, pt. 2, p. 645.
19. Freeman, *Lee*, II, 241.
20. Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command* (3 vols.; New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1946), I, 670.
21. Napoleon to Eugene, 7 June 1809, in *Correspondance de Napoleon 1er* (32 vols.; Paris: Henry Plon, J. Dumaine, 1866), no. 15310, XIX, 81.
22. "Projet d'une nouvelle organisation de l'armee," *Corres.*, XXXI, 460.
23. Freeman, *Lee*, II, 345.
24. Dowdy, *Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, p. 283.
25. Freeman, *Lee*, II, 345.
26. Dowdy, *Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, p. 313.
27. Ibid., p. 316.
28. FM 100-5, p. 21.
29. *O.R.*, XXV, pt. 1, pp. 854-57.
30. Quoted in Freeman, *Lee*, II, 468.
31. G. F. R. Henderson, *Stonewall Jackson and the American Civil War* (2 vols.; London: Longman's Green and Co., 1906), II, 470.
32. *O.R.*, XXV, pt. 1, pp. 854-57; FM 100-5, pp. 154-57.
33. Freeman, *Lee*, II, 589.
34. Joe N. Frazar III, "How many Operational Commanders? Insights from History" (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College Military Studies Program, 1986), p. 25.
35. David A. Ralston, "Meade's Gettysburg Campaign: The Operational Art of George Gordon Meade" (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: US Army War College Military Studies Program, 1986), p. 25.
36. Freeman, *Lee*, I, 294-95.
37. Ibid., p. 358n.
38. Napoleon, "Notes sur l'art de la guerre," *Corres.*, no. 15144, XXXI, p. 365; "Extraits des recits de la captivite," ibid., XXXII, p. 379.
39. Freeman, *Lee*, II, 457, 463.
40. Dowdy, *Wartime Papers of Lee*, p. 64.
41. Ibid., p. 69.
42. Ibid., pp. 114, 116.
43. Lee to Jackson, 21 April 1862, *O.R.*, XII, pt. 3, p. 859.
44. Lee to Jackson, 16 May 1862, ibid., p. 892.
45. Henderson, *Stonewall Jackson*, I, 411.
46. "Notwithstanding the demonstrations of the enemy in your front [Yorktown], I see nothing to prove that he intends immediately to attempt your line. He is feeling your strength and desires to prevent your occupying other points." Lee to General J. B. Magruder, 18 March 1862, in Dowdy, *Wartime Papers of Lee*, p. 132. In point of fact, McClellan did not begin active operations against Magruder for another three weeks.
47. Dowdy, *Wartime Papers of Lee*, pp. 156-57.
48. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, ed. and trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 100-05, 191.
49. Dwight D. Eisenhower, *At Ease: Stories I Tell to Friends* (Garden City: Doubleday and Company, 1967), pp. 185-86.
50. G. F. R. Henderson, *The Science of War*, ed. Neill Malcolm (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1906), p. 49.