JAMES LONGSTREET AND THE MISUNDERSTANDING

AT SEVEN PINES, MAY 31 – JUNE 1, 1862

(John Mason)

Shelby Foote calls the Battle of Seven Pines (or Fair Oaks as it was known by some) "unquestionably the worst-conducted large-scale conflict in a war that afforded many rivals for that distinction.[1] It would be a battle marked by confusion and compounded by delay. Most of the confusion surrounding the situation could be attributed to one man: Confederate Major General James Longstreet.[2]

Longstreet deservedly rates as one of Lee's and the Confederacy's most competent corps commanders, and as an excellent defensive strategist, described by Douglas Southall Freeman as being a "clear-headed, imperturbable soldier … in one word … dependable."[3] While all of this was certainly true, he could, at times, also be slow and contentious. And whether from this or from a single misunderstanding, it was his actions on the morning of May 31, 1862 that lead Foote to make his remarks.

The Confederate plan of attack was really quite simple. General Joseph E Johnston, commander of the Confederate forces in and around Richmond, had been confronted by two federal armies: Major General George B McClellan's Army of the Potomac was moving inexorably westward towards Richmond up the Peninsula, and Major General Erwin McDowell's 40,000 man First Corps moving southward from Fredericksburg. The last thing Johnston needed was to be caught between these converging forces.

McClellan had arrived in front of Richmond first. On May 17, he had received a dispatch from Secretary of War Edwin Stanton that forced him to change his original axis of advance. Stanton promised McClellan that McDowell's forces would be moving South to join him as soon as Major General James H Shields' forces arrived in Washington from the Shenandoah Valley. McClellan was requested to extend his right wing as far as possible to the north of Richmond to facilitate their linkup. McDowell enforced the request the next day by informing McClellan he would begin moving on the 24th.A accordingly, McClellan made his dispositions.[4]

By the 24th, McClellan had complied with his orders by moving his right flank to Beaver Dam Creek in the vicinity of Mechanicsville, about 5 miles North of Richmond. His position was less than ideal, however. McClellan placed three of his corps north of the Chickahominy River in

a line extending from just east of Mechanicsville running southeast to Bottom's Bridge where the Williamsburg Road crossed the river about twelve miles out from Richmond. From right to left, there were Brigadier General Fitz John Porter's Fifth Corps, Major General William B Franklin's Sixth Corps, and Major General Edwin "Bull" Sumner's Second Corps. Each was facing the river, with Porter's corps' right flank refused along Beaver Dam Creek to guard against an attack from Mechanicsville. As his other two corps were left in a somewhat vulnerable position across the river, McClellan ordered the construction of a series of bridges spanning it to allow for reinforcements should the need arise.[5]

The Union Third (Brigadier General Samuel P. Heintzelman) and Fourth Army Corps (Brigadier General Erasmus D. Keys), had crossed the Chickahominy on May 24th. Third Corps was deployed along the Williamsburg Road about 2 miles West of Bottom's Bridge, facing White Oak Swamp. Heintzelman's job was to support Keys while at the same time watching the crossings through White Oak Swamp and providing security for the Union left. Fourth Corps had moved up the road to a position about six miles from the Confederate capital. In that position, they were facing the capital with their right flank in the air in the vicinity of Fair Oaks, and their left flank anchored on White Oak Swamp. Keys had dispersed his corps so that Brigadier General Silas Casey's division was about three-fourths of a mile west of Seven Pines, to the right of Williamsburg Road and at right angles to it, and Brigadier General Darius N. Couch's division was at Seven Pines.[6]

There were two major problems with McClellan's dispositions. First, Confederate Major General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson's drive down the Shenandoah Valley, coupled with McClellan's loose accounting for troops, led President Abraham Lincoln to withhold McDowell's corps to protect Washington. This really upset the always-outnumbered McClellan's plans. Second, unusually heavy spring rains had turned the Chickahominy River into a raging torrent, threatening to wash all of her bridges away. Normally about forty feet wide, the river had overflowed its banks and its water had filled the bottomlands. White Oak Swamp was nearly impassable. The river was at its highest level in twenty years. By May 29th, Johnston believed that McClellan had finally made the tactical mistake he had been waiting for. Johnston had already made his initial dispositions, as he had originally planned to attack the three corps north of the river before McDowell and McClellan could link up. This was even easier. Now, he would

destroy the two corps isolated south of the river, and then leisurely turn on the rest of McClellan's forces later. At last, it was time to attack.[7]

The morning of May 30th dawned with the Confederates in position to begin their offensive. Newly promoted Major General A.P. Hill's and Major General "Prince" John B. Magruder's divisions were left in place between Richmond and Mechanicsville guarding the upper approaches across the Chickahominy. Hill, in fact, would be the only division not to take any part in the coming battle. Longstreet and Major General Gustavus W. Smith were camped south of Richmond near the Fairfield Racecourse. Major General Daniel Harvey Hill had pushed his division eastward on the Williamsburg Road on the 29th for a reconnaissance. His division was basically in place. The only group missing from Johnston's plan was Major General Benjamin Huger's division, which was marching up from Petersburg.[8]

With the arrival of Huger around midday of the 30th, Johnston was ready. There were three roads leading from Richmond to Seven Pines, and he would use them to catch the Union army in a crushing defeat.

To the north, the Nine Mile Road ran from Richmond through Fair Oaks station to rejoin the Williamsburg Road at Seven Pines. Smith and Longstreet's divisions would proceed down this road, Smith peeling off to become the general reserve and watch the lower bridges across the river. In the middle, the Williamsburg Road ran from Richmond through Seven Pines and across Bottom's Bridge. D.H. Hill's division would be on this road, and would initiate the attack. Branching off the Williamsburg Road, about three miles from Richmond, was the Charles City Road, the lower of the three, running generally southwest, and connecting with the Nine Mile Road near White Oak Swamp. Huger's division would move down this road and cover Hill's right flank near the swamp. Johnston intended for Longstreet's six brigades to be the key players in the attack, sealing off the Federal right, and then crushing the two isolated Federal corps between himself and Hill. In all, twenty-three out of Johnston's available twenty-seven brigades would participate in the attack. The plan was simplicity itself.[9]

The plan may have been simple, but Johnston failed to make sure that all of his subordinates fully understood their roles. He sent written orders to Hill, Huger, Brigadier General William H. C. Whiting (leading Smith division) and Magruder, but gave only verbal instructions to Longstreet, and never informed Smith of his role at all. The result was predictable. Longstreet would later write:

> I was with General Johnston all of the time that he was engaged in planning and ordering the battle, heard every word and thought expressed by him of it, and received his verbal orders.

Many would later wonder whether he had paid any attention at all to what he had heard.[10]

Johnston wanted the attack to begin at an early hour on the morning of May 31st, which presumably meant before 8:00. Both Whiting and Huger got underway at approximately 4:30. When Whiting reached the Nine Mile Road around 8:00, he found Longstreet's division just breaking camp, and completely clogging the right of way. Whiting waited for two hours, and then returned to Johnson's headquarters for assistance. Smith promptly sent a courier after Longstreet whom he was unable to find. Johnston was beginning to worry.[11]

The courier may not have been able to locate Longstreet, but Huger did. For some reason, Longstreet had decided to modify Johntson's plans, and rather than moving as he had been ordered, he had decided to move up the Williamsburg Road in support of Hill. Huber ran into Longstreet's division at Gillies Creek, about a mile out on the Williamsburg Road. Like the river, Gillies Creek was flooded. Longstreet had placed a wagon in the creek bed for a bridge, comma and his 14,000 troops were crossing over it in a virtual single file. Huger were needed to talk to Longstreet, and was directed to D.H. Hill's headquarters tent. There, Longstreet erroneously claimed seniority and continued to move his troops across the Creek. It was not until after noon that Huger was able to cross the creek and continue his march, hours after the specified time for the attack. Huger's refusal to press the issues here would ultimately end in the ruin of his career. Longstreet had now completely disrupted Johnston's plan, and Johnston new it. Back at his headquarters, he was heard to say "I wish all the troops were back in camp."[12]

But Longstreet was not through. Now in support of Hill, he further weakened the original plan by dividing his six brigades (easily the largest division in the army). Brigadier General George Pickett's division was posted to a new position on the York River railroad to protect the flanks and defend against any Union sorties in that direction. Brigadier General Richard H. Anderson and Colonel James Kemper's brigades continued up the Williamsburg Road to support Hill. The final three brigades were placed under the command of Brigadier General Cadmus M. Wilcox and sent in support of Huger to the Charles City Road with vague orders to "keep abreast" of the combat on the Williamsburg Road. At 1:00, Hill finally lost his patience and

sounded the signal gun. In spite of the fact that not all of his brigades were in place, he commenced the attack.[13]

Meanwhile, back at headquarters, Joe Johnston had no idea of how the battle was proceeding. Although Longstreet gets the credit for altering the battle plans, Johnston shares some of the blame for abrogating his command responsibilities. Rather than remaining at headquarters wishing his troops were back where they started from, Johnston should have taken to the field to straighten out the mess that had been created. Have he done this at 10:00 when the problem first arose, he could have still implemented his plan. Instead, at around 2:30, he sent a courier in search of Longstreet for a status report.[14]

The courier returned around 4:00 with a note from Longstreet requesting help. Finally, Johnston mounted his horse and went to Whiting's camp, ordering Whiting to move his five brigades, four down the Nine Mile Road, and the other through the woods to Longstreet. Whiting ran headlong into the van of Sumner's Second Corps who had perilously crossed the river against the suggestions of the corps engineer. This struggle would continue for the rest of the day.[15]

The battle would continue through the next day, but by 1:00, June 1st, both sides had had enough. The battle had extracted a frightful toll, and the result was that the two armies were in virtually the same positions as they had been when the battle began. Only the numbers had changed. Of the Confederates engaged, 6,134 had been killed, wounded, or were missing; the Union, 5,031. This equates to more than thirteen percent of all the forces engaged. And for what? Johnston's plans had been totally ruined, and no tactical objectives had been achieved. What had gone wrong?[16]

Confederate Colonel E.P. Alexander, concluded that the misunderstanding between Johnston and Longstreet had completely disrupted the battle plan and was responsible for the chaos of the resulting battle. He went on to say that the engagement

> Affords a most striking illustration of how people may misunderstand each other an important affairs; And of the extreme importance comma and such matters, not only of having everything thoroughly understood, but of the commanding general supervising by his staff the actual execution of all orders in order to guard against accidents and misunderstandings.

Alexander goes on to say that while Johnston and Longstreet shared the blame for the outcome, Johnston should have been held primarily fault. He argues that had Johnston reacted in person

at the first sign of trouble, he might have been able to make the corrections necessary to reestablish his original plan.[17]

Naturally, Johnston and Longstreet saw things a little differently. Longstreet placed the blame for the Confederate failure squarely on the shoulders of Benjamin Huger. In a letter to Johnston on June 7, 1862, he wrote:

> The failure of complete success on Saturday [May 31] I attribute to the slow movements of Gen. Huger's command. This threw perhaps the hardest part of the battle upon my own poor Division. It is pretty cut up, but as true and ready as ever. Our ammunition was nearly exhausted when Whiting moved, and I could not therefore move on with the rush that we could had his movement been earlier. We did advance however through three other encampments, and only stopped at nightfall. The enemy ran in great confusion. But the troops were arranged in [en] echelon, and we encountered fresh troops every few hundred yards. These readily fell back however, as … ours came to them closely pursued.
>
> I can't help but think that a display of his forces on the left flank of the enemy, by Gen. Huger, would have completed the affair and given Whiting as easy and pretty a game as was ever upon battlefield. Slow men are a little out of place upon the field. All together, it was very well, but I can't help but regret that it was not complete.[18]

He continues that line of thought in his official report filed three days later. While heaping praise on the actions of his own division, Longstreet said that

> The division of Major-General Huger was intended to make a strong flank movement around the left of the enemy's position and attack him in rear of that flank. The division did not get into position, however, in time for any such attack, and I was obliged to send three of my small brigades on the Charles City Road to support one of Major-General Huger's which had been ordered to protect my right flank.
>
> After waiting some six hours for these troops to get into position I determined to move forward without regard to them, and gave orders to that effect to Major General D. H. Hill.
>
> Some of the brigades believed that the affair would have been a complete success had the troops been upon the right been put into position within eight hours of the proper time. The want of promptness on that part of the field and the consequent severe struggle in my front so greatly reduced my supply of ammunition, that at the late hour of the move on the left I was unable to make the rush necessary to relieve that attack.

It is interesting to note that nowhere in the report does it state the reasons for Huger's delay.[19]

If someone was going to take the blame for the fiasco, it certainly was not going to be Longstreet. Then to make matters worse, Johnston supported him. Johnston's official report, filed on June 24th, says nothing of Longstreet's alteration of the orders he was given. It does, however, finish the ruination of Huger's career. Johnston says:

> Major-General Longstreet, unwilling to make a partial attack, instead of the combined movement which had been planned, waited from hour to hour for General Huger's division. At length, at 2 p.m., he determined to attack without these troops.
>
> Had Major-General Huger's division been in position and ready for it to action when those of Smith, Longstreet, and Hill moved, I am satisfied that Keyes' corps would have been destroyed instead of merely being defeated. Had it gone into action even at 4 o'clock the victory would have been much more complete.

Longstreet had at least had the decency only to shade the facts of the situation; Johnston simply lied. The reasons for this are unclear.[20]

Unfortunately, neither Huger nor any of his officers filed any official reports concerning their operations at Seven Pines, so their side of the story is not readily available. On his behalf, it is interesting to note that the two written orders he received from Johnston (May 30, 1862 at 8:40 p.m., and May 31) do not give him any specific role in the attack. Johnston cautions him in the first order to be ready to fall on the enemy's flank, if the opportunity arises. The second stresses caution, and reminds him that his primary responsibility is to provide a strong reserve to cover the army's right flank. Huger later refuted the charges filed in the official reports, and tried to get a court of inquiry or court-martial to investigate them. He was successful in neither attempt.[21]

Douglas Southall Freeman did an in-depth analysis of the actions of Johnston, Huger, and Longstreet at Seven Pines. He places very little of the blame on Johnston. He also absolved Huger, saying that Johnson's orders were cautionary and expressed no mandatory actions, and that although late, he was in position by 4:00, and did not participate in the action only because his assistance was not requested by Longstreet. His report on Longstreet's actions, however, is not as kind. He cites six problems caused or exacerbated by Longstreet on the 31st, including the change in orders, the delay of Huger, and the unnecessary split of his division. He goes on to say that the one man who had done the least to make the attack a success came out of the battle not only with his reputation untarnished, but with it enhanced.[22]

So, in the final analysis, who should bear the brunt of the blame for the Confederate failure at Seven Pines? Johnston certainly is in part responsible. He had developed a good, simple plan that should have led to the destruction of the two federal corps. When it first became apparent that the plan was not being executed as devised, Johnson should have immediately gone to the field to straighten out any problems. He failed to do so. As a result, the battle's execution was left entirely in the hands of his subordinates. And the one subordinate entrusted with the most responsibility, James Longstreet, failed miserably in his endeavors.

In his defense, Longstreet was new to division command, never mind commanding what amounted to a corps in a major assault across terrain that could best be described as unfriendly. Had he been simply commanding his division, his actions might have been acceptable.

Unfortunately, this was not the case. Longstreet had been given command of the entire right wing of the Confederate army and entrusted with a plan that required coordination and cooperation. He facilitated neither.

In following Hill down the Williamsburg Road rather than moving his division down the Nine Mile Road as ordered, Longstreet wrecked the entire plan. His reasoning for this is totally unclear. Although he says at his memoirs that he had heard every thought and word expressed by Johnston concerning the plan, he also says that "The plan settled upon was that the attack should be made by General D. H. Hill's division on the Williamsburg road, supported by Longstreet's division".[23] This is in complete contravention to Johnston's concept. vAnd then, when the battle began, Longstreet, like Johnston, gave up all control of events and entrusted the outcome to his subordinates.

On the whole, Longstreet did few things correctly on May 31st, and of those, none of them were done well. His biographer, Jeffrey Wert, expresses it best.

> May 31, 1862 was perhaps his worst day as a general during the war. Either the 41-year-old officer was confused, or he misunderstood Johnston's orders, or he believed he could modify the advance as a wing commander. He never admitted his primary role in the disruption of the day's operation. Instead, in his after-battle report and postwar writings, Longstreet blamed Huger for the delay in the assault. It was an unjustified, even reprehensible, act on Longstreet's part.[24]

James Longstreet would serve the Confederacy throughout the war, and become one of Lee's most trusted subordinates, his "Old War Horse." His critics would never question his

bravery nor his ability to lead men in a fight. But Longstreet never excelled in independent command as exemplified by his actions of Lookout Mountain and at Knoxville. And his hesitancy on the third day of Gettysburg, and the resulting failure of Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania, have been debated ever since. The pattern for his be fit behavior was first evident at Seven Pines.

NOTES

1. Shelby Foote, *The Civil War: A Narrative*, 3 vols. (New York: Random House, 1974), p. 445, hereafter referred to as Foote, *The Civil War*.

2. The Confederates referred to the battle as "Seven Pines" because that was the area of the battlefield in which they had the most success. For the same reasons, it was known as "Fair Oaks" to Union troops.

3. Stephen W. Sears, ed., Douglas Southall Freeman. *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command*, 1 Volume Abridgment (New York: Simon and Schuster, Inc., 1998), p. 112, hereafter referred to as Sears, ed. *Lee's Lieutenants*.

4. Foote, *The Civil War*, pp. 441-2, Ibid., p. 427.

5. Frederick H. Dyer, *A Compendium of the War of the Rebellion* (Dayton, OH: The Press of Morningside Bookshop, 1908), p. 280ff, hereafter referred to as Dyer, *Compendium*. Emery Thomas, *Richmond: The Peninsular Campaign* (Conshohocken, PA: Eastern Acorn Press, 1979), p. 20. James Longstreet, *From Manassas to Appomattox: Memoirs of the Civil War in America* (New York: Mallard Press, 1991), p. 83, hereafter referred to as Longstreet, *Manassas to Appomattox*.

6. Jeffry D. Wert, *General James Longstreet: The Confederacy's Most Controversial Soldier* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), p. 113, hereafter referred to as Wert, *Longstreet*. Theodore F. Dwight, ed., *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, Vol. 1: Campaigns in Virginia, 1861-1862* (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company), 1989, p. 174, hereafter referred to as Dwight, *Papers*.

7. Jeffry D. Wert, "Like an Avalanche: The Battle of Seven Pines, Part I." *Civil War Times Illustrated*, vol no. 6 (October, 1988), p. 23, hereafter referred to as Wert, *Avalanche*.

8. Wert, *Longstreet*, p. 111.

9. Wert, *Avalanche*, p. 25. Wert, *Longstreet*, p. 113. Dwight, *Papers*, p. 176.

10. Wert, *Avalanche*, p. 25. Longstreet, *Manassas to Appomattox*, p. 88-9.

11. Wert, *Avalanche*, p. 26.

12. Wert, *Avalanche*, p. 26. Wert, *Longstreet*, p. 116. H. J. Eckenrode and Bryan Conrad, *James Longstreet: Lee's War Horse* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press), 1986, p. 46.7, hereafter referred to as Eckenrode and Conrad, *Lee's Was Horse*.

13. Wert, *Avalanche*, p. 26. Wert, *Longstreet*, p. 116.

14. Wert, *Longstreet*, p. 120. It is coincidental that just as Johnston wrote away, Confederate President Jefferson Davis arrived in camp to see how things were going. There are those, Davis probably among them, who say that Johnston left to avoid talking with the president. If that's the case, it's a pity Davis did not arrive much earlier.

15. Jeffry D. Wert, "Richmond's Gates: The Battle of Seven Pines, Part II." *Civil War Times Illustrated*, vol. 27, no. 7 (November, 19880, P. 28, hereafter referred to as Wert, *Richmond's Gates*. In response to his engineer who had told him a crossing was impossible, Sumner uttered one of the great quotes of the war period "Impossible?" Sumner barked. "Sir, I tell you I can cross! I am ordered!"

16. Wert, *Longstreet*, p. 123.

17. Ibid.

18. Ibid., p 124-5.

19. United States War Department. *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*. 70 Volumes in 128. Washington, D.C. Government Printing Office, 1880-1901, Vol. XXIII, Series 1, pp. 939-941, hereafter referred to as ORA with volume, series, and page shows as XXIIII, 1:939-941.

20. ORA XXIII, 1:933-5. Clifford Dowdy, *The Seven Days: The Emergence of Lee* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company), 1964, p. 104, hereafter referred to as Dowdy, *The Seven Days*. Jeffrey work says that Johnston wrote his report probably to protect himself as much as to shield Longstreet (*Longstreet*, p. 125.) He goes on to say that though Johnston later complained about Longstreet's official report. He continued to support the official story until the end of his life. Douglas Southall Freeman said that "Johnston prepared his report on the basis of what Longstreet narrated … without knowledge of all the circumstances." (*Lee's Lieutenants*. p. 142.) He goes on to say that either had sets of honor, affection for Longstreet, or the camaraderie developed among the Manassas combatants may also have led Johnston to do what he did.

21. ORA, XXIII, 1:938.

22. Sears, ed., *Lee's Lieutenants*, p. 141-2.

23. Longstreet, *Manassas to Appomattox*, p. 87.

24. Wert, *Avalanche*, p 26.