

TVCWRT Civil War Tutorial, Part V: The Military Situation in 1863, by Ed Kennedy

In the last column regarding the “military situation”, the piece ended with the major operations in 1862. The Sioux uprising in Minnesota was serious but did not precipitate a larger Indian uprising as was feared. The frontier settled back into relative peace. The major battle of Murfreesboro was still ongoing when the calendar year changed-over to 1863.

1863 would be a decisive year with the tempo of operations and events gaining momentum and increasing. On both sides the realization that the war would not end quickly had set in. The Confederates were being pressed on all sides militarily and had implemented the first American conscription act to replace the volunteers who filled the armies during the first year of the war. The Union Army was still meeting its recruiting goals with large numbers of new immigrants being enlisted at ports of entry.

Naval engagements largely took place along the American coast and the overwhelming strength of Federal naval forces kept the small Confederate navy largely bottled-up. The launching of the CSS Alabama as a commerce raider gave the Confederates what is now called an asymmetric advantage to overcome the conventional Union Navy strength. In January 1863, the Alabama conducted her first combat engagement. Sinking the USS Hatteras off of Galveston, she continued raiding on the open seas. The success of the Alabama led to the building of the commerce raider, CSS Shenandoah, launched in August of 1863. These ships caused massive problems to Union commerce shipping by raiding around the world. It was hoped they would draw Union Navy assets away from the blockade but their raiding only had a negligible effect on the blockading forces.

Neither the Union Army nor the Confederate Army, mirror images of each other for all intents and purposes, had organizations to plan and implement large-scale operations. A dysfunction “bureau” system dating back to the early 1800s performed tolerably in peace but was inadequate during times of war. The end result was a lack of efficient coordination and synchronization. Much wasted effort, wasted materiel, wasted funds and wasted lives were the result.

How did the high commands in each army function then? Not well. The coordination and command of the forces in the armies depended upon the centralized direction and planning from the top. The presidents of both sides became involved in the operational direction of the armies even though they had military advisors. Matters of personnel and operational planning became somewhat of a vacuum without a “general staff” to perform these tasks. The Adjutant Generals could only do so much which left others to perform their designated tasks. With the advent of the telegraph, Lincoln especially, could insert himself into the decision making processes of field commanders. This was not a desirable thing. While the presidents normally deferred in the interference of operations, they could, and would, insert themselves at inopportune times, bypassing the designated chains of command. This is still considered a major *faux pas* by military men and the results can be extremely disconcerting and frustrating to those trying to command and control formations assigned to them.

In the previous “Military Situation 1862” the battle of Murfreesboro had not been decided yet with the battle beginning the last week of December 1862. The ongoing battle finished as a close win/draw for Maj. Gen. Rosecrans on 2 January 1863 and General Bragg withdrew his army to the southeast to establish a defensive line along the Tennessee “Highland Rim”. This protected much of southeastern Tennessee’s agriculture but abandoned Nashville and much of central Tennessee and its valuable resources to the Union Army.

On 1 January, a political act by President Lincoln changed the entire complexion of the war. The war changed from primarily an action to “restore the Union”, a political act, to a moral crusade to “free the slaves”. This clever and astute move had major implication on military operations. The Emancipation Proclamation was an extremely clever political move as it did not free a single slave. However, it reinvigorated the Union Army by gaining support of the abolitionists at a time when military affairs looked bleak. Most Union soldiers did not care one way or another about the slaves. Many were indifferent as northern racism was a more benign form than in the South. However, the effect changed the perception of the conflict to that of one with the moral aspect that “re-union” did not impart. Of significance is that it gave the impetus to the Union Army to legally recruit free blacks and slaves alike. This was a huge boon to the Union as war-weariness was beginning to affect recruiting and black soldiers, encouraged to fight for their freedom, swelled the ranks of the Union Army at the same time the Union instituted its conscription acts in the summer of 1863. The effects of the Emancipation Proclamation cannot be underestimated as a practical war measure.

In the Western Theater, Maj. Gen. Grant and Acting Rear Admiral Porter formed a great inter-service “joint” team, working together towards the goal of capturing Vicksburg. Rebuffed at Chickasaw Bayou in December 1862, Grant went to work on other operations to get to Vicksburg. There was no “doctrine” in 1863 directing joint Army-Navy operations. Today, there are reams of doctrinal publications on how to work together. Back then, everything was done on personal relations. It is what USMC General Anthony Zinni later aptly referred to as “handcon” (referring to a fictional military command and control arrangement done by hand-shake instead of a formal control arrangement). Grant’s and Porter’s relationship proved to be key to the Union Army’s ultimate success on land...and it was done by “hand-con”.

On the eastern seaboard, Union forces were unable to capture Charleston and settled-in to conduct a siege. Only able to land on the coast, Union forces were thwarted on the overland move to capture Charleston and decided to bombard the city indiscriminately. The idea was to terrorize the city into submission. The US Navy had a large part in the siege, blockading the harbor and shelling the coastal fortifications as well as Fort Sumter (an island fort at the mouth of Charleston’s harbor). The city never fell to siege, instead the defenses were subsequently overcome by Maj. Gen. Sherman’s march up the coast from Savannah. In July 1863, the Confederates launched the CSS Hunley in Charleston, a submarine designed as a “secret” weapon to break the siege and the naval blockade. It would make its combat debut in February 1864.

In a series of different moves to try and flank or bypass Vicksburg known as the “Bayou Expeditions”, Grant finally crossed the Mississippi on the last day of April and immediately began the “official” campaign to capture Vicksburg (the “official” Army campaign begins when Grant’s forces land at Bruinsburg on the eastern shore of the Mississippi River). Fighting his way to Vicksburg, he used an indirect approach, capturing Jackson, Mississippi enroute, then attacking Vicksburg from the east. By 18 May, Grant reached Vicksburg after fighting and winning several battles. Conducting a hasty attack from the march, and then a deliberate attack with both failing, Grant undertook a siege to reduce the defenses by starvation, bombardment, and attrition.

In the Eastern Theater, the Confederates finally decided that in order to win, they could not just defend to prevent losing the war. In May, General Lee moved in a spectacular tactical victory at Chancellorsville, breaking the Federal threatened offensive towards Richmond and causing the Union Army to withdraw.

General Lee decided to take the war to the north and invade Pennsylvania thereby drawing Union Army forces away from northern Virginia and their drive towards Richmond. It was a risk that Lee was willing to take based on his understanding of the Army of the Potomac commander, Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker. In June, Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia moved north at the exact, same time Grant had laid siege to Vicksburg. At Brandy Station, Virginia the largest cavalry battle of the war resulted in a Confederate victory when Maj. Gen. Pleasonton’s Union force was turned-back from attempting to locate the Army of Northern Virginia. Lee’s Army marched unhindered into Pennsylvania with the Union cavalry gone.

During late June in Tennessee, Maj. Gen. Rosecrans’ Army of the Cumberland was finally moved to action by subtle threats issued by Secretary of War Stanton and President Lincoln who was particularly aggravated by Rosecrans’ seeming intransigence. An advance by Rosecrans towards Chattanooga would be of huge benefit to the Union side. It would fix the Army of Tennessee, capture the resources in southeast Tennessee, and possibly gain recruits from the pro-Unionists.

None of these theaters were conducting coordinated operations and any synchrony appears to be purely happenstance. While Rosecrans’ offensive was useful in fixing Confederates in Tennessee, it was more by accident than centralized planning. Lee’s move north was not linked to Maj. Gen. Johnston’s actions in the west although it was bound to initially help relieve pressure on Confederates in Tennessee and Mississippi by keeping Union forces from shifting southward. In the words of an unnamed strategic theorist: “Stuff happened”. Fortuitously for the Union, things worked together to garner decisive victories.

Rosecrans launched his Tullahoma Campaign from Nashville to Chattanooga the last week of June so that on all major fronts, the armies were clashing. Lee’s move into Pennsylvania was quickly shadowed by the Army of the Potomac which “rushed” north (albeit slower than anticipated), inadvertently running into Lee at Gettysburg. At the exact same time, Grant’s siege of Vicksburg was culminating favorably. In Mississippi, Grant was on the offensive. In Tennessee,

Rosecrans was on the offensive. In Pennsylvania, Meade was on the defensive. The first week of July would be crucial to the war across the entire country. The seeming Confederate tide was about to recede very substantially.

At Gettysburg on 3 July, Pickett's Charge culminated the Confederate offensive actions and Lee retreated towards Virginia. Instead of pursuing vigorously, Meade hesitated. Rosecrans' Tullahoma Campaign also concluded on 3 July. This often overlooked military operation is still considered to be one of the most exemplary campaigns of the entire war but was overshadowed by Gettysburg and Vicksburg. Vicksburg surrendered on 4 July ---- a devastating loss to the Confederacy.

July was a hugely busy time for both sides. Draft riots broke-out in New York City causing units to be detached from the Army of the Potomac to assist in suppressing the rioters. At Charleston, S.C., the Union Army attempted to seize Confederate defenses on Morris Island at the entrance to Charleston Harbor. On 11 and 18 July, two unsuccessful attempts to capture Battery Wagner were made by ground assault (the movie "Glory" (1989) chronicles the second assault). Union Army ground maneuver operations on Morris and James Islands eventually ground to a halt and siege warfare continued even though the Confederates abandoned Battery Wagner.

On all fronts, the Confederacy was transitioning to the operational and strategic defense. The blunting of Lee's advance into Pennsylvania was a serious defeat for the Army of Northern Virginia. The Confederate losses were enough to insure offensive operations would be very limited in the future. The day after Pickett's charge, Vicksburg fell to Grant. Two disasters in one week was a shock to the Confederates but emboldened the Union Army. Of all things of importance to the Southern government was international recognition and support. The events of July 1863 quashed any hopes of support from Britain or France and meant that the Confederacy was on its own.

As Lee retreated, so did Bragg. The Confederates at Vicksburg were paroled. Many made their ways to the Army of Tennessee to fight again. On the Union side, flushed with victories and with momentum, prepared to launch further offensives. Rosecrans struck towards Chattanooga and by September captured it. Mistakenly believing that Bragg was in full retreat, he unwisely separated his army corps on three very dispersed avenues of approach. Bragg, rather than retreating, was consolidating and struck Rosecrans' army as it tried to withdraw hastily into Chattanooga. At Chickamauga, the second largest battle of the war, Rosecrans was handed a major tactical defeat. Operationally, Bragg was unable to follow-up and surrounded Union forces in Chattanooga placing Rosecrans under siege. Rosecrans was relieved by Grant in October. At the end of November, Bragg's Army of Tennessee was reduced by the loss of Longstreet's corps which was sent back to Virginia. The Union forces were substantially reinforced with reinforcements from the Army of the Potomac allowing them a major victory at Missionary Ridge and setting the stage for Sherman's march to Atlanta in 1864.

During August 1863 the Trans-Mississippi erupted into more intense irregular warfare. Union Army depredations against the civilian populace sparked a

massive reaction by both Southern Partisan Rangers and guerillas. In an action that gained more notoriety than military results, Quantrill's command overran, captured and pillaged Lawrence, Kansas. The resulting Union over-reactions included the depopulation of citizens along the Missouri border, the pillage of their possessions, and the burning of their homes. Irregular warfare in Missouri peaked in 1863 as Union forces flooded the countryside in an attempt to suppress irregular Confederate forces. With Quantrill gone to Texas for the winter, things began to settle down.

The war in the East settled-down after the battle of New Hope Church (a.k.a. "Mine Run) in Orange County, Virginia occurring at the end of November as part of the Union's Bristoe Campaigns. Maj. Gen. Meade's attempt to flank Lee's army's right flank and strike a decisive blow. Meade's attack moved slower than envisioned which allowed Lee to redispense his forces and thwart the attack to his flank stopping Meade who then withdrew despite numerical superiority.

Thus, ended the large scale combat for 1863 but if 1863 had been a busy year, it portended an even busier one in 1864 now that the armies had become more experienced.