

The Seven Days Battles

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Write Style I, Lesson 15

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Early in the summer of 1862 there was a sequence of battles known to those not involved as the Seven Days battles; however the men involved in the battles had a different name for the struggle, as Bruce Catton put it:

Men spoke of the last week in June simply as the Seven Days; aptly enough, because during those days a pattern emerged from chaos... They were days filled of bitter fighting among wooded hills and ravines, of confused flight and pursuit past broken bridges in impassable swamps, with a final climax on a blazing slope where the great ranks of guns proved greater than the great ranks of men who tried to take the guns by storm; one battle, seven days long and infinitely deep, changing the war and compelling the nation in the end to find new definitions for itself. The hope that the war could be something less than a revolutionary struggle died somewhere between Mechanicsville and Malvern Hill. And so, for the matter of that, did thousands of young men. (Catton 325)

In all of the Civil War not only did the ranks of guns versus the ranks of men play a role, but also the way in which the men and guns were commanded, as well as the numbers of each engaged respectively. Never (save perhaps Chancellorsville) was the advantage in leadership as vital to the success of a battle as it was to the repulsion of the Union juggernaut from the gates of Richmond. The advantages that the Union army may have had were neutralized by both the aggressive attacks of Lee, and McClellan's tentative reactions to the assaults. It has been said that had any other leader been in charge of the Federal army on the Peninsula Campaign, Richmond would have been taken, and the gambles of Lee would have been exploited. But as it was, with each assault by Lee, McClellan repeatedly fell back while still outnumbering the enemy, ultimately to his retreat from the Peninsula.

As I already stated, during the Seven Days the commanding general for the Union was George McClellan, and the commander for the Confederacy was Robert E. Lee. Some of the corps commanders under McClellan were: Fitz John Porter, Samuel Heintzelman, Erasmus Keyes, William Franklin, and Edwin Sumner. Under these men were more than 115,000 soldiers (*Long*). A few of the adjutants under Lee were Stonewall Jackson, D.H. Hill, A.P. Hill, James Longstreet, J.E.B. Stuart, Benjamin Huger, John Magruder, and Richard Ewell. These commanders led a force of about 88,000 effectives (*Long 235*).

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A few events leading up to the Seven Days were important to the outcome of the battles. The first occurred in the Battle of Seven Pines sometimes called the Battle of Fair Oaks when the previous commander, General Joe Johnson, was wounded, and Lee was handed the command of the Confederate army in Virginia. The second was that the Confederates found that by simply parading their men continuously, McClellan would believe that he was vastly outnumbered. The third was the disposition of the Union forces. McClellan concentrated the bulk of his troops on the south bank of the Chickahominy River, leaving Fitz John Porter's large corps isolated on the other side. For Lee the opposite was true; the bulk of his force was on the north bank with only the troops of Magruder and Huger on the south bank to protect Richmond.

The massive battle known as the Seven Days began with the minor engagement of Oak Grove on June 25. McClellan ordered elements of Samuel Heintzelman's corps towards the Confederates under Huger. The attack was savagely repulsed with the result of 626 union casualties and 514 for the confederates (*Foote 477*). While no actual ground was gained for either side, the repulse of Heintzelman's men led McClellan to wire Stanton, "The Rebel force is stated at 200,000" (*Foote 477*). This reckoning would prevent McClellan from attacking the vastly outnumbered Confederates directly barring his advance on Richmond. If he had attacked while Lee was on the opposite bank of the Chickahominy, Richmond would most assuredly have fallen.

As a contrast to the minor battle fought on the previous day Lee was planning a major attack on Porter's isolated corps on the north bank of the Chickahominy. The plan was for the troops of Longstreet, A.P. Hill and D.H. Hill to engage Porter's men in Mechanicsville. Meanwhile, Stonewall Jackson's men were to come down from the north behind Porter's engaged troop. It was a good plan; all Lee's men had to do was execute it. On the morning of June 26th Lee got word from Jackson that his men would be 3 hours late in their arrival. While Lee was waiting, A.P. Hill attacked the Federals driving them out of Mechanicsville and into a set of strong entrenchments that Porter had prepared ahead of time. A.P Hill attacked the strong position and was repulsed with a loss of 1484 out of 14,000 (*Long 231*). Porter on the other hand lost a trifling 361 out of 15,000 (*Long 231*). That night, with most of Lee's army looming at his front and flank, Porter retreated back to another prepared position near Gaines Mill.

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McClellan had a problem, his main supply base was at White House on the Pamunkey River, on the northern side of the Chickahominy and Lee was threatening to slice it with only Porter to stop him. To prevent this he ordered Porter to hold his position at Gaines Mill at all costs, while he changed his base of supply to the James River. The position Porter had selected for his stand was immensely strong, consisting of a semi-circular hill with a swampy stream to its front facing Lee. On the hill, Porter had about 36,000 men which he deployed in three lines of entrenchments, and then he placed his artillery on the plateau at the top (*Long 232*).

Lee ordered his men against Porter, but instead of one mass assault the soldiers went in piecemeal, brigade by brigade. All day they went in, only to be chewed up and spit out by the union defenders. Finally, towards sunset, Lee managed to organize his men for one final unified assault. It worked. The first men to break Porter's troops were those in John Bell Hood's Texas Brigade. Putting a damper on the last charge was the coming of nightfall, allowing Porter to successfully withdraw his beleaguered corps across the Chickahominy. Porter had held his position all day, allowing McClellan to begin repositioning his base of supply. But he had done so at the price of 6837 casualties, 2836 of which were prisoners (*Long 332*). Meanwhile Lee's troops were licking their own wounds; out of Lee's 57,000 men in action 8750 became casualties that day (*Long 232*).

On the 28th McClellan began his withdrawal from the gates of Richmond back to his new base at Harrison's landing on the James.

President Lincoln received an angry telegram from (a) distraught McClellan. I have lost this battle because my force is so small he wrote, blaming the President and the administration bitterly and disclaiming responsibility for the defeat at Gaines' Mill despite the fact that he had not used a major portion of his army. Two sentences of this message were deleted by War Department staff as unfit for Mr. Lincoln to see. They read, If I save the army now, I tell you plainly that I owe no thanks to you or to any other persons in Washington./ You have done your best to sacrifice this army. (*Long 233*)

It was plain then that McClellan had given up the Campaign and would withdraw from the peninsula.

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During this withdrawal on the 29th Magruder ran into the Federal rear guard, and a battle was fought at a place called Savage's Station. Again was Jackson late, for he was supposed to come up and help Magruder drive the Federals back. The federal troops under Sumner defeated the Confederates, but Sumner then received orders from McClellan to fall back. In executing these orders the Federals left behind about 2,500 of their wounded and sick. Nothing was gained for the Federals in this battle; that is, except time for McClellan's massive wagon trains to move through the treacherous White Oak Swamp without being intercepted by the Confederates.

The next battle was fought near Glendale, or some call it White Oak Swamp. Lee's basic strategy was dependant on a well coordinated execution of his order by all of his corps commanders. In a nutshell A.P. Hill and Longstreet would come up south of Glendale and smash the Union line of retreat. Jackson was supposed to press the Union rear guard through the White Oak Swamp. The resulting fragments would then be vulnerable to the troops Lee had ready to send in after the initial attack. McClellan recognized Lee's plan (for once) and placed his eleven available divisions in such arrangements that every possible confederate move would have a union answer. There were 5 divisions just south of Glenville waiting for Longstreet, A.P. Hill and Huger and two waiting in White Oak Swamp for Jackson. He also placed four divisions on Malvern hill three miles away, just in case anything went wrong (*Foote 507*).

In addition to the counter measures taken by McClellan, Jackson was once more guilty of not carrying out his orders and the resulting attacks by Longstreet and Hill were eventually repulsed in some of the most savage hand to hand fighting up to that point in the war. Contributing to the carnage were shells from the gunboats in the James River, and siege artillery situated on Malvern Hill. All the Confederates managed to accomplish in the battle was to capture 18 cannon and Longstreet's old war buddy Union general George McCall (*Foote 508*). McClellan on the other hand was able to thwart the Confederate attack intended to take his supplies and artillery reserve, and in turn concentrate his troops at Malvern Hill near his base on the James River.

On the last of the Seven Days, July 1st, the battle that would culminate the deadly struggle, occurred. It started with Porter and Keyes situating four divisions of infantry about midway up the 150 foot height called Malvern Hill and then placing artillery pieces wheel hub to wheel hub in a crescent shape all the rest of the way up

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the hill. Siege guns were situated behind this. In addition to these arrangements there were gunboats floating in the James to back up the already massively strong defensive position. Lee threw his men at the Federals in the final battle of the campaign only to have them decimated by the expert handling of the Northern artillery. The Battle of Malvern Hill started around 12:30 p.m. and lasted until nightfall. The total casualties for the battles of Savages Station, Glendale and Malvern Hill stood at a total of 17,513. The Confederates had lost 9,477 men to the union's 8,036 (*Long 235*). That night the victorious Federals fell back to their base at Harrison's landing.

The battles that spanned the final week in June of 1862 impacted both the Union and the Confederacy in more ways than one. For the Confederacy, the 20,000 men they lost was a quarter of their total army, those men could not be replaced until the lads at home were old enough to join the thinned ranks. As for the North, the leaders became more aware that the war would not be decided by manpower but by the competence of the generals in command. The reason for the high Confederate casualties was the aggressive tendencies of Lee in battle, as well as the risks he was willing to take in order to put himself in the best position to crush the foe. Compounding the problem of the Confederate aggressiveness for the North, was the ineptness of McClellan, who when presented an opportunity to inflict a serious blow to the enemy, failed to do so. As a result of these factors the Union attempt to take Richmond faltered at the gates, and the war raged on for another three years.

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