ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Lynchburg Campaign

By **Daniel F. O'Connell**

In the spring of 1864, Lieutenant General U. S. Grant's overall concept of operations against the Army of Northern Virginia was to press them everywhere. By applying pressure across all fronts, he hoped to keep the Confederates thin everywhere and to take maximum advantage of his manpower superiority. Accepting the brunt of the expected combat Grant massed the Army of the Potomac for a showdown with Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. To support these operations secondary campaigns were ordered in eastern Virginia and the Shenandoah Valley. On the Virginia coast, Major General Benjamin Butler would conduct an amphibious landing in the Bermuda Hundred with his Army of the James and Major General Franz Sigel would move up the Valley with men from the Department of West Virginia. The combined efforts were designed to force Lee into the position that he was so desperately trying to avoid. Grant believed, and Lee agreed, that if he could pin the Army of Northern Virginia into the defense of Richmond/Petersburg his materiel advantages would ultimately win out. Lee's army deprived of the ability to maneuver would wither on the vine of static defense.

Initially the strategy led to little more than bloody stand-offs in the Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House and an unexpected defeat of Sigel's forces at the Battle of New Market (May 15). But Grant was nothing if not persistent. Determined to maintain the initiative he envisioned another move around Lee's right. With this in mind he embarked on his ambitious four-pronged plan. First, remove Lee's eyes by engaging his cavalry in a chase of his horsemen who would be sent to attack the fragile Confederate supply line. Second, use Lee's temporary blindness to side step south across the James River and invest the Petersburg rail hub, further destroying Lee's ability to provision his forces and pin him to the city. Third, deny reinforcement of Lee from the west by continuing to threaten the Bread basket of the Confederacy in the Shenandoah Valley. And lastly to apply the killing blow with the assistance of the united forces coming from the valley and Major General Phillip Henry Sheridan's cavalry from the west.

To add weight to the secondary operation in the valley command of the Union forces was shifted to Major General David Hunter, who was recalled to replace the ineffective Sigel on May 21, 1864. A strict abolitionist and friend of President Lincoln, Hunter had already made quite a name for himself. As Department of the South

commander in 1862 he had issued Special Order No. 11 granting emancipation to all slaves in Georgia, Florida, and South Carolina. A flabbergasted Lincoln immediately rescinded the order fearing political consequences in the Border States. As might be expected Confederate President Jefferson Davis took a much harsher view of the action, declaring Hunter a criminal who was to be executed if he was captured. Hunter was eventually removed from active service after his defeat at Secessionville, South Carolina. He spent this time serving on the court martial of Major General Fitz-John Porter and other administrative tasks. Nothing that would happen in the coming weeks would alleviate the controversy surrounding his name.

Hunter departed Cedar Creek on May 26 hoping to consolidate his army of two infantry divisions and two cavalry divisions before arriving at Lynchburg. The first obstacle in Hunter's path was Port Republic. The town was the crossing point of the Shenandoah River and the Federals found it defended by "the enemy occupying a strong entrenched position." Rather than attack the defenses directly Hunter opted for an indirect approach. He sent a diversionary attack of cavalry to occupy the attention of the defenders while the main body crossed at an alternate location. The move not only avoided a frontal assault but netted a Confederate supply train that the maneuver column stumbled onto. In the morning, the cavalry attacked and after a short fight forced a Confederate retreat. The dash of the cavalrymen cost the Union force 75 men killed, wounded, and missing. Seven miles away was the village of Piedmont. It was defended by 6,000 Confederate troops. [1]

On arrival at Piedmont, Brigadier General Jeremiah Cutler Sullivan's 1st Division arrayed for battle. An artillery duel opened at 9:00 a.m. while the First Brigade units of Colonel Augustus Moor drove the Confederates back from a wooded area that had been strengthened by a barricade of fallen timber and fence rails. A second attack by the 1st Brigade commenced at 1:00 p.m. after the Union gunners by their "fine practice" had overwhelmed the Rebel pieces. However, an assault could not carry the works and the Union forces withdrew. [2]

The Confederates, under Brigadier General William Edmondson "Grumble" Jones, were next to assert themselves. Around 2:00 p.m. the Rebels counter-attacked the First Brigade, who withstood the onslaught, aided immeasurably by excellent work from three batteries of artillery. While Jones was being pummeled in the front, Colonel Joseph Thoburn shifted the 2nd Brigade into an area from which he could attack the flank of the faltering assault. Colonel Jacob Campbell, 54th Pennsylvania Infantry reported, "Here for

[1] United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 37, part 1, p. 94 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 94).
[2] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 95.

a short time a most desperate struggle took place, bayonets and clubbed muskets were used on both sides, and many hand-to-hand encounters took place." [3]

Seeing an advantage being gained the 1st Brigade units rushed from their works and Colonel John Wynkoop's 2nd Cavalry Brigade charged the Confederate right and rear. Assailed from two directions the enemy forces broke. The Confederates were driven back mercilessly, some "into the river, which covered his left." General Jones was dead on the field and Brigadier General John C. Vaughn took the survivors in the direction of Waynesboro. [4]

To this point, Hunter's march had been a fairly standard military affair. He had overwhelmed Jones at Piedmont with his much larger force and continued forward against minimal resistance. Colonel Rutherford B. Hayes, commanding the 1st Brigade of Major General George Crook's 2nd Infantry Division reported the Confederate actions in front of his advance this way, "the enemy frequently appearing in our front and making several ineffectual efforts to delay or stop our progress." [5]

They reached Staunton on June 8 "without loss", despite these actions. General Crook described the opposing actions as "almost a continued skirmish" with McCausland's and Jenkins Confederate brigades that were offered "without avail." [6]

The occupation of Staunton would put an ugly complexion on the campaign that would mark it for controversy. It was here that Hunter made his first report of the destruction that was to become the symbol of the entire operation. Besides capturing 400 mostly sick and wounded men, "large quantities of commissary and ordinance stores" also fell into his hands. That which could be used by his men was distributed. Crook reported, "At Staunton we were fortunate enough to get shoes for our barefoot men." [7]

Brigadier General William W. Averell echoed the sentiment stating, "My barefoot men suffered terribly, but without complaint on this march. At Staunton, the much-needed supplies were received." [8]

Everything else of possible military value was put to the torch. Hunter wrote about the destruction this way, "All railroad bridges and depots and public workshops and factories in the town and vicinity were also destroyed." [9]

Writing two months later at the conclusion of the campaign Hunter amended his description of this affair by adding military significance to the destroyed buildings and

[3] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 118.
[4] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 95.
[5] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 122.
[6] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 122, 120.
[7] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 95, 120.
[8] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 145.
[9] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 95.

stores. "Also several extensive establishments for the manufacture of army clothing and equipments" were burned. [10]

With the destructive work out of the way Hunter turned his attention to the evaluation of his own military condition. The victory at Piedmont and occupation of Staunton caused Brigadier General John McCausland and Colonel William L. Jackson, whose small force had been charged with preventing Crook and Averell from reinforcing Hunter, to evacuate Buffalo Gap allowing General Crook to join the Union forces unopposed. The first element of reunification of his army was accomplished. Crook's Division more than made up for the 800 men who were sent back at the expiration of their enlistments. They escorted a train of wagons, prisoners, and refugees on their way back to civilian life. Also Brigadier General Napoléon Alexander Duffié assumed command of the Union 1st Cavalry Division. After a two-day wait to rest, replenish, and reorganize the columns set out for their next objective—Lexington.

For their part the Confederate commanders understood the gravity of the situation. Jefferson Davis' Chief of Staff, General Braxton Bragg's communication with Secretary of War Seddon on June 6 stated that he had "no force to send" to assist in the valley. Robert E. Lee would have to send help. The race for Lynchburg was on. [11]

The march to Lexington began on the June 10. Hunter's army moved "up the valley in four columns by roads nearly parallel." Crook and Averell marched on the far right and were opposed by McCausland's cavalry, but they could do little to slow the advance that covered 24 miles. Crook noted that, "...he endeavored to retard my march, but his loss of killed and wounded that fell into my hands was more than double mine." [12]

The march resumed the following morning, where they found that "the enemy fled across the river, burned the bridges, and occupied the cliff on the opposite side of the river." Hunter, accompanying Sullivan's division on another road rushed them forward at the sound of musketry and cannon. Hunter "took a position in front of the town" and from his vantage point he could see on the other side of the North River. Of his observations, he reported, "enemy sharpshooters posted among rocks...in some storehouses at the bridge...and also occupying the buildings of the Virginia Military Institute." [13]

Hunter also wrote that he was appalled that McCausland would threaten the civilian population by assuming such an "unsoldierly and inhuman" position that was covered by his 30 guns. After condemning McCausland, he completed his commentary on the Confederate troop dispositions with the self-ennobling statement that "instead of crushing the place", as he felt he had the right to do, he spared the "helpless inhabitants" because it was not "imperative by any military necessity" to begin a bombardment.

[10] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 96.
[11] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 150.
[12] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 96, 120.
[13] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 120, 96.

Instead he sent "Averell with a brigade of cavalry" upriver to cross at another point. The Confederate defenders discovered the effort and realizing they might become trapped in the city "hastily retired" toward Buchanan. Lexington fell virtually without a fight. That would not spare the town Hunter's wrath. What he would not destroy with cannon fell to fire. "A number of extensive iron-works in the vicinity were burned." [14]

It would not stop there. On June 12, the buildings of the Virginia Military Institute were torched. About 250 cadets had taken part in the failed attempt at defense, but it was an "inflammatory proclamation" by Governor John Letcher found there that doomed the school. Letcher's missive affirmed the right and encouraged the citizens to engage in guerilla war against the invader. Letcher's home would also go up in flames for his literary efforts. The Union army remained at Lexington for two days to allow a supply train to catch up. Hunter's force was again reinforced by the arrival of Brigadier General Duffié and his 1st Cavalry division. They had been out of communication for several days and Hunter had begun to worry about them. His army was now complete and Hunter turned them toward Lynchburg. [15]

Before they began their march, Averell dispatched "a party of 200 picked men" on a reconnaissance to obtain "all possible information of the enemy". The remainder of his troopers headed for Buchanan to secure a bridge over the James River. Averell drove McCausland from Buchanan, but not before he managed to burn the bridge. Again, Hunter accused McCausland of recklessness stating that; "a convenient and accessible ford" made the burning of the bridge unnecessary and only the actions of his men prevented the spreading flames from consuming at least the eleven houses that were turned to ash by McCausland persisting in the needless destruction. Before their departure, Hunter also released another 100 Ohio volunteers who had reached the end of their 100-day enlistment. These men served as the security detail for the returning supply train. [16]

Without intelligence Hunter had no idea what lay in front of him. Undeterred he decided to advance on Lynchburg immediately. Hunter found the ford at the Great Otter River to be more difficult to negotiate than he had anticipated. A delay of several hours was caused by the difficulty moving his artillery across. Every moment lost was another opportunity for the Confederates to beat him to Lynchburg.

Oddly with operations against Lynchburg close at hand, Hunter left the planning to Averell, who stated, "at the request of the major general commanding...I submitted a plan...the purpose of which was the capture of Lynchburg…." Averell's plan proposed a movement by four different roads, eventually massing the force just south of the Lynchburg. Hunter readily accepted the plan, but before they could begin another issue arose. Mistrust had developed between the two cavalry commanders. Averell found it

[14] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 96-97.
[15] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 97.
[16] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 98.

necessary to issue "complete and comprehensive verbal instructions" to Duffié who was also provided with "memoranda to assist his memory." [17]

The march was eventful for Averell who engaged in a sharp clash with McCausland at New London on June 16. McCausland had been reinforced by Imboden with "400 men and two guns but relinquished his position...". Crook's infantry, moving by the railroad, destroyed it "effectually as they marched." Sensing no great need to rush, Hunter ordered the columns into camp for the night. [18]

On the morning of June 17 the final drive began. Averell's men, in the van, moved up the main road to Lynchburg from the south followed by Crook. They "came upon the enemy" at 4:00 p.m. about five miles from town. [19]

Averell's report states that the Confederates gave way to his advance "until they came in sight of the stone church." There the rebel forces "seemed determined to give battle." Despite the fact that the ground was "difficult for cavalry" Averell deployed Colonel James Martinis Schoonmaker's brigade as mounted skirmishers followed by Colonel John H. Oley's brigade on the right and Powell's on the left. The attack drove the enemy back to the crest of a hill where they encountered "rapid artillery fire". The Federal attackers dismounted and a section of artillery galloped to their support. Again, the Confederates were forced to give ground. After being driven into their fieldworks the reinforced enemy troops "confidently advanced to charge" the Union position. Averell's troopers held on until Crook's infantry came into position and the "boldness of the enemy was severely punished." [20]

The subordinate commanders on the scene had a narrower view of the battle and added their own stories to the tale of early Union success.

Colonel Jonathan Hines, 12th Ohio Infantry "came under the fire of the enemy's artillery near a stone church (known as the Quaker Church)." His troops pushed through the retreating cavalry skirmishers with fixed bayonets and stopped the "advancing enemy" and drove them back, claiming twenty-one prisoners. [21]

While the Union forces successfully drove the defenders back into their trenches, not every soldier was up to the task.

Colonel Daniel Johnson, 14th West Virginia Infantry complimented every man under his command but one. Lieutenant Gillespie "exhibited great cowardice by dodging behind trees, stumps, etc." Again on the June 18, he "abandoned his regiment" under

[17] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 146.
[18] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 147, 99.
[19] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 99.
[20] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 147-8.
[21] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 127.

artillery fire. Johnson recommended summary dismissal for his young subordinate. Others were called to higher responsibility by the fighting. [22]

Lieutenant Colonel Benjamin Coates, 91st Ohio Infantry, replaced his regimental commander who fell grievously wounded while leading the attack on a Confederate artillery piece. They helped push back the Confederate advance.

Colonel Jacob Campbell, 3rd Brigade Commander, 2nd Infantry Division, reported that his men drove the enemy "about one mile and a half" before "darkness having overtaken us, we ceased to press the enemy farther and merely maintained the position we had gained." [23]

Campbell's men and the rest of the 2nd Division troops were relieved by the 1st Division units of Brigadier General Sullivan. Crook's men reorganized in the second line, refilled their cartridge boxes, and prepared for the renewal of the battle. Meanwhile Duffié's independent attack on the extreme left was also brought to a halt by the rebel defenders. He was desperately short of ammunition and very close to having his position collapse when they too were saved by darkness. Any hope for pressing the assault forward disappeared when it was determined that the initial Union success could not be followed up. Hunter was satisfied to put his army in camp for the night.

The Federal positions at the end of the fighting on June 17 left them in perfect position to be susceptible to one of the great ruses of the Civil War. Lieutenant General Jubal Anderson Early, arriving on the scene late, in an effort to create the illusion that he was being strongly reinforced had empty trains run up and down the track, whistles blowing. The local populace was recruited to raise a cheer every time one of these imaginary troop trains arrived. Bands struck up martial airs and marching drums were beat, all within the earshot of the Union line. Prostitutes were allowed to pass through the lines to help spread the tale of the great influx of troops to their Yankee customers. Hunter was completely taken in. He eventually believed that he was facing a force twice the size of his own when actually the sides were roughly even. This misconception would play an important part in his decision-making during the coming battle.

When June 18 dawned "the enemy opened heavily with artillery." Crook's men were dispatched on a mission to see if they could find a way to flank the rebel position. Several other cavalry detachments further weakened the center of the Union line. After three or four miles of marching, Crook gave up the enterprise and started back for their original positions. Early was watching and decided to attack the Union center before Crook could get fully re-established. At the same time the Confederates renewed their effort to drive a wedge between the isolated Duffié and the main body. Rebel troops poured out of their defenses and struck the Union lines. General Sullivan's troops bore the brunt of the attack. After a half hour of hotly contested fighting they finally repulsed the effort. On the far left, Duffié struggled for ninety minutes before the Confederates

[22] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 129.
[23] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 130.

withdrew. Hunter was so convinced that he was facing a superior force and inevitable defeat if he remained that he decided to throw in the towel. Citing lack of ammunition to fend off another assault he issued the retreat order. The units were instructed to keep up brisk skirmishing to hide their intent until nightfall and then gradually fall back. The rear guard left their posts at midnight. [24]

There seems to have been no disagreement among the Union commanders over this course of action. Many of the soldiers closest to the fighting, however, were disgusted at giving up their hard-earned gains. In spite of their protests, shortly after midnight the Federal positions were empty. Early was indeed planning another attack but wanted to wait until all his troops were up and posted. The assault was planned for sunrise the morning of June 19. Finding Hunter gone, he began a pursuit. The chase lasted until June 21 when Early called it off to rest his men. Hunter did not stop. He continued into West Virginia leaving Early alone in the Shenandoah Valley

After reviewing the available reports from the Union commanders, it is easy to reach one undeniable conclusion. In every aspect, Hunter and his troops failed in the mission assigned them. There are three basic reasons why this campaign failed.

Leadership

This was an Army that had recently experienced defeat. It needed a dynamic leader to come in and restore its morale and *espirit de corps*. Instead the ineffective Sigel was replaced only days before the campaign began by the equally ineffective and dour Hunter, whose only real talent seemed to be zealotry. To compound matters one major subordinate command changed leaders in the middle of the campaign. Brigadier General Duffié did not assume command of the 1st Cavalry Division until June 9 at Staunton when he replaced Major General Julius H. Stahel. Immediately communication problems developed between the two cavalry leaders. Averell spent the bulk of his report accusing Duffié of negligence. According to Averell, Duffié spent the remainder of the campaign either out of communication, lost, asleep at critical times, or ignoring orders. Hunter's other subordinates were a steady but wholly unspectacular and unimaginative. There seemed to be little planning other than to move forward. Leadership was a critical issue here.

Confederate leaders here managed to overcome their apparent disadvantages with skill, determination, and imagination. The impact of confident leadership cannot be overstated.

[24] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 125.

Logistics

The campaign was logistically unsound from the outset. Before he could even begin movement, Crook was forced to wait eleven days for supplies to arrive due to "miserable transportation" He was "compelled to leave...with many of my men barefoot and scantily supplied with rations." Averell reported nearly a third of his men unhorsed for lack of fresh mounts and later of long marches made on half-rations. [25]

Hunter's abandonment of the campaign so easily for lack of ammunition does not paint picture of a properly supplied army. Twice the columns waited for desperately needed supplies instead of pressing forward in a steady advance. An expedited advance to Lynchburg would have beaten Early there.

Lack of Motivation

Individual motivation is much more difficult to quantify but these troops just were not up to the job assigned. They were a defeated bunch that was accustomed to being poorly led, inadequately equipped, and badly provisioned. Nothing about this new command group gave evidence that this situation was any different. Also, nearly 1000 of them were at, or nearly at, their expiration of enlistment. This combination of factors had to play into the minds of these troops and play poorly on their morale. Indicative of this status is Captain Daniel W. Glassie's report from the 1st Kentucky Battery. Glassie reports that within days of departure 68 men were assigned to him at the tail end of the Union column because they were "unable to march" and had fallen out of ranks. [26]

Under these circumstances, it is easy to see why the Union forces could not capitalize on their easy minor victory at Piedmont. Poor leadership, insufficient support, and unmotivated troops doomed this campaign from the beginning.

The only possible positive that can be taken, from a Union perspective, is the drawing away of troops from Lee. This apparent gain was quickly turned into a Confederate advantage by Hunter's retreat completely out of the Shenandoah Valley. With no Federal presence, the natural corridor to Washington's back door lay undefended and Early did not hesitate to exploit it. Hunter resigned his command on August 8 after a meeting with Grant and Sheridan. It was the last combat command he would ever hold.

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[25] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 120.
[26] *O.R.*, I, 37, pt. 1, 136.