

Tradecraft and Technology – Intelligence in the Civil War

Lecture Two: Collection Methods & Technologies Improve

A. Aerial Reconnaissance: New Intelligence Uses for an Old Technology

- Balloons were not a new technology in the 1860's.
- U.S. Army Balloon Corps was headed by civilian Thaddeus Lowe.
- McClellan's Peninsula Campaign saw the first use of aerial reconnaissance.
- Within a year, both sides had given up on balloons – the Union over bureaucratic squabbles, the Confederacy for lack of funds.

B. Expanding Role of Technology: USA & CSA Signal Corps Organizations

- CSA Signal Corps, headed by Col. William Norris, had a small nucleus of 50 officers and NCO's, with another 1,500 men detailed from other branches of the services.
- USA Signal Corps: Created & headed by Col. Albert James Myer. At its peak, U.S.S.C. numbered some 300 officers and 2,500 men.
- Signal stations took two forms: 1) observation - observing & reporting on a particular area or looking out for the enemy; or 2) communication - relaying messages.
- The "wigwag" tactical battlefield system employed flags during the day and torches at night to send messages by code.
- Wigwag's first tactical military intelligence success probably was at First Manassas.
- Telegraph: The Signal Corps flag signals were supplemented by (and sometimes interlinked with) a telegraphy system.
 - From an intelligence perspective, the telegraph permitted the Army of the Potomac & the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia to exchange information with other commands and the governments in Washington & Richmond.
 - Mr. Lincoln's "T" Mails: One phase of life in the telegraph-room of the U.S. War Department was President Lincoln's daily visit.
 - Military Telegraph: Key failing: Not maximized through HQ Intelligence component. Messages didn't get widespread distribution.
- Cryptology: Both Union & Confederate services employed ciphers to enhance the secrecy of communications.
 - Cipher Discs: Developed by both sides. Used for important messages.
 - Encoding went from simple ciphers in 1861 to more complex cipher discs and machines by 1864.
- Signal Intercepts: Reading the enemy's mail became big activity for both sides.

C. Union Tactical Intelligence: Cavalry and Special Units

- Cavalry Corps had vital intelligence and counterintelligence roles to perform, in addition to its combat mission. Early advantage went to the Confederates.
- Berdan's Sharpshooters main function in combat was to serve as skirmishers forming a defense line in front of the army while reconnoitering enemy positions.
- Loudoun Rangers served as scouts and guides for regular Army units and worked against Confederate raiding parties in the Northern Virginia area.
- Couriers, guides and escorts performed information-gathering responsibilities.

D. Black Dispatches - Intelligence provided by slaves

- **Contrabands**
 - John Scobell
 - W.H Ringgold
 - Mary Touvestre
- **Harriett Tubman - conductor becomes a spy**

E. Confederate Tactical Intelligence: Scouts, Rangers & Cavalry

- Mosby's Rangers (43rd Battalion VA Cavalry) was a hit-and-run cavalry force designed to harass Federal units and supply lines and to gather intelligence.
- J.E.B. Stuart's Cavalry was the most productive source of tactical intelligence information to Lee's army.

F. Local Spy Stories

- Laura Ratcliffe was credited with saving Mosby & providing intelligence to JEB Stuart.
- Rev. Read (Pastor of Falls Church Baptist Church) was executed by Rangers in 1864.