

The Role of Intelligence in the Civil War

Part II: Support to Military Operations

Lecture 1: Cartographers, Contrabands, Cavalry, Irregular Units, Local Spies

Background/Introduction

- My Bio - CIA background
- CW ancestors- SOB (“son of both”) or “Bi-Sectionalist”
- ALL QUESTIONS WELCOME AT ALL TIMES

Purpose & Scope: This is the second part a two-part lecture series

Part 1 – Focused on Early Developments, Tradecraft & Technology 61-63

- Lecture 1: Intelligence North & South, early efforts, evolution, tradecraft (Pinkerton, Lamon, Greenhow & Webster)
- Lecture 2: Bureaucratic Infighting Hampers Union Efforts – Webster conclusion; Lafayette Baker; Elizabeth Van Lew; Third Estate (Press & Photography)
- Lecture 3: Advances in Collection Methods & Technologies (Balloons, Signal Corps, Telegraph, Cryptography, Mr. Lincoln’s “T-mails”).

Part 2 – Focus on Tactical Intelligence Support in Major Campaigns – 61-63

- Lecture 1: Support to Military Operations - Mapmaking, Cavalry, Contrabands, Mosby, Local Spies
- Lecture 2: Trace transition/evolution of Union intelligence from McClellan to Burnside to Hooker – impact on **Antietam and Fredericksburg**
- Lecture 3: Compare & contrast Lee vs. Hooker at **Chancellorsville**. Improved Intelligence Processes Don’t Guarantee Success.
- Lecture 4: Case Study: “Pulling it all together”: Meade vs. Lee at **Gettysburg**

TRIVIA QUIZ #1/WORDS OF WISDOM

- **Intelligence in Civil War: What Do We Know?** - Despite publication of over **50,000 books on the Civil War**, comparatively little written about the topic, until quite recently. Challenge for historians has been the lack of accurate, reliable information. WHY?

- Confederate Sec of State Judah Benjamin burned all the intelligence records he could find as the Federals entered Richmond in 1865.
- Union intelligence records were sealed in the National Archives until 1953. A few individuals involved in espionage burned their papers. Others published greatly exaggerated personal memoirs.
- **The real intelligence professionals, true to their craft, rarely talked or wrote about their activities. Much of their stories may never be told.**
- **Key Goal of Intelligence – Surprise:** It has been argued that the impact of intelligence is most significant in **preventing or abetting** surprise. Surprise usually is a tactical event. But it often has strategic implications. This was as true during the Civil War as it is today.
- **QUOTE: Frederick the Great:** “It is pardonable to be defeated, but not to be taken by surprise.”

Mapmakers – Critical to Military Tactical and Strategic intelligence (Still vital part of IC today for civilian and military use)

- **Custer:** Let’s return now to the point in our last lecture when intrepid Lt. Custer was trembling with fear while rising to 1,000 feet in a wicker basket that barely came above his knees. What kind of intelligence was Lt. Custer providing? Drawing on his West Point training (yes, he finished last, but he did pick up a few things), literally, he spent most of that ride, and several subsequent ascents, making detailed maps of the VA Peninsula.
- **Maps,** particularly for military use, were **sources of intelligence** information often critical to the success of a campaign or battle. The key was know what kinds of information should be included in, or excluded from, a map. Like his WP classmates, Custer had been trained to include details such as woods, streams, roads, terrain features, tents, artillery and fortifications. Although quite perishable, the location of troop concentrations and movement also could provide intelligence on probably enemy leadership intentions and objectives.

- **Confederates had civilian-produced maps** from before the war; and, in most cases, they were operating on home ground. But these advantages were not as great as one might expect, especially in the early days of the war. Their civilian maps lacked the kinds of specific detail required by military commanders. The predictable result was confusion. Places often had multiple spellings and names. Cold Harbor, for instance, was variously listed as Coal Harbor, Cool Arbor, Old Cold Harbor and Burnt Cold Harbor. **Gen. Richard Taylor** later admitted that the Rebels “**knew no more about the topography in the immediate vicinity of Richmond than.... they did about Central Africa.**”

Beginnings – Advantage Union

- As the war began, the **Union had the advantage** because it had preserved the infrastructure of the various mapping agencies – all the buildings, supplies and files, as well as most personnel, remained in Washington. The Winder Bldg, 600 17th St. NW (now home of the U.S. Trade Rep) housed the Hqs of the U.S. Topographical Engineers Dept.
- **The Confederates faced a much more daunting challenge.** They had no such organization, no mapping supplies and nobody identified to lead the effort. A civilian post office worker, **Albert H. Campbell**, was commissioned a Capt. and assigned to head the “**Topographical Dept.**” of **Provisional Engineer Corps.** He did have experience, having been a railroad surveyor and cartographer. He was surprised to learn that Army Hqs. had no useful maps; because, despite clear instructions, field maps weren’t forwarded to Richmond.
- Campbell immediately began recruiting and **deploying surveying teams, mostly civilians**, with specific instructions to pay particular attention to the names of roads, streams, churches, crossroads, bridges, ferries and fords. Eventually, Campbell was able to **supply good county and regional maps** to Rebel armies. But more detailed tactical maps that guided daily operational planning were produced by topographical engineers attached to the field armies.

Challenge: Finding Good Talent

- In the peacetime U.S. Army, the top West Point grads usually selected the **Engineer Corps**, which included the topographical engineers. Opportunities for career advancement were greatest in those fields. But when the war began, officers leading troops in combat (infantry, artillery, cavalry) gained fame and rank more quickly.

- Former engineers on both sides, such as Johnston, Meade, Warren, Pope opted for field commands. So, few quality officers were interested in commanding small units as captains or majors, while their classmates found fame and glory. A relative unknown, **Col. Joseph Totten**, was selected to command the **U.S. Topographical Engineering Dept.** (within the Corps of Engineers)
- Much of the field mapmaking was done by **self-taught topographical engineers**. They learned what map details field commanders most needed. They also learned “tricks of the trade” such as estimating distances by studying objects of familiar sizes (like barns, fences, steeples, farm animals); knowing that at 500 yds, it was possible to make out a single pane in a multi-paned window; and using their horses steady pace as a scale (1,050 horse paces equal 1 inch).
- Typical of these men was **Jedediah Hotchkiss**, who also the war’s most famous mapmaker. Hotchkiss was a New Yorker, who moved to Virginia and offered his services to the Confederacy. He created beautiful, detailed large-scale maps very quickly on the spot for his commander – **Gen. T.J. “Stonewall” Jackson**.
- He used colored pencils to differentiate cultural and physical details and specific symbols to indicate terrain features. With Hotchkiss at his side, Jackson was able to visualize the countryside and design his battle plan with confidence. Many, including Jackson, credit much of the success of Jackson’s famous 1862 “Valley Campaign” to the maps prepared by Hotchkiss.
- **For the most part, the Union topographical Engineers** were operating in unfamiliar Southern territory and didn’t have detailed local knowledge of the countryside. So Union mapmakers had to make frequent, dangerous trips into the field, detached from the armies, to collect the information they needed.
- Typical of these brave, resourceful men was **Sgt. N. Finegan of the 1st Ohio Cavalry** whose specialty was interrogation. He would question anyone who might have knowledge of the territory ahead of the army on the move. He apparently was a friendly, non-threatening sort, a good conversationalist and a better listener. In civilian clothes, he talked with deserters, prisoners, preachers, country doctors, peddlers and others likely to be familiar with local roads, byways and shortcuts. He would carry on a friendly conversation asking harmless questions to get his subject feeling comfortable about talking – and answering. Then he would slip in seemingly innocent questions about roads, mountain passes, etc. He also would get the addresses of county surveyors and the location of the courthouses – both good resources for maps.

- Other uniformed Union topographers would go to **the picket lines** and join in the good-natured banter that often went on between bored guards and their Rebel counterparts. Some of the careless gossip provided invaluable intelligence, and the picket sites that were along rivers would reveal the locations of fords. One example of intelligence picked up that way was the location of **Snake Creek Gap** that enabled Gen. Sherman to get through the mountains north of Atlanta and outflank the Confederate defenders.

Its Logistics – Not Dramatic But Critical

- Another example of the value of good field maps is the critically important local information that enabled large field armies to stay on the move. If they remained too long in one place they would soon starve themselves out. The passage of tens of thousands of men and animals created a wasteland – roads were wrecked, local stores emptied, wells drunk dry, fields stripped bare and orchards picked clean and fences torn down. The devastation was severe and it made little difference whether the passing army was friend or foe.
- Moving such a force efficiently meant that the armies had to move along parallel roads, which made **good maps essential**. The units had to stay within supporting distance, so intersecting roads had to be identified. Water, food and forage had to be available. To support the heavy wheeled vehicles (wagons, cannon) road surfaces had to be firm; fords could be no more than 2-3 feet deep; river bottoms have to be smooth and firm and banks had to be gently sloping.

Mapmaking Process

- When a new map was needed, the best existing map would be **the “basis”** used to create a **“skeleton”** map. The main geographic features – rivers, mountains, roads and railroads – would appear on this first draft, using standardized symbols. Next the topographical engineers would **add all the information** that cavalry, scouts, interrogations and observers had gathered. Then the details were **highlighted with watercolors**. Each color was keyed to a physical or cultural detail: water – marine blue; structures – black; woods – green; roads/railroads – red; terrain features – brown. These colors were not decorative. They provided clarity to commanders who often studied these maps under poor light and in extremely chaotic conditions. **This cumulative process gradually resulted in a military map.**

- **Additions/Corrections:** It was the responsibility of anyone with a map to make corrections, add new information and return the corrected map to hqs. Maps were thus **constantly improving works-in-progress**. But **uniformity was critical** to the success of the project. Everyone needed to have the same version.
- **Copies Distributed:** The final steps in the process were to get the map copied as quickly as possible and in sufficient numbers to enable commanders to coordinate efficiently the movements and activities of thousands of military personnel. Gen. Sherman's command even carried huge lithographs and presses to print maps whenever possible. Maps were reproduced on various materials, including **waterproofed paper and muslin or linen or cotton handkerchiefs** for the convenience of the cavalry.
- **Conclusion:** The most successful Union generals were those who covered the most ground with the largest armies. They marched hundreds of miles in enemy territory, defeated their rebel opponents, held territory, guarded supply lines and then moved on – repeating the cycle. Without proper guidance their task would have been impossible. Military maps and topographical engineers provided that guidance and paved the way to victory.

Black Dispatches:

- Black Americans also contributed to tactical and strategic Union intelligence through behind-enemy-lines missions and deep covert operations during the War. **Black Dispatches** was the special category used by Union to identify intelligence provided by slaves. Some were runaways (conscripted to work on Rebel fortifications); others agreed to stay in place as agents. They provided a steady stream of reporting.
- In 1862, Frederick Douglass wrote: **“The true history of this war will show that the loyal army found no friends at the South so faithful, active, and daring in their efforts to sustain the government as the Negroes. Negroes have repeatedly threaded their way through the lines of the rebels exposing themselves to bullets to convey important information to the loyal army of the Potomac.”**

- **Contrabands:** Was another term for escaped slaves. It was coined by **Gen. Ben Butler** in refusing a VA slaveholder's request that his "property" be returned to him. Butler declared that the slaves were **confiscated property or "contraband of war."** The name stuck. These escaped slaves were a valuable source of direct news from behind Southern lines. They were often in a position to gather a great deal of Intel without arousing suspicion. Believing that slaves were either too ignorant or docile to understand military matters or risk their lives to aid the Federals, Southerners often spoke freely in front of them about recent or planned troop movements and military activity.
- **Lee**, however, was aware that **"the chief source of information to the enemy is through our negroes."**
- **Local:** A Union report records a slave (name unknown) who worked on defenses of **Leesburg**, escaped & brought detailed observations on the deployment of 5,000 Rebels defending the town.
- Typical Contraband Report from Union forces laying siege to Charleston, SC: **"Three contrabands came from Ft. Johnson yesterday. They were officers' servants and report, from conversation of the officers there, that north and NW faces of Ft. Sumter are nearly as badly breached as the gorge wall, and that many of our projectiles passed through both walls, and that the fort contains no serviceable guns."**
- **Allen Pinkerton:** While he was McClellan's Intel chief, established a detailed debriefing program of contrabands, who had extensive knowledge of Confederate fortifications, camps, and supply points. From these Black men and women, Pinkerton recruited a small number for intelligence collection missions behind Confederate lines. (got something right)
- **John Scobell we already have met.** He is probably the best known of these Pinkerton agents. He was recruited in the fall of 1861. Scobell had been a slave in Mississippi but had been well educated by his owner, a Scotsman who subsequently freed him. He was quick-witted and an accomplished actor, which permitted him to function in several different identities on various missions, including food vendor, cook, or laborer.

Scobell often worked with other Pinkerton agents. On his first assignment, he traveled to Richmond, posing as a servant for two white agents (**Timothy Webster & Carrie Lawton**). While the White agents were targeting Confederate officials and officers, Scobell would seek out leaders in the Black community and collect their information on local conditions, fortifications, and troop dispositions. On at least one occasion, Scobell protected the escape of the Carrie Lawton from pursuing Confederate agents. When Webster & Lawton were captured, he managed to avoid suspicion and continued his efforts.

Scobell is credited with providing valuable intelligence on Confederate order of battle, status of supplies, and troop morale and movements. Frequently, Scobell used his membership in the "**Legal League,**" a **clandestine Black organization** in the South supporting the Underground Railroad, to acquire local information. League members sometimes supported Scobell's collection activities by acting as couriers to carry his information to Union lines. Scobell worked for Pinkerton for over a year until the intelligence chief closed down his operations after McClellan was replaced by Gen. Ambrose E. Burnside

- **W.H Ringgold:** was a freedman who was forced by Confederates to work on a riverboat on the York River in Virginia. Ringgold spent 6 months on the river, helping move Confederate troops and supplies. When his ship was damaged by a storm, he and the other crewmen were permitted to travel back North by way of Maryland's Eastern Shore. On reaching Baltimore, he sought out Union officials, who immediately sent him to Pinkerton in Washington.

In December 1861, Ringgold provided Pinkerton with detailed intelligence on Confederate defenses on the peninsula. This included locations of fortifications and artillery batteries, troop concentrations, and defenses on the York River. His information was the best McClellan received before the start of his Peninsula Campaign in March 1862; it was also the basis for much of his strategic planning for that campaign.

- **Mary Touvestre:** was a freed slave who worked as housekeeper for a Confederate engineer in charge of converting the **Merrimac** (U.S. ship burned & abandoned by retreating U.S. Navy) into the first ironclad – **the Virginia**. She overheard the engineers talking about the ship, realized its significance & stole a set of plans for the ship. Mary traveled at great risk to DC & got meeting with Navy Dept. officials, who were surprised by the speed & technology of the Confederate efforts. In response, they accelerated construction of the first U.S. ironclad, the **Monitor**.

- **Impact:** Historians believe that as a result of her bold action, USS Monitor was ready for action many weeks ahead of schedule; which prevented CSS **Merrimack** from having that time to rampage unopposed against the wooden Union blockade ships.
- **The Dabneys** were a runaway slave couple, who crossed into Union lines and found work in Gen Hooker's headquarters camp near Fredericksburg. Dabney knew the geography of the area very well; and, though he had little education, he was intelligent and resourceful. He quickly developed an interest in the Union signal flag system, and he studied it intensely. Working independently over several weeks, without the knowledge or guidance of Union Army intelligence, the Dabney's developed their own signaling system and worked out a plan.

Dabney's wife was hired as a personal servant by a White Southern woman who was returning to her home a short distance away in Confederate territory. A few days after his wife's departure, Dabney began reporting Confederate movements to members of Hooker's staff. His reports soon proved accurate, and he was questioned as to the source of his intelligence.

Dabney explained that he and his wife had worked out a signaling system based on the laundry that she hung out to dry at her mistress' house, which was observable from across the Rappahannock River at Hooker's headquarters. As the wife observed Confederate troop movements, she would hang the laundry in a particular sequence as a signal. For example, a white shirt represented Gen. A. P. Hill, a pair of pants hung upside down represented the direction west, and so forth.

- **Harriett Tubman:** is certainly the most famous of all Black Dispatchers. But her notoriety is based mostly on her heroic activities with the Underground Railroad. Less well know are her intelligence activities for the Union. Born into slavery in MD in 1819/20, she escaped on **Underground RR** in 1848. She returned to MD and became a **conductor** on the RR, making 13 trips over 10 years trips into the South to bring her family and over 300 other slaves to freedom. The price on her head was \$40,000, but she was never betrayed and she never lost a slave on her trips. She did use creative tradecraft during her trips. She would carry 2 live chickens so that she appeared to be going on an errand. She worked coded messages into spirituals and hymns. When these were sung it spread her instructions from slave to slave. She traveled in winter, when folks who had homes were usually inclined to stay in them, and she

scheduled departures for Friday nights because "escaped slave" notices couldn't be published until the following Monday.

- She met John Brown in Canada & would have joined him on his ill-fated 1859 Harpers Ferry raid, but she was too sick at the time. She became known in the Black community as "Moses." Her last trip took place in 1860. She spent the early years of the war assisting with the care and feeding of the massive numbers of slaves who had fled to Union-controlled areas.
- **Conductor becomes a spy:** In spring, 1863, the Union forces in South Carolina were in desperate need of information about Confederate forces opposing them. Intelligence on the strength of enemy units, location of encampments, and designs of fortifications was almost non-existent. Tubman was recruited to organize and lead short-term spying expeditions behind enemy lines to gather such intelligence. She recruited 9 men – ex-slaves, including some riverboat pilots, who knew the S. Carolina coastal waterways. It was their job to find & clear remotely-detonated "torpedo" mines along waterways patrolled by Union Naval craft. Her work evolved into "**special operations**" under the direction of Union **Col. James Montgomery**, who commanded the 2nd SC Volunteers, a Black unit involved in guerrilla warfare activities.

The **tactical intelligence** Tubman provided to Union forces during the war was frequent, abundant, and used effectively in military operations. Tubman conducted spy missions into the area, identified enemy supply areas, and reported weaknesses in Confederate troop deployments.

In late May, Gen. David Hunter, commander of all Union forces in the area, asked Tubman to personally guide a raiding party up the Combahee River near Beaufort, SC. On the evening of 2 June, Tubman led Montgomery and 150 of his men up the river. Thanks to Tubman's skills, they bypassed the Confederate picket lines and avoided the floating mines. In a swift raid, taking the Confederates by surprise, the Union forces destroyed several million dollars worth of supplies and brought back more than 800 freed rice plantation slaves and thousands of dollars in enemy property.

- Confederate Report: "**The enemy seems to have been well posted as to the character & capacity of our troops...and to have been well guided by persons thoroughly acquainted with the river & country.**"

- BG Saxton's report to Sec. War Stanton: **"This is the only military command in American history wherein a woman, black or white, led the raid, and under whose inspiration it was originated & conducted."**
- She and Frederick Douglass had great respect for each other. He wrote to her in 1868: **"Most that I have done and suffered in the service of our cause has been in public, and I have received much encouragement at every step of the way. You, on the other hand, have labored in a private way. I have wrought in the day - you in the night. The midnight sky and the silent stars have been the witnesses of your devotion to freedom and of your heroism."**
- Tubman's nickname in the army was "The General." When she died in 1913, Tubman received a full military funeral as a mark of respect for her activities.

UNION TACTICAL INTELLIGENCE: CAVALRY AND SPECIAL UNITS

- **Cavalry Corps - Traditional Intelligence Arm:** The cavalry had vital intelligence and counterintelligence roles to perform in addition to its combat mission. These included gathering information for use by the commander and screening the army's movements from the eyes of the enemy. These roles increased in importance when the army was on the march, and the cavalry's mobility was a key factor in performing these tasks.
- **BUT early in the war,** the Union cavalry's ability to conduct intelligence and counterintelligence operations was limited, by bureaucratic shortsightedness in HQs; and by military field commanders, like McClellan, who inhibited or ignored its Intel role. The situation didn't begin to improve until early June of 1863. We will get to that story in future lectures.
- **Couriers, Guides and Escorts** in the Army of the Potomac also performed information-gathering responsibilities. Several units performed essential duties for army headquarters, including the 2nd Penn. Cavalry, two companies of the 6th Penn. Cavalry, and detachments from the 1st, 2nd, 5th and 6th U.S. Cavalry. They scouted the best routes for movement of the army and kept watch for enemy spies and informers operating in or near the Union encampment.
- **Berdan's Sharpshooters:** The A of P had other means for gathering information and denying the enemy knowledge of its strength and movements.

Sharpshooter units - main function in combat was as skirmishers forming a defense line in front of the army while reconnoitering enemy positions. They also confronted enemy skirmishers who were attempting to reconnoiter Union lines. Most notable of special units were the 1st and 2nd United States Sharpshooters, otherwise known as Berdan's Sharpshooters after their founder and commander, Col. Hiram Berdan. These elite units were dressed in dark green and armed with .52 Sharps breech-loading rifles. Each man could hit a 2 inch bullseye target 10 consecutive times at 200 yards.

- **Loudoun Rangers:** Another unit with special qualifications available to the Army of the Potomac during the campaign was the Loudoun Rangers. In June 1862, Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton recruited Samuel C. Means, a successful businessman from **Waterford, Va.**, to organize the independent Loudoun Rangers and assigned him as commander. Waterford was a center of pro-Union sentiment. The Rangers' mission was to serve as scouts and guides for regular Army units and to counteract Confederate raiding parties in the Northern Virginia area, particularly Mosby's Rangers.

Confederate Tactical Intelligence: Scouts, Rangers & Cavalry

- **Spies vs. Scouts:** The terms were often used interchangeably, but in the parlance of the day **“spies” were individuals located permanently within enemy lines or territory** who were actively involved in collecting information valuable to their military leaders. Here the Confederacy had a natural advantage in the border states, particularly Maryland, contained many southern sympathizers. This advantage was greater still in the occupied portion of the Confederacy, where nearly every inhabitant was a potential spy willing to provide military information to those fighting for southern independence.
- **To the Civil War soldier, however, most of what were loosely termed “spies” would be considered “scouts”.** Scouts were organized under a chief who directed their movements, and their duties were to serve as couriers between the network of spies and their own military leaders. Because their duties involved bearing dispatches, locating enemy units, and acquiring precise information about the terrain that would facilitate the march of the army, it was inevitable that scouts would often function as spies. Scouts became **“the real eyes and ears of the army”** as they probed forward as far as the enemy picket line and then used their trained powers of observation to find out what was happening on the other side. In the Confederate armies these men came primarily from the cavalry.

MOSBY'S RANGERS: Probably no unit, North or South, blended or blurred the lines between scout and spy more effectively, and gained more fame in doing so than the **43rd Battalion Virginia Cavalry**, better known then and now as Mosby's Rangers.

- **Confederate Congress passed the Partisan Ranger Act in 1862.** It authorized the creation of irregular units to conduct what we would now call "**asymmetrical warfare**" – hit and run raids in Rebel territory that had fallen under Federal control. Within a very short time dozens of these units sprang up in 8 states, including Virginia.
- Unfortunately for the Confederacy, most of these bands were **undisciplined outlaw groups** that spent more time preying on defenseless Confederate civilians than on attacking well-armed Federal forces. It proved easier to steal from and even kill these people than to risk encounters with military units. The Confederate Congress later repealed the act, **and all but two of these units were disbanded** (some no so easy – Quantrill's Raiders)
- The most famous and effective of the two remaining Ranger units was **Mosby's Rangers**. Although based in Loudoun and Fauquier Counties, it's operations ranged from the outskirts of Washington to the Shenandoah Valley.
- The battalion's colorful and ruthless, but highly effective, commander was **Col. John Singleton Mosby**. Mosby was born near Charlottesville, VA in 1833. He attended UVa and studied law. When the war began, he had a law practice and a family. He immediately volunteered for the cavalry and served the first 2 years of the war as a private and scout for JEB Stuart. During a Christmas party at **Oakham Farm** (on Rt. 50 just east of Middleburg), he approached Stuart with a proposal to stay behind when Stuart rejoined Lee's army. Stuart granted him permission to form a hit-and-run cavalry unit, composed of local recruits, to harass Federal operations and supply lines and to **gather intelligence** in Union-held NoVA.
- **Mosby's Mission:** "My purpose was to weaken the armies invading Virginia, by harassing their rear... to destroy supply trains, to break up the means of conveying intelligence, and thus isolating an army from its base, as well as its different corps from each other, to confuse their plans by capturing their dispatches, are the objects of partisan war. It is just as

legitimate to fight an enemy in the rear as in the front. The only difference is in the danger."

- **Mosby's physical description** - He was slight (5'7" & 128 lbs). Piercing blue eyes. He was reserved; honest; keen intellect; hard realist; restless, untiring energy - a natural leader; who brooked no opposition. Never drank; except coffee, which he loved. "Even when he went on a raid, Mosby carried a pouch of ground coffee with him."
- **Leadership:** One of the reasons Mosby succeeded when so many other partisan units failed was his leadership and **strict discipline**. Unit officers & men were required to wear official uniforms, and to observe the Articles of War & Army Regulations. He made them officially part of Confederate military - commissioned & paid by govt. But as partisans they were allowed to keep the spoils they seized, which created much temptation.
- **Operations:** Mosby actually practiced excellent what we call today "**operational trade craft**." He claimed that he was inspired by and patterned his unit & operation after the guerrilla tactics adopted by Revolutionary War hero Francis Marion, "**The Swamp Fox**." Rather than establish a base of operations or camp, his men were scattered throughout the civilian population. Generally, (2) or (3) men stayed with a family. These "**safe houses**" were all known to Mosby and nearly every one had a hiding place, entered into by a trapdoor, floorboards or secret wall panel.
- **The "safe houses"** served as residences, watchtowers and signal stations for the Rangers. When Mosby summoned the men to a meeting or rendezvous, couriers rode from farmhouse to farmhouse, relaying the news. Periodically, a civilian left signals - hanging red flannel underwear in an upstairs window or dropping a blanket over a hayrick in the barnyard. Each rendezvous location was selected by Mosby - always near blacksmith.
- As for his tactics, Ranger Munson related: "**Mosby would send his men out on different directions on individual scouting trips with orders, perhaps, to meet him at a designated point fifty or more miles away. In this way he kept an eye on the enemy all around the circle and when, acting on one of his men's reports, he decided to strike a blow, he would take the necessary number of men with him or have them meet him at some point near the scene of the expected attack and, after verifying the man's report by his own actual observation, the trouble would begin. He knew the theatre of war so well, and was so complete a master of his own work, that it was**

impossible to confuse him. He never lost his self possession: he never got rattled."

- His fighting force in a given operation would often be about (200) men. His most common tactic would be a head-on-charge with drawn pistols. His command to charge was often simply "**Go through them boys.**" After raid, disbanded, except for detail to handle captured horses & prisoners It was said that the Union knew all the roads on the 1862 McDowell Map (as they created it), but Mosby and his Rangers "**knew and used all of the other roads.**"
- **Intelligence coups** – Much of the intelligence that Mosby & his men collected was of use in planning for their raids in the local area. But on several occasions the results of Mosby's activities had **much broader impact.**
- On June 17th 1863, only 5 months after he began operations, and only 8 days after his 43rd Battalion was officially sworn into Confederate service, Mosby's scouts made what looked like a routine raid. Three rangers - **Charlie Hall, Norman Smith & Joe Nelson** – were riding past the farm home of **Almen Birch** on the Little River Turnpike (now Rt. 50). They noticed 3 horses tied up in front. The horses clearly belonged to Union soldiers. So, they moved to the side of the house and waited. Their instincts were correct.
- **Union Dispatches:** Inside the Birch home, **Union Maj. William Sterling, a Capt. and an orderly** were enjoying a meal provided (under duress) by their pro-Confederate host. As they emerged from the house in the darkness, Charlie Hall confronted Maj. Sterling and extended his hand. Put at ease, Capt. Sterling was shaking hands when the mood suddenly changed. He was ordered to surrender his weapons because he and his men were prisoners of Mosby's Rangers. **This night they hit the intelligence jackpot.**
- Gen. Lee's march north through the Shenandoah Valley toward Penn, on what we now call the **Gettysburg Campaign**, had begun less than 2 weeks earlier. Capt. Sterling was a member of Union Army commander Joe Hooker's staff & he was carrying dispatches from Hooker to Cavalry commander Gen. Alfred Pleasenton. **The dispatch pouch with invaluable details of Union troop movements, the locations of all Union Corps & the cavalry pursuit of JEB Stuart was seized** and it, along with the 3 prisoners, was taken through Union lines and turned over to Gen. Stuart before dawn the next morning.

- **Directions to Stuart's Cavalry:** A few days later, on 24 June 63, Stuart and Mosby met in **Rectortown (now Atoka** on Rt. 50 west of Middleburg). Stuart wanted Mosby's advice on the best route to cross the Potomac River and rejoin Lee's Confederate columns heading into PA. Mosby suggested that Stuart should cross the Potomac at **Rausers' Ford** north of Drainsville (on Loudoun/Fairfax border). Mosby was to join Stuart at **Gum Springs (Arcola)** and ride into PA. But Mosby was delayed because roads were crowded with Union troops. Stuart also had to detour south and as they say, the rest is history.

J.E.B. Stuart's Cavalry:

- Speaking of Stuart, despite Mosby's flair for the dramatic and some genuinely excellent intelligence collection efforts, the most productive source of tactical intelligence information to R.E. Lee's Confederate Army of Northern Virginia was the **Cavalry Corps commanded by Virginian MG J.E.B. Stuart.**
- **James Ewell Brown Stuart:** grandson of Rev. War hero & son of War of 1812 officer. Born in Patrick Co. Va , 1833. Attended Emory & Henry & West Point (54). Lee was Superintendant. Served on frontier: wounded in hand. In Kansas, chased John Brown. In Oct. 1859, Lt. Stuart joined Col. Lee & 87 Navy Yard Marines to Harpers Ferry - captured Brown & his 18 followers (2 sons). Stuart went to the Engine House door & recognized Brown. **Stuart searched Brown's hideout & found documents confirming Brown's plans to lead a slave revolt. Stuart's first foray into intelligence gathering.** Helped to convict Brown, who hanged on 2 December.
- Stuart was MG in charge of Lee's cavalry by 1862 (at 29). Flamboyant, his military exploits made "good copy." But Lee appreciated his less public service – **espionage.** Lee even took a personal interest. Lee quote: **"One of Stuart's scouts sometimes acted under my special direction."**
- Another scout/operative trained personally by Stuart, was **Ben Franklin Stringfellow (featured in PBS Series "Mercy Street").** He became very successful at under cover work. He posed as a dentist in Union-occupied Alexandria, VA. Posing as a civilian, he moved easily around the city watching carefully and sending regular troop movement reports to Stuart. Unfortunately, we don't know how he managed to get the messages through Union lines. In DC, he used same cover – even got a dentist license.
- Stuart made this evaluation of Stringfellow's activities: **"In determining the enemy's real design, I rely upon you, as well as the quick transmission of**

the information.” Your information “**may be worth all the Yankee trains**” I ever attacked.

- **Death:** When Stuart was killed 11 May 1864 at Yellow Tavern near Richmond, Lee said: “**He never brought me a piece of bad information. I can scarcely think of him without weeping.**”

Local Confederate Spy Laura Ratcliffe

- As we conclude Lecture 1 in Part II of our look at Civil War intelligence, let’s take a few minute to focus on what was going on in **our local area**. Some have called Fairfax County Va the “**Land Between the Lines,**” and in many ways that was true. The area between the Potomac River and Leesburg had been under Union occupation since shortly after the Battle of Bull run in July 1861.
- Union forts and outposts were scattered about the countryside, and all major towns (Alexandria, Falls Church, Fairfax, Fairfax Station, Centreville, Drainsville, Herndon, Chantilly, etc.) were occupied by Union troops. Federal Cavalry patrolled the major roads.
- But many of the **local citizens remained fiercely loyal to the Confederacy**. Some were brave enough to try to take action to resist Yankee occupation. Among those Southern “patriots” was the beautiful young **Laura Ratcliffe**. She was born May 28, 1836, in Providence/Fairfax City. Laura’s mother, Ann, was a Lee; and her grandfather had founded the City of Providence (Fairfax CH).
- The land up and down what is now Centreville Road, a main artery connecting Herndon and Centreville, was once owned and farmed by Ratcliffes. But at 25 she was still single, despite her beauty; and her family was no longer wealthy. She had moved farther south to house-sit a small place on Centreville Rd. (owner had fled to DC) in Nov. 1861.
- **Meets JEB Stuart:** In Dec, 1861, following the **cavalry fight at Drainsville** (intersection of Rt. 7 & Rt. 193 Georgetown Pike), Stuart’s wounded were treated at Frying Pan Baptist Church. Laura’s place was only 1.5 mi. south and her married sister Cora lived north (Worldgate). The Ratcliff sisters were caring for the wounded at the church, **when they met JEB Stuart for the first time**. Laura quickly agreed to provide info to Stuart & they began exchanging letters.

- **Network:** Laura developed a network of female friends in the **Fairfax-Frying Pan-Leesburg area** who could supply information about Federal Cavalry and supply train movements. They included her cousin, **Antonia Ford** (Fairfax), **Molly Mellon** (Rt. 50/Centreville Rd), and **Kate Carper** – “Bloomfield” home on Rt. 7 near Loudoun Co. line.
- **Meets Mosby:** On 29 Dec 1862, Stuart introduced Laura to John S. Mosby as someone who would be in the area to protect her and receive intel from her. The next day, at Oakham, Stuart authorizes Mosby to organize what became the 43rd Battalion VA Cav. **Mosby wasted no time and contacted Laura in Jan. 1863 about acting as an informant.**
- **Saves Mosby:** On 11 Feb 63, a trap had been set for Mosby near Laura's home (at Frying Pan Baptist Church on Centreville Rd.). A young Union Lt. came by her sister's house to buy eggs or milk. It was suspected that the Ratcliffe sisters were helping the Confederates. The Lt. could not resist boasting about it: **"I know you would give Mosby any information in your possession; but, as you have no horses and the mud is too deep for women folks to walk, you can't tell him; so the next you hear of your 'pet' he will be either dead or our prisoner."** Laura & sister went on foot across the fields to her cousin George Coleman's home on Centreville Rd. Luckily, she met Mosby and she was able to warn him herself, thus saving him from capture.
- He acknowledged his great debt to her in his memoirs:

". . . I observed two ladies walking rapidly toward me. One was Miss Laura Ratcliffe. . . But for meeting them, my life as a Partisan would have ended that day."
- **Mosby's Rock:** Laura continued to provide intel to Mosby & Stuart. Served as "banker" for Mosby's Rangers by hiding money and supplies near "Mosby's Rock." Today, a sign near the meeting place reads:

"The large boulder, located just south of here, served as an important landmark during the Civil War, when Col. John S. Mosby's Partisan Rangers (43rd Battalion, VA Cavalry) assembled there to raid Union outposts, communications, and supply lines. Laura Ratcliffe, a young woman who lived nearby and spied for Mosby, concealed money

and messages for him under the rock. Mosby credited her with saving him from certain capture by Federal cavalry on one occasion. She also was a friend of MG JEB Stuart."

- **Gen. Stuart was so impressed with Ratcliffe's exploits that he wrote a poem dedicated "To Laura."** Stuart also presented her with a gold-embossed leather album with the following inscription on the front page: **"Presented to Miss Laura Ratcliffe by her soldier-friend as a token of his high appreciation of her patriotism, admiration of her virtues, and pledge of his lasting esteem."** The album was signed by Stuart & many other soldiers who fought with him including Mosby, 10 Rangers and BG Fitzhugh Lee. She kept this memoir, as well as Stuart's gold watch chain, among her possessions.
- **Spy base:** Although it was obvious that Laura's home was the center of much Confederate activity, she was never arrested or charged with any crime. She suffered losses like so many others during the Civil War. Her brother, John Ratcliffe, was a private in the 17th Virginia Infantry. He died of chronic diarrhea at Chimborazo Hospital in Richmond in Oct 1864, at the age of 31.
- **After the War:** Laura continued to live in the area until 1890, when at age 54, she finally **married** a former Union soldier, **Milton Hanna**, a businessman who had been living in the South for several years when they met. After they were married, they moved to his 200 acre farm - **"Merrybrook."** On Centreville Rd.
- Their happiness lasted only 7 years. Hanna was killed by a tree he was cutting down. Laura continued to live at Merrybrook until her death in 1923 (86). She is buried in a small, almost hidden family cemetery at Worldgate Marriott Hotel.
- **Win and Dave Meiselman have lived in Merrybrook since 1971.** Had ghostly experience on first night in house. They had settled down to a quiet dinner after unpacking - heard footsteps running on the roof. They investigated. The footsteps resumed as soon as they started their meal. Once again, no one was there. **"Mosby is checking up on you,"** a neighbor told them.

Antonia Ford, Local Confederate Spy

- Born to a wealthy Virginia family, **Antonia Ford** was 23 when she and her **cousin, Laura Ratcliffe**, provided military intelligence to Confederate cavalry general J.E.B. Stuart. Ford gathered information from Union soldiers who

occupied her hometown of Fairfax Court House. In October 1861, Stuart rewarded Ford with a written honorary commission as aide-de-camp and ordered that she “be obeyed, respected and admired.”

- In March 1863, after the Mosby raid on Fairfax CH that captured Gen. Stoughton, Ford was accused of spying for Mosby. Lafayette Baker (Secret Service) suspected Ford was involved in planning the attack in part because Stoughton and Ford had spent time together. Baker sent a female agent, pretending to be a Confederate sympathizer, to meet with Ford, who showed her Stuart’s commission. Ford was soon arrested. While being held, she was found with smuggled papers.
- After several months at the **Old Capitol Prison** in Washington, D.C., Ford was released due to the petitioning of Union Major Joseph C. Willard—one of her captors. Willard resigned from the Union Army, and he and Ford married in March 1864; Ford took an oath of allegiance to the United States.
- The couple stayed in Washington, D.C. and had three children, but only one survived infancy. Their son, Joseph Edward Willard, later became lieutenant governor of Virginia and United States ambassador to Spain. Ford died on February 14, 1871, at the age of 33. Her husband never remarried.

Rev. Read (Pastor of Falls Church First Baptist Church).

- Population of area split, with many pro-Unionists. Led to hard feelings & reprisals. Read was a lay pastor & Union man. His intelligence gathering activities were well known locally. He collected info from students of a black school run by his daughter. Read had been warned repeatedly by Mosby to stop his activities. He had threatened to reveal the location of a large Mosby horse depot near Hunter’s Mill.
- On 18 Oct. 1864, he was taken (with a Black man who worked for him) in a raid by 75 Rangers (Mosby not present). Both men were shot, Read fatally. The black man’s ear was blown off, but he survived to tell the tale. Resulted in a children’s jump rope poem: **“Isn’t any school; Isn’t any teacher; Isn’t any church; Mosby shot the preacher.**

