

Battle Analysis:

The Siege of Petersburg

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CCC 24-243 SG 6

August 2, 2024

Battle analyses offer a plethora of lessons learned for military operations. Analyses of Civil War battles have provided lessons learned about leadership, tactics, planning, morale, trust, etc. and the impact of each on mission completion. An analysis of LTC Henry Pleasants' application of mission command warfighting functions during the Siege of Petersburg provides an example of the impact of leadership and support on the successful completion of the mission. Although LTC Pleasant applied the mission command principles of competence, shared understanding, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance, the lack of trust and support from leadership had a severe negative impact on this pivotal engagement during the Civil War.

Background

Importance of the Siege of Petersburg

The Siege of Petersburg was a crucial campaign in the American Civil War that began in June 1864 in Petersburg, Virginia. This extended engagement was significant for both Union and Confederate forces.¹ The Union's strategic goal was to encircle and capture Petersburg, a key transportation hub with five railroads that supplied the Confederate forces and the James River Region. Capturing Petersburg was essential not only to cut off these supply lines but also to pressure the Confederate capital of Richmond, located approximately 20 miles north of Petersburg.² The Union Army aimed to disrupt Confederate logistics and gain a decisive military advantage by isolating and neutralizing their capacity to sustain the war effort.

Confederate forces, commanded by General Robert E. Lee, were equally determined to hold Petersburg. Defending the city was critical for maintaining the supply route to Richmond and supporting the broader Confederate war effort across the southern states. The siege evolved into an extended and grueling engagement, lasting from June 1864 until April 1865.⁴ Throughout this period, the Union and Confederate armies engaged in intense battles and trench warfare, highlighting Petersburg's significance in the larger context of the Civil War. The eventual fall of Petersburg was a turning point in the conflict, leading to Lee's surrender and effectively sealing the fate of the Confederacy.

Key Leaders and Divisions

An explanation of the impact of leadership on the Siege of Petersburg, specifically as it relates to the actions of LTC Pleasant, must necessarily include an understanding of both key

leaders and the divisions for which they were responsible. The Commanding General of the Union Armies was General Ulysses S. Grant. General George Meade served as the Commander of the Army of the Potomac while Major General Ambrose Burnside was the Commander of the 9th Corps. The leaders of the four divisions included Brigadier General James Ledlie (Leader of the First Division); Brigadier General Robert Potter (Leader of the Second Division); Brigadier General Orlando Wilcox (Leader of the Third Division); and Brigadier General Edward Ferrero (Leader of the Fourth Division, which consisted of all Colored Troops). Finally, Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pleasants served as an Officer in the 48th Pennsylvania Volunteers, part of the Second Division.⁴

Command Principles in Mission Execution

During the siege of Petersburg, LTC Pleasants devised a daring plan to overcome a critical obstacle. Facing continuous Confederate fire, Pleasants recognized that capturing Elliott's Salient, a key defensive position, was crucial to Union success. His plan involved digging a 510.8-foot tunnel to Elliott's Salient, which he intended to fill with 25-pound powder kegs, a total of 320 powder kegs, to create a massive explosion.⁷ The goal was to use the blast to blow a crater that would allow Union troops to overrun and control Cemetery Hill. The explosion created a crater 130 feet long, 60 feet wide, and 30 feet deep—an impressive engineering feat, as it was the first successful tunnel operation in U.S. military history.⁸ Despite the groundbreaking nature of the operation, the ensuing battle resulted in significant casualties; 3,798 Union troops were killed, wounded, or missing, while the Confederates suffered 1,491 casualties. To understand the failure of the mission, an analysis of the ways in which careful application of command principles may be disrupted is essential. The mission command principles employed by LTC Pleasant in the execution of his plan highlight the application of competence, shared understanding, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance.

Competence

According to ADP 6-0 Mission Command and Control of Army Forces, "An organization's ability to operate using mission command relates directly to the competence of its Soldiers" (1-27).⁵ LTC Pleasant's background as a civil engineer enabled him to propose an underground attack. His competence in engineering and military strategy allowed him to develop a plan that

would ultimately involve digging a mine to breach the Confederate defenses, showcasing his ability to apply specialized knowledge to a complex problem.

Shared Understanding

Effective leadership ensures that all team members understand the mission and the commander's intent, which facilitates collaboration and innovation. As stated in ADP 6-0, "Shared understanding of the situation, along with the flow of information to the lowest possible level, forms the basis for unity of effort and subordinates' initiative" (1-36).⁹

General Robert Potter, Pleasants' direct superior, fostered a culture of collaboration that allowed Pleasants to present his unconventional plan. Pleasants' confidence and the supportive environment enabled him to propose a bold solution. However, General George Meade, Commander of the Army of the Potomac, was skeptical due to past failures and a lack of confidence in his subordinate leaders.¹⁰ Despite the General's skepticism, the proposal was referred up the chain to General Ulysses S. Grant, who reluctantly approved it.¹¹ The mixed support and skepticism from higher command reveal the complexities of maintaining shared understanding and fostering an environment that encourages initiative.

Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pleasants ensured his troops fully understood the importance of the plan and their specific roles in its success. He meticulously managed the mission to ensure it proceeded on schedule while also taking great care to support his troops, maintaining their well-being so they could continue their efforts effectively. Despite facing numerous obstacles, Pleasants remained focused on the mission's objectives and never lost sight of what was crucial for its success.

Discipline Initiative

Lieutenant Colonel Henry Pleasants exemplified disciplined initiative by starting the excavation of the mine without waiting for final approval of his plan or any basic resources. ADP 6-0 defines disciplined initiative as "the duty individual subordinates have to exercise initiative within the constraints of the commander's intent to achieve the desired end state" (1-59).¹² Despite facing numerous challenges during the excavation such as sagging ceilings, dense soil, and ventilation issues, Pleasants and his team persevered.¹³ They used makeshift tools and about 400 of his enlisted Soldiers to complete the mine.¹⁴ Pleasants' ability to tackle problems

creatively and continue progress despite obstacles highlights the importance of disciplined initiative in achieving mission success.

Risk Acceptance

Finally LTC Pleasants' understanding of risk and his attempts to mitigate it accentuated his ability to employ the mission command principle of risk acceptance. According to ADP 6-0, "Risk is the exposure of someone or something valued to danger, harm, or loss. Because risk is part of every operation, it cannot be avoided" (1-66).¹⁵ Lieutenant Colonel Pleasants accepted significant risks in his plan to undermine the Confederate defenses. He addressed potential dangers and worked to mitigate risks to his troops. However, the Union leadership's lack of trust in subordinates led to detrimental outcomes due to last minute changes in the plan.

Major General Ambrose Burnside had meticulously prepared his divisions for the execution of Lieutenant Colonel Pleasants' plan. He selected the 4th Division, composed entirely of Black troops under the command of General Edward Ferrero.¹⁶ The 4th division was rested and eager to prove themselves in battle. This division had trained extensively and rehearsed the plan multiple times to ensure readiness for the attack. Unfortunately, General Grant lacked confidence in Burnside's ability to respond effectively under pressure and decided to replace the 4th Division with a different group of white Soldiers.¹⁷ These troops, already exhausted from previous engagements, were forced to fight due to political concerns. Consequently, Grant assumed the risk of deploying unprepared and fatigued Soldiers to carry out Pleasants' complex plan without the benefit of time; the Soldiers were given less than 24 hours' notice. The subsequent changes increased risks and led to higher casualties. This outcome underscores the critical role of trust in leadership and the potential impact of risk acceptance on operational success despite good planning.

Conclusion

The Siege of Petersburg serves as a study in the application of mission command principles—competence, shared understanding, disciplined initiative, and risk acceptance. Lieutenant Colonel Henry J. Pleasants' innovative approach demonstrated the effectiveness of these principles in overcoming significant challenges. His competence in engineering allowed him to devise a groundbreaking plan while shared understanding and collaboration among his

direct leaders facilitated the proposal's advancement. Pleasants' disciplined initiative was crucial in executing the plan despite numerous obstacles and insufficient resources. However, the lack of full support and trust from higher command affected the plan's final execution, leading to increased risks and casualties.

Ultimately, the siege's outcome highlighted the importance of cohesive leadership and the need for trust and support at all levels. Pleasants' experience underscores that effective mission command requires not only the application of principles but also the alignment of leadership and strategic decision-making. The fall of Petersburg, while marking a significant victory for the Union Army, also revealed the complexities of command and the impact of leadership dynamics on the resolution of critical battles.

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