



BLUE AND GRAY DISPATCH

Surprises Don't Last

By Bert Dunkerly

Winter is when my thoughts turn to a fascinating battle I like to study, Stones River. The Confederates were able to mass and overwhelm the Army of the Cumberland on the first day of the battle, December 31, 1862.

Yet their success was short lived, within a few hours Union resistance stiffened, and by the next day, the Army of the Cumberland had recovered sufficiently to hold off any further attacks (which did not come until January 2).



Union artillery makes a stand against Confederate attacks. NPS photo.

This got me thinking: it was an overwhelming attack that broke the morning stillness that day, just like at Shiloh or Cedar Creek. These three Confederate surprise attacks stand out in my mind. They began with overwhelming force. Yet these attacks all unraveled eventually. Even a routed and disorganized army can recover, while an attacker gradually gets weaker and disorganized. Was this a Confederate problem? Clearly not: plenty of Union attacks that met with initial success then sputtered out. Look at Spotsylvania or Fort Harrison.

I was reminded of a great quote from the Gerald Prokopowicz's book, *All for the Regiment*. It is one of the finest studies of Civil War combat I've read. As he writes, Civil War armies "*absorbed enormous punishment without shattering.*" Armies were bent, but did not break, despite seemingly overwhelming surprise attacks. The same holds true for other battles where a major breakthrough occurred like Chickamauga.

What accounts for this? Resiliency on the part of the defenders? The inevitable confusion and breakdown in control among the attackers? I believe both.

Prokopowicz writes, "*the survival of most of their regiments as functioning units made it relatively easy for Civil War armies to reassemble themselves.*" He goes on to say, "*The decentralization of loyalty and the concentration of unit identification at the regimental level made these armies so elastic that they could not be broken, yet also made them into awkward weapons that their leaders could not wield with decisive effect.*"

Authors Joseph Frank and George Reaves in their landmark study on Shiloh, *Seeing the Elephant*, write of the importance of

... ties with friends and the sense of confidence they had in their territorially recruited units. This type of regiment embodied both political and community bonds with military traditions, such as esprit de corps and devotion to comrades. The volunteer regiment was thus a source of overlapping powerful loyalties."

Several good points to ponder there. Civil War armies were large, unwieldy organizations: difficult to manage given the challenges of space and distance. No one had ever commanded armies this large before, there was no precedent.

And I think they're onto something regarding unit cohesion. Many regiments were recruited at the local level: one town, county, or neighborhood. At the small unit level units could reform and rally.

Returning to my initial example, at Stones River, the Confederate onslaught struck at dawn, around 6:30, on December 31, 1862. Overwhelming numbers and the element of surprise drove Union defenders back from their camps.

Within five minutes, the first Union camp, troops of General James Kirk's brigade, were crushed. By 8 o'clock Union troops had been driven back one mile and over 1,000 prisoners were scooped up.

Then fog began to disrupt the Confederate advance. There was also poor communication between division commanders as the action unfolded. As the front lines pursued fleeing Union troops, they were drawn off course. By the time the rest of General William Hardee's Corps were engaged, the entire Union army was alerted, and scrambling for a defensive posture.

Enthusiasm got the better of some Confederates. William Matthews, color bearer of the 1st Arkansas, exclaimed, "*Boys, this is fun!*" A nearby soldier replied, "*Stripes, don't be so quick, this is not over . . .*"

Although five Union brigades were routed and panic was spreading through the other defending units, resistance was stiffening. By 9 o'clock, the Confederates encountered a division led by General Phil Sheridan. They gave ground stubbornly for a few hours, allowing reinforcements to arrive from the other side of the field.

By the time the Confederates crested the Nashville Turnpike in the afternoon, where they had the potential to cut off or destroy the Union army, they were spent. The southerners had been fighting for hours, units were intermingled, and officers struggled to coordinate with each other.

Once fighting began, officers had no way to effectively control events, they took on a life of their own. In the case of Stones River, fighting devolved into small unit actions. Regiments, often organized at the local level, could effectively fight and rally, but often not act in concert with other units and fight effectively in brigade or division formations.

A surprise attack launched with overwhelming numbers had stalled. Confederate commander General Braxton Bragg did not renew his attack on this Union flank. After a failed assault on the other side of the battlefield, Bragg withdrew.

Despite the initial success of an attack, the small units: regiments and companies of the defender's brigades, could rally and recover. Combined with the inevitable fatigue, confusion, and loss of momentum by the attacker, a rout could only last so long.

Some examples from the morning's routed units illustrate the point: Captain Hendrick Paine of the 59th Illinois reported, "*We continued to move to the rear in reasonably good order, forming twice and firing upon the pursuing enemy . . .*"

Colonel Jason Marsh of the 74th Illinois wrote that he could "*rally about half of the regiment*" and that they fell back "*in good order.*"



Confederates overrun Union artillery. NPS photo.

In fact, most of the units overrun in the dawn attack had rallied within a few hours, but at the regimental level, not as brigades or larger units. Most of these units reengaged later in the battle. They were out of the fight temporarily, but not for good.

Conversely, as the attacker advanced, his units became gradually worn down.

Some officers recognized the issues with maintaining an attack's momentum, and experimented with various tactics like new formations, infiltration, deception, etc. Emory Upton's attack at Spotsylvania comes to mind. Yet no one overcame the issue entirely.

Prokopowicz writes, "*The Union army that fought at Perryville, Stones River, and Chickamauga proved amazingly resilient in the face of devastating flank attacks, but incapable of following up any of its limited battlefield successes. These traits remained constant, no matter who was in command, because they were inherent in the army's social structure.*"

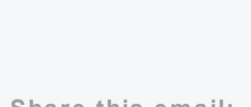
In terms of an army's structure and morale, never mind the lives and health of its members, perhaps British general Wellington said it best when he declared, "*Nothing except a battle lost can be half as melancholy as a battle won.*"

Stones River, Shiloh, and Cedar Creek were battles that lacked complex maneuver, they were head-on fights in which sheer numbers and force made the difference.

Perhaps commanders on both sides should have heeded the advice of General Jubal Early, quoted at Cedar Creek as saying his army had glory enough for one day. Maybe there was a point at which an attacker had inflicted the maximum amount of damage that was possible on a defender, before which his own forces began to unravel.

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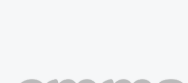


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