

# Civil War History Leads to Present-Day Lessons for Marines

By Jessica Koers

**F**our vans with leathernecks from 2d Battalion, Ninth Marine Regiment (2/9) pulled into a small parking lot that serves as the third stop on the self-guided battlefield tour for the Battle of Chancellorsville in Virginia. When the Marines emerged from the vehicles, they saw a field with overgrown grass surrounded by woods to the left and a road to the right. After reading the educational plaques, they made their way down to the foundational ruins of the Chancellor family home; Union Army Major General Joseph Hooker made that house his headquarters on 30 April 1863.

First Lieutenant Alexander N. Abate, the Company E, 2/9 commander, was in charge of the battlefield's discussion. He was leading the group of 35 Marines, consisting of the battalion command element and company-level participants, in

a professional military development effort that included a lecture and walking the grounds to review and learn from the strategy involved in the battle and the reasoning behind the actions of Union and Confederate leadership.

"What we are trying to build upon is the lessons the generals, colonels, division commanders and corps commanders learned during the battle," Abate said. "We are trying to see, and look, into what they saw on the battlefield and the decisions they made ... so we can take those lessons learned and apply them to the future."

The Battle of Chancellorsville is considered to be the last and greatest collaboration between General Robert E. Lee and Lieutenant General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson. On the first night of the battle, 1 May 1863, the two met and finalized a plan that would eventually lead to a Confederate victory.

"Chancellorsville is that battle in the Civil War that best encapsulates a smaller fighting force fighting a larger one," said Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas Davis, the battalion commander. "The Confederates split their forces several times, and it culminates with General Jackson outflanking a stronger Union position."

On 2 May, LTG Jackson took 30,000 men on a march to cross the front of the Union Army in order to swing stealthily behind them. In the meantime, GEN Lee had about 15,000 men facing 70,000 Union soldiers. In order for the plan to work, Jackson had to make his long march undetected; MG Hooker had to remain timid in his defensive strategy; and MG Jubal A. Early, a Confederate commander, would have to keep the Union troops in Fredericksburg, Va., occupied despite the 4-to-1 advantage of the other side.

The plan worked, however, and MG Hooker was unprepared for the overwhelm-



Lessons for today's warfighters can be drawn easily from past battles, and that's what drove LtCol Nicholas Davis, the battalion commander of 2d Bn, 9th Marines, center background, addressing the group, to take his officers and staff to a study of the Battle of Chancellorsville during a weekend in September 2013.

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ing attack LTG Jackson's men would unleash on his right flank and rear. The Confederates pushed the Union Army back about two miles.

Davis said Jackson's maneuver easily could have been applied in Iraq or Afghanistan because the Marine Corps is tasking platoons and squad patrols to fight against larger entities. He said it is also an important lesson for Marines to keep in mind as they look to the future.

"As we reach and pivot to the Pacific, we are going to be looking at forces that are much larger than us," Davis said. "I want to make sure our Marines are thinking they are still able to compete on that level."

The battlefield studies, which the Marines from Camp Lejeune, N.C., conducted on a weekend in September 2013 around Fredericksburg, were meant to build camaraderie among the Marines and to provide lessons in leadership, communication and decisive action.

"At Chancellorsville, we look at the Confederates' maneuvers and Jackson's big flanking attack and economy of force," Abate said. "The Battle of the Wilderness [May 1864] deals with frontal attacks and force on force, and Spotsylvania is really where the Confederates moved into the defensive."

The 2/9 leathernecks are conducting a series of professional military education (PME) battlefield tours because they are a new team preparing for a deployment to Okinawa, Japan. Deployment comes with the challenge of having new people with different levels of military knowledge combining into one unit.

"We are in the building phase of the battalion's life cycle," Davis said. "We are getting people, right now, who are going to schools and doing basic-level skills. As we go into the fall, we will start getting into more complex and larger operations culminating in the spring with company- and battalion-sized operations. Then we will be on a glide slope for deploying to Okinawa."

Professional military education comes in a variety of formats for Marines, such as holding forums that highlight key speakers who provide insight into current military issues or the courses Marines take to become more knowledgeable about their career fields. However, all PME seminars and classes seek to improve leadership and are dedicated to keeping Marines educated on relevant topics from historical, cultural and operational perspectives.

"PMEs are going to show you lessons based off of history and teach you mistakes or good things from the past," Staff Sergeant Justin Cameron, the intelligence chief with the battalion, said. "It shows you how to build upon those things to



Above: "Battle of Chancellorsville—May 2, 3 & 4, 1863" by Kurz & Allison. (Library of Congress)

Below: Pointing to the Chancellorsville battlefield map, 1st Lt Alexander N. Abate, the commander of Co E, 2/9, planned and organized the professional military education battle study.



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better yourself, your unit and your unit cohesion."

Earlier in 2013, the 2/9 Marines visited Fort Fisher, N.C., a Confederate Civil War fort that was a vital trading route for Wilmington, N.C., and the South because it was the entry point for supplies as well as an important port for exchanging cotton and tobacco for foreign goods. Time permitting, prior to deploying to Okinawa, the battalion staff will visit Revolutionary War sites to drive home the principle of economy of force.

"Again, it deals with small-unit leader-

ship and quick decisions against a larger enemy," Davis said.

He said the worst thing a smaller force can do when up against a larger entity is sit and wait for more guidance or information because it runs the risk of being outwitted or maneuvered by the larger force.

"I want the Marines to learn to seize initiative and make decisions with limited commander's intent," Davis said. "They need to be able to assess the situation. ... I want our leaders to think—when in doubt, make a decision and move."

Captain Paul Vandebos, the intelli-

gence officer with the battalion, said the PME made him realize the importance of the "70 percent" solution, which is a common guideline. Marine leaders use to make decisions. The principle is that getting a "C" now is better than getting an "A" three days later because the situation will change, and you most likely won't end up with an "A."

"A lot of these guys [Civil War leadership] were waiting for the perfect plan before they did anything, so the PME really hammered home to me that it doesn't have to be a hundred percent perfect before you pass the information out," Vandebos said. "Then people can start moving on what they kind of know to be true. ... A lot of times it seemed like the picture didn't change between when they kind of knew what the enemy was doing and when they knew 100 percent."

Looking into the reasoning behind the Civil War generals' actions also helped the Marines decide which style of leadership they thought had a better outcome. First Lt Peter Karonis, an infantry officer with the battalion, said the PME added to how he thinks commanders affect the sense of initiative in their subordinates.

"The South empowered their subordinates instead of crushing them like the North," Karonis said. "It's what the Marine Corps uses overall, but to see it used clearly and effectively with giving mission-type orders and having subordinate

unit commanders execute off intent instead of specific instructions ... just seeing the power of that definitely makes you want to educate your Marines on commander's intent and also ensure when you give commander's intent you are putting thought into it."

The PME gave Capt Dan Neubauer, who is a pilot assigned to the battalion for air support coordination, an insight into the minds of the Civil War soldiers in the trenches and how decisions will affect the future.

"It was new for me to think about leadership from the ground side," Neubauer said. "It gave me a better perspective ... so when I am flying up above, I'll know what the guys on the ground are thinking."

Before the Marines made their first stop at Chancellorsville, they also visited the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Quantico, Va., in order to see the Khe Sanh exhibit. "Khe Sanh" is the battalion's call sign and a famous Vietnam War battle where past 2/9 Marines brought honor and glory to the battalion, and knowing the heritage of the unit is significant to team building. For Neubauer, the exhibit had greater personal meaning because his father was a Navy pilot during the Vietnam War.

"We take it for granted today when we fly over Afghanistan that they can't shoot back at us, but in Vietnam they could and they did," Neubauer said. "I think a lot

about my dad who was flying two combat missions a day."

The PME tied together the past and the present for the Marines of 2d Bn. It provided them with insight into their more recent history and with lessons from a war in which they were not involved.

"We take things that have happened in the past and build upon them in the future so we aren't learning the lessons in combat," Abate said. "We are trying to learn them before we go in."

*Editor's note: The 2/9 PME trip to Chancellorsville was made possible by a grant from the Marine Corps Association & Foundation. The MCA&F Commanders' Forum Program provides funding to assist commanders in developing and providing forum opportunities specifically tailored to enhance their Marines' and sailors' knowledge of the operational matters from a historical, cultural or operational perspective. To find out more about the Commanders' Forum Program, go to [www.mcafdn.org/awards-pro-forums](http://www.mcafdn.org/awards-pro-forums).*

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**The 2/9 officers and staff took advantage of a rare opportunity specifically tailored to enhance their knowledge of the operational art and strategic importance of the Battle of Chancellorsville.**



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