If Practicable? Exactly!

A leadership lesson from the Gettysburg battlefield

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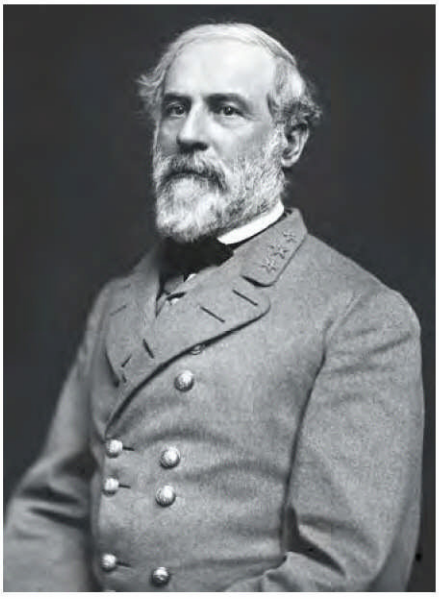

Gen Robert E. Lee. *(Photo by Julian Vannerson.)*

Gen Richard S. Ewell. *(Photo from National Archives and Records.)*

Gen George G. Meade. *(Photo by Matthew Brady.)*

Early on the morning of 1 July 1863, the Army of Northern Virginia began its day's march, continuing the invasion of Pennsylvania. Learning of a fight brewing between LtGen A.P. Hill's Third Corps and what was believed to be a group of militia, LtGen Richard Ewell steered his Second Corps toward the town of Gettysburg. Approaching from the northeast and moving between the Chambersburg Pike and Carlisle Road, Ewell's corps entered the growing battle at Gettysburg from almost behind the Union line. Although Confederate commander Gen Robert E. Lee's orders were to avoid a general engagement until the entire Army could be brought up, Ewell's position on the battlefield—in relation to the ongoing skirmishes across McPherson's Ridge—made his decision to join the battle an easy one. Poor execution initially blunted the effect of the attacks by Second Corps; however, by late afternoon, all of Lee's Army was engaged and Ewell succeeded in driving the Union I Corps and XI Corps back through Gettysburg toward the high ground south of town.

As the Union right flank fell back through Gettysburg, Lee sent Ewell another order to attack Cemetery Hill, the high ground south of town, "if practicable." According to Reardon and Vossler's account in *The Gettysburg Campaign, June-July 1863*, Ewell

> performed a perfunctory reconnaissance of the ground, saw the beginnings of a stout defense, and received reports about possible Union activity behind his left flank. Then, realizing that he 'could not bring artillery to bear' on the hill 'and all the troops …

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> were jaded by twelve hours marching and fighting,' he decided—against the recommendations of his senior subordinates—not to order an assault.[1]

Ewell's decision not to attack remains controversial. Some historians fault the discretionary tone of Lee's order and argue that Lee should have commanded Ewell to attack without leaving any question to the order. Others blame Ewell, arguing that Ewell should have recognized the situation and taken the high ground with or without clear orders to do so. Many historians agree that if the venerable Gen Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson was alive and in command at Gettysburg, he certainly would have seized the initiative and the hill. During a battlefield study of Gettysburg Campaign, expertly guided by Col Doug Douds, USMC(Ret), a professor at the U.S. Army War College, I had the chance to consider Lee's discretionary order to Ewell, the tyranny of time and distance affecting both Ewell and his Union adversaries on Cemetery Hill, and whether another commander—such as Jackson—might have made a different decision regarding the attack.[2] While we may never know the full effect of Lee's orders, whether an attack by Ewell would have been successful, or if another commander might have chosen a different course of action than Ewell, there are several vital lessons that today's Marine leaders can learn by critically examining Lee and Ewell's dilemma.

Civil War historians have championed a wide spectrum of interpretations regarding what Lee meant to communicate to Ewell by stating, "if practicable." In *Last Chance for Victory: Robert E. Lee and the Gettysburg Campaign,* Bowden and Ward claim the phrase was simply a part of Lee's vernacular as a Southern gentlemen, and the order he gave Ewell was every bit as direct as any order he issued.[3] Conversely, Harry Pfanz argues in *Gettysburg, The First Day,* as does Edwin Coddington in *Gettysburg: A Study in Command,* that Lee's order was indeed discretionary, and Ewell—as the man closest to the ground truth of the situation—was expected to apply his judgment just as Lee expected from any of his corps commanders.[4] I argue that neither of these views are entirely correct and that almost all of the debate surrounding Lee's "if practicable" remark misses his true intent—providing an extremely important lesson to Marine leaders. In the context of the Gettysburg *battle,* Lee's order to Ewell is as clear and direct as any he issued: take the high ground south of the town. However, looking at the order in the context of the overall Gettysburg *campaign,* Lee's "if practicable" remark proves not to be a statement of discretion, but of *guidance.* Having previously focused solely on the battle, or more specifically on the first day of the battle, I too initially interpreted Lee's orders as one that gives Ewell latitude—potentially too much latitude—to decide whether or not to attack the heights of Cemetery Hill. Taking a broader view of the campaign, largely as a result of Col Douds' unique and extraordinary approach to understanding the Gettysburg battle as part of Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania and the larger Confederate strategy, Lee's "if practicable" remark reveals itself as the commander's guidance Lee intended. Lee certainly expected his corps commanders to exert their discretion in the execution of their orders. Experienced leaders recognize that *every* order is discretionary to some extent, especially in the face of the enemy, and Lee was no doubt an experienced leader. I argue Lee's "if practicable" comment was intended to give Ewell guidance regarding the extent to which he should expend effort and resources to take the heights, given the unfolding circumstances and what Lee *anticipated would happen in the future.*

At the point in the battle, when Lee issued his infamous "if practicable" order, neither he nor Ewell knew that the growing meeting engagement at Gettysburg would be the culminating event in the invasion of Pennsylvania or the importance the heights surrounding Cemetery Hill would be later in the battle. Lee wanted Ewell to take the high ground, but he wanted Ewell to know it was not to be taken "at all hazards," as Col Strong Vincent purportedly ordered Col Joshua Chamberlain to hold the ground at Little Round Top. Lee was all too aware men and materiel were in short supply for the Confederacy, and conserving his force was certainly one of his top priorities. I argue Lee anticipated that Ewell and his corps were needed for a future fight and wanted to communicate to Ewell that he should not expend every last effort in the attack; thus, he added the infamous, "if practicable," remark to do so. Regardless of what Ewell decided as his course of action, Marine leaders can learn from Lee and Ewell the increasing value of the commander's guidance on the dynamic and fluid modern battlefield. Even with today's technology, providing commanders an unprecedented situational awareness of actions at the lowest echelons in their formations, there is often no better person to make the decision than the Marine in the fight. Leaders must give mission orders that clearly define an end result desired and provide broad guidance while giving freedom of maneuver to the leader closest to the action. Standing on Oak Ridge looking southeast toward Ewell's approach to Gettysburg and the heights beyond, acutely aware of the early morning, long march, the hard day of fighting Ewell's men had endured, and the uncertain enemy situation that lay in front of him, it is certainly easy to understand his tactical assessment of the situation and ultimate decision not to attack.

When considering Ewell's decision not to attack Cemetery Hill in the dying light of 1 July, the Marine leader can learn from both the truths and uncertainties as Ewell understood them. Specifically, modern Marine leaders must remain keenly aware that the forces affecting them on the battlefield, what Von Clausewitz called "friction," also affect the enemy.[5] The unfavorable truths facing Ewell regarding his own forces undoubtedly influenced his conclusion to attack Cemetery Hill was "not practicable." His forces were tired after a long march and a day of fighting, and Ewell knew he would not be able to get artillery into position to support his attack. Ewell gave the Union forces the benefit of the doubt when assessing his enemy's ability to reorganize following their chaotic retreat through town. While he remained acutely aware of

the obstacles his forces would have to overcome to mount an attack, Ewell conceded to the enemy every advantage in his estimates of their disposition and the status of their defenses. In a letter written in January 1878, Union Gen Winfield Hancock recounts the battle and paints a picture of chaos and confusion upon his arrival to Cemetery Hill. By Hancock's own admission, a concerted effort by Ewell's Confederates at the decisive moment might have carried the day. Whether Ewell could have organized an attack at the precise hour that Hancock's defense floundered remains debatable. What remains certain—and is the important lesson for the Marine leader to take away—is that any friction that friendly forces face is also affecting the enemy. Recognizing that friction affects both friend and foe provides the Marine leader an opportunity to seize the initiative and take bold, decisive action. Historians agree that had it been the more aggressive Jackson, and not Ewell, in command of Second Corps, he would have chosen the bold course of action and carried the attack up Cemetery Hill.

One of the greatest criticisms of Ewell's actions on the first day at Gettysburg was that he did not display the initiative that was the hallmark of his predecessor, Stonewall Jackson. James McPherson writes in *Battle Cry of Freedom*, "Had Jackson still lived, he undoubtedly would have found it practicable. But Ewell was not Jackson."[6] Historians agree that Lee's order to take the hill "if practicable" was well suited to Jackson's discretion and comfort in reacting to the conditions on the battlefield to achieve the desired result. Ewell, in contrast to Jackson, required more precise instructions than Lee was accustomed to issuing. Ewell served under Jackson from January 1862 until Jackson's death in May 1863; yet, there is little evidence that Jackson shaped Ewell's perspective as a commander. According to Frederiksen's article on Ewell in *The Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, Ewell often complained about Jackson keeping him uniformed about his plans.[7] In analyzing the relationship between Jackson and Ewell, Col Douds drives home a final leadership lesson from the battlefield at Gettysburg.

In reply to the claim that the first day of Gettysburg would have seen the Confederates capture Cemetery Hill had Jackson been alive and in command, Col Douds responds, "Yes … but why wasn't he?" Col Douds' pourpose is not to question the circumstances around Jackson's accidental shooting by his own troops, but instead to question why Jackson failed to mentor Ewell and foster in him the same aggressiveness and boldness that were the trademarks of Jackson's victories. Jackson was duty bound to professionally develop his subordinate commanders and had ample opportunity to teach Ewell how to interpret Lee's orders, how to identify and seize tactical advantages, and how to lead as he himself did. As stated by Col Douds during his tour, there should have been nothing keeping Ewell from being Stonewall Jackson incarnate, ready to exploit an earlier victory and charge up Cemetery Hill. Marine leaders must understand the importance of developing subordinates and mastering the techniques to do so. Developing Marine leaders must not only learn *what* to do in given situations, but *why*; it is the responsibility of the seasoned leader to pass along the lesson. As the title of Nathan Fick's Colby Award winning autobiography so adroitly articulates, we as Marine leaders are all only one bullet away from turning over our command.[8] We must take every opportunity to prepare our successors to carry on, armed with the judgment and initiative required of bold, decisive leadership.

Looking back in hindsight, it is easy to interpret the events of the first day at the Battle of Gettysburg as a turning point in the Civil War. It is equally as easy to point to Ewell's failure to take Cemetery Hill as the seminal event of the first day's fighting and the cause of the ultimate Confederate defeat. However, a thorough analysis of the Gettysburg battle, the Gettysburg campaign, and the Civil War presents a myriad of perspectives that counter this simplistic view of events. While the debate surrounding Ewell's failure to take Cemetery Hill will probably never be settled, there can be no debate regarding the important lessons developing Marine leaders can take away from a study of Ewell's dilemma. Mastering how to give and receive guidance, how to remain bold and decisive with the knowledge that friction infects both sides of a battle, and how to develop subordinates' understanding of what should be done and why it should be done will prepare the Marine Corps leader to face any challenge, on any battlefield.

Notes

1. Carol Reardon and Tom Vossler, *The Gettysburg Campaign, June-July 1863*, (Washington, DC: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 2013).

2. Col Doug Douds, "MSTP IMA Detachment: Gettysburg Battle Field Tour," (presentation, Gettysburg, PA, September 2016).

3. Scott Bowden and Bill Ward, *Last Chance for Victory: Robert E. Lee and the Gettysburg Campaign*, (El Dorado Hills, CA: Da Capo Press, 2003).

4. Henry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg, The First Day*, (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2001); and Hedwin B. Coddington, *Gettysburg: A Study in Command*, (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1997).

5. Carl von Clauzwitz, *On War*, translation by Michael Howard and Peter Paret, (New York, NY: Penguin Books, Inc., 1968).

6. James M. McPherson, *Battle Cry of Freedom*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2003).

7. John C. Frederiksen, "Richard Stoddert Ewell," in *The Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History*, edited by David S. Heidler and Jeanne T. Heidler, (New York, NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2000).

8. Nathaniel Fick, *One Bullet Away: The Making of a Marine Officer*, (Boston, MA: Mariner Books, September 2006).