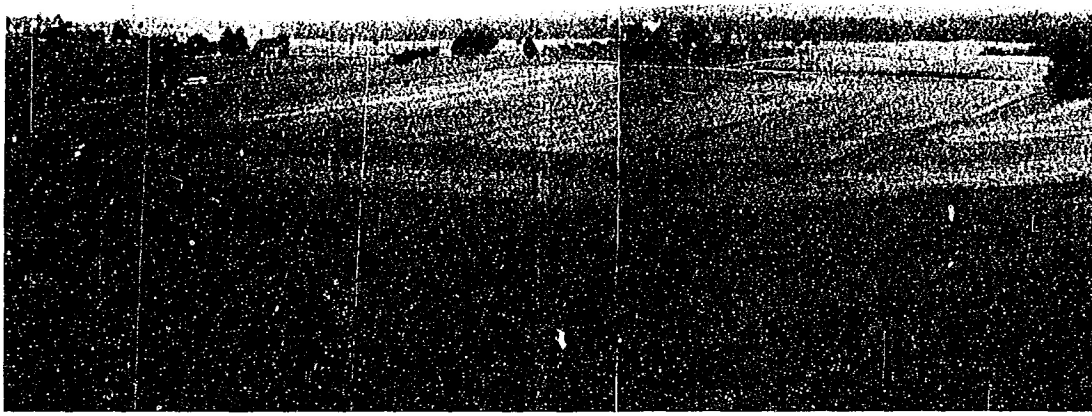

Robert E. Lee and Lessons From the Gettysburg Campaign

by Maj Michael Wisloski, Jr.

Examining Robert E. Lee's actions from Chancellorsville to Gettysburg in concert with FMFM 1-1 Campaigning *will help Marines distinguish among the tactical, operational, and strategic levels of war.*

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On the second day of the battle, Gen J. B. Kershaw's Confederate brigade entered an open field in front of a stonewall in plain view of the enemy. This is roughly the picture he saw. The road to the left is the Emmitsburg Pike, which intersects with the Wheatfield Road at the Peach Orchard (at the center left of the picture). Kershaw's brigade attacked across the Emmitsburg Pike (from left to right) toward a slightly elevated clump of trees in the center of the picture (the Stony Hill), which, if successfully captured, would allow his brigade to pour fire down and into the Peach Orchard, then controlled by Union forces. Clearly visible on the far right of the picture is Little Round Top and Big Round Top, which together formed the far left of the Union lines and which are the key to the battle the following day.

A careful examination of Robert E. Lee's Gettysburg campaign during the Civil War serves as an outstanding teaching tool when discussing levels of warfare. This paper will illustrate the different levels of warfare and how skill in one level may not translate to expertise in another. More importantly, it will demonstrate that a commander must never lose sight of his operational goals during battle.

While Lee is considered a military genius, his actions leading to and during the Gettysburg campaign indicate a failure at the operational level of warfare. This paper is not an attempt to change Lee's position in history. Rather, it is an attempt to illustrate how mastery of all levels of warfare could only enhance his position. Had Lee been operationally attuned during this most important campaign of his career, history could only record his complete mastery of warfare. Most authors paint Lee as the most capable of Civil War generals, and I must agree. Victory at Gettysburg would have ensured a successful northern campaign and could have changed the outcome of the Civil War.

Levels of Warfare

To begin this analysis, it is necessary to define the levels of warfare. The best source of reference is *Fleet Marine Force Manual (FMFM) 1-1 Campaigning.* This article will be used throughout this paper as a baseline for examining Lee's actions as they pertain to the operational level of warfare. The following definitions have been extracted from an advanced copy of *FMFM 1-1*:

> *Tactical Level*: Marines are generally most familiar and comfortable with the tactical realm of war, which is concerned with defeating an enemy force at a specific time and place. . . . the means of tactics are the various components of combat power at our disposal. Its ways are the concepts by which we apply that combat power against our adversary. Its end is victory: defeating the enemy force opposing us. In this respect, we can view tactics as the discipline of winning battles and engagements.
>
> The tactical level of war includes the maneuver of forces in contact with the enemy to gain a fighting advantage, the application and coordination of fires, the sustainment of forces throughout combat, the immediate exploitation of success to seal the victory, the combination of different arms and weapons, the gathering and dissemination of pertinent combat information, and the technical application of combat power within a tactical action—all to cause the enemy's defeat. . . .
>
> *Tactical success of itself does not guarantee victory in war.* . . . In fact, a single battle alone can rarely resolve the

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outcome of a campaign, much less an entire war. One example in which a single tactical victory did end a campaign ironically demonstrates that tactical victory does not necessarily even result in strategic advantage. Robert E. Lee's costly tactical victory at Antietam in 1862 was an operational defeat in that it compelled him to abort his offensive campaign into the North. . . .

The last paragraph is especially interesting when we examine Lee's second invasion of the North. The lessons of history are lessons we seldom learn.

Operational Level: This discipline is called operations (or the operational level of war), and it is the link between strategy and tactics. The aim at this level is to give meaning to tactical actions in the context of some larger design, which itself ultimately is framed by strategy. . . .

The operational level of war thus consists of the discipline of conceiving, focusing, and exploiting a variety of tactical actions to realize a strategic aim. In its essence, the operational level involves deciding when, where, for what purpose, and under what conditions to give battle—and to refuse battle as well—with reference to the strategic design. . . .

The basic tool by which the operational commander translates tactical actions into strategic results is the campaign. Thus as strategy is the discipline of making war, and tactics is the discipline of fighting and winning in combat, we can describe the operational level of war as the discipline of campaigning. Its means are tactical results—be they victories, losses, or draws. Its end is the accomplishment of the established strategic aim. . . .

Strategic Level: The activity that strives directly to attain the objectives of policy, in peace as in war, is strategy. At the highest level, the realm of grand strategy, this involves applying and coordinating all the elements of national power—economic, diplomatic, psychological, technological, military. Military strategy is the applied or threatened use of military force to impose policy. Military strategy must be subordinate to grand strategy and should be coordinated with the use of the other elements of national power, although historically neither has always been so. U.S. military strategy is applied regionally by the unified commanders in chief of the various theaters of war. Military strategy will likely be combined strategy, the product of a coalition with allies.

. . . Strategy guides operations in three basic ways: it establishes aims, allocates resources, and imposes conditions on military action. Together with the enemy and the geography of the theater or area, strategic guidance defines the parameters of operations.

By referencing the above definitions, we will be able to examine Lee's actions during his second northern campaign. It is my opinion that Robert E. Lee never really lost a battle in the Civil War, yet he was instrumental in losing the war for the South. Even Gettysburg escapes the title "loss"—victory, no, but not really a loss. Perhaps if Gen Meade was a bit more aggressive, Gettysburg could have ended the war for Lee and the South, but that's another example of the inability of a commander to link tactical and operational warfare.

Robert E. Lee was a masterful tactician. He constantly faced an army superior in numbers and combat power and then designed a battle plan that delivered a tactical victory to the South. His ability to develop and implement viable campaign plans utilizing limited materiel and human resources served his nation well. Lee's mastery of tactics and operations allowed him to perform in textbook fashion. We will also see that he understood and followed the strategy of the South to the utmost of his ability. Unfortunately he may have been too competent. The best example of this is the Battle of Chancellorsville in 1863. As described by Charles P. Roland in *Grant, Lee, Lincoln and the Radicals*:

> In late April [Gen Joseph] Hooker advanced in Virginia. Again Lee seized the initiative with great audacity. Splitting the Confederate force, Lee occupied the bulk of Hooker's powerful army with slightly above one-third of his own; at the same time Lee sent the remainder of his troops under the indomitable [Thomas "Stonewall"] Jackson to fall upon Hooker's vulnerable flank and rear. Lee's victory at Chancellorsville [May 2–3], was one of the supreme instances in history of a great general's ability to outwit his adversary and direct the attack where it is least expected. The Army of the Potomac once more fell back across the Rapidan; Confederate leaders again took inventory of strategic resources.

A superior force was routed on the battlefield. Lee constantly divided his force in the face of overwhelming odds, yet the Northern forces were driven back in total defeat. By every measure of tactics, Lee is a genius—in maneuver (Jackson's march to the right flank); economy of force (holding the enemy with only a third of his force); taking the offensive (Hooker assumes Lee will either withdraw toward Richmond or be crushed between himself and MajGen John Sedgwick at Fredericksburg); surprise (Jackson's attack); and combined arms (artillery at Hazel Grove supports Lee's main attack). Chancellorsville ends a series of battles (tactics) that were part of Lee's successful campaign (operations) to implement Southern strategy. But strategically, Chancellorsville becomes a link to defeat, not victory, for the South. Lee sees his force as invincible; Confederate leaders rethink their strategy (a decisive victory on Northern soil, war taken to the enemy); and Lee prepares to invade the North again.

Strategy

It is now important to look at the Southern strategy for the Civil War. If operations or campaigns are to implement the strategy of a nation, we must understand what the South hoped to gain from each of Lee's victories. As a military man, Jefferson Davis understood the shortcomings of the Confederacy in terms of population and industrial capacity. This understanding quickly translated into a defensive posture, which allowed the superior forces of the North to "invade" the South, where an "offensive defense" allowed Confederate forces to attack and destroy the invaders. The Confederacy would fight the war on Southern soil.

Additionally, this strategy allowed the South to court world opinion as it sought recognition from abroad. It gave the South the opportunity to

Clockwise from top left: Monument on present-day battlefield marking what is popularly called "the high water mark of the Confederacy" (all the Confederate guns and the attacking lines of Pickett, Pettigrew, and Trimble were directed toward this point); Alabama Monument across from Little Round Top; Gen Robert E. Lee; modern-day view of Devil's Den; and Union artillery battery facing the direction of MajGen George Pickett's ill-fated charge.

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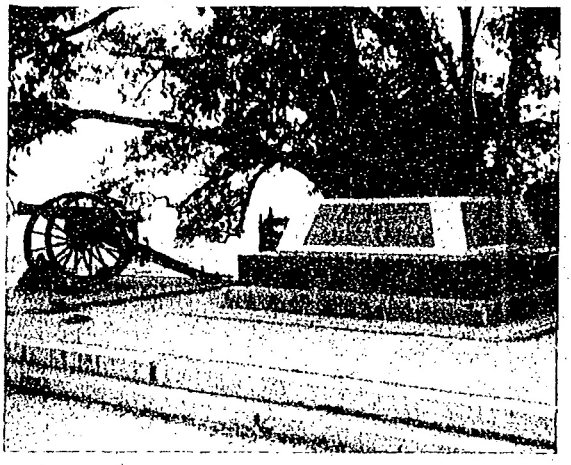

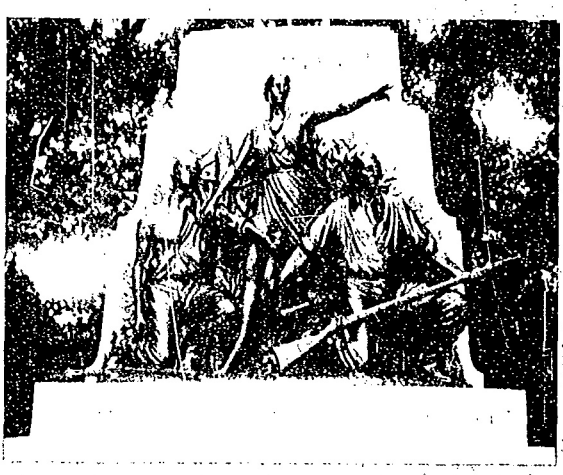

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slowly turn Northern public opinion. In the spring of 1863 the strategy was working. Union defeats were causing more and more people in the North to question the war. The Peace Democrats were gaining popularity, and service in the Union Army was questioned. After Chancellorsville even President Lincoln had doubts; while Richmond rejoiced in the brilliant victory, the deep despair in Washington was summed up by Lincoln's anguished cry, "My God! What will the country say?"

This basic explanation of Southern strategy indicates the South had neither the intention nor the capability to invade the North. Lee's first attempt in 1862 ended in a tactical victory (Antietam), yet his losses forced him to abandon his plan to bring Maryland into the Confederacy. In 1863, when Grant laid siege to Vicksburg and threatened the South's link to the west, a review of strategy brought Lee to Richmond.

The majority of the Southern leadership had the opinion that forces could be dispatched from Lee's army and sent across the Confederacy to reinforce Southern forces in the West. Lee, with his victory at Chancellorsville, was allowed to offer his opinion. Prior to meeting with Jefferson Davis and others, Lee stated his desires:

> It would have been folly to have divided my army; the armies of the enemy were too far apart for me to attempt to fall upon them in detail. I considered the problem in every possible phase, and to my mind, it resolved itself into a choice of one of two things—either to retire to Richmond and stand a siege, which ultimately must have ended in surrender, or to invade Pennsylvania.

Given the opportunity to influence his strategic guidance with the President of the Confederacy, Lee had a unique opportunity for any general. He was allowed to greatly influence his nation's strategy, a strategy that his campaign must support. Lee's actions in this campaign into Pennsylvania must reflect the desires of his country. Lee understood the strategic direction his advance into the North must take. Each battle or action, such as stripping the countryside (tactical level), taken together during this campaign (operational level) must lead to the recognition of the South or at least relief of Vicksburg (strategic level). Lee should focus at the operational level of warfare, and as such, he should formulate a campaign plan. Lee's plan should serve as a roadmap to indicate the desired results of his invasion of the North. As pointed out by Robert Hoffsommer in the *Civil War Times Illustrated* (Special Issue 1968), the plan was based on the limited resources available to Lee in the Confederacy, for he knew:

> An invasion of the enemy's country breaks up all his preconceived plans, relieves our country of his presence, and we subsist while there on his resources. The question of food for this army gives me more trouble and uneasiness than everything else combined; the absence of the army from Virginia gives our people an opportunity to collect supplies ahead.

"As Lee invaded the Pennsylvania countryside, there was only one force that could stop him. It was not the militia of Pennsylvania. . . . [they were] quickly brushed aside. The Army of the Potomac, however, could defeat Lee, force him from Pennsylvania, and end the hopes of the Confederacy."

Lee knew the basic needs of his army and the needs of Virginia, but he also understood the needs of the Confederacy. Some historians even argue that he alone may have seen the need to take the fight to the enemy. Lee knew that his nation was beyond the foreign recognition that most members of the government still hoped would save the South. While he formulated his plan for an advance into the North, according to MGen Sir Frederick Maurice, Lee was still convinced:

> The one way for the Confederacy to obtain the peace it sought was to alter public opinion of the North that the attempt to keep the South within the Union was not worth its cost, and that the surest way to bring that about was to win a victory on Northern territory.

The quote above indicates that Lee better than anyone in the South understood what he must accomplish in the North. Lee would take the war to the North and would seek a decisive battle. He made this decision based on his study of the political climate of the North and the realities of logistics in the South. Tactical victory at Chancellorsville was very costly to the South as vital supplies and, more importantly, trained manpower ebbed away. Events in the North indicated that the peace movement was gaining strength. By taking the war to the North, Lee would break the North's will. Lee must first be the operational commander and then the tactical genius. He must focus on the success of his campaign, not on one battle. If he does focus on a battle, he must be able to direct its outcome to fit the design of his campaign.

Initially, Lee's campaign was carried out extremely well. His army subsisted off the enemy's countryside and provisions were sent back to Virginia. James G. Randall in his book *Lincoln: The President* describes the fear that spread across the North as Lee approached Harrisburg:

> Never in the war was the Army of the Potomac at a more critical point: the North invaded, Philadelphians shaken by the rumor that Harrisburg was being bombarded, the railroad broken between Baltimore and Harrisburg, business suspended, gold taking a tell-tale leap, militia and thirty-day men mustering in haste, farmers aghast at the loss of harvests and stock, men and women of the North trembling as they read their newspapers or peered at bulletins.

Northern public opinion was greatly affected by Lee's campaign, now he must fight the decisive battle to bring his campaign plan to fruition.

Relationship With Subordinates

It is time to look at the people who implemented Lee's plan. As indicated in *FMFM 1-1*, people are important:

> The operational commander must establish a climate of cohesion among the widely dispersed elements of his command and with adjacent and higher headquarters as well. Because he cannot become overly involved in tactics, the operational commander must have confidence in his subordinate commanders with whom he must develop mutual trust and an implicit understanding.

First, a point about the climate of cohesion with higher headquarters. Lee originally believed President Jefferson Davis understood his entire plan, a plan that also called for a skeleton army centered around Gen Pierre

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Beauregard to be garrisoned near Culpeper, VA. Lee expected this army to menace Washington and divert Union attention away from Lee's movement into Pennsylvania. Davis never implemented this key positioning of forces, which allowed the Army of the Potomac freedom of movement against Lee.

Chancellorsville was costly to the Army of Northern Virginia with its greatest tragedy, the loss of "Stonewall" Jackson, Lee's right-hand man. This was the man Lee counted on to implement his desires as if Jackson could read Lee's mind. Lee then reorganized his army. He split Jackson's corps and gave command to LtGens Richard Ewell and A.P. Hill. Under Jackson, Ewell performed well, but Jackson was a hard man, explicit

"... The operational commander should not fight battles. He must shape the battlefield for his subordinates by selecting the best terrain, by moving his forces into place at the proper time, and by enticing the enemy to the battle area."

in his intent and a stern supervisor. Lee was just the opposite. He trusted his commanders' sense of the battlefield and gave discretionary orders. Time was too short for these commanders to adapt to Lee's style. Critics of Southern actions at Gettysburg focus on the conduct of Ewell, best described by Douglas Southall Freeman in *Robert E. Lee: A Biography*:

> The second reason for the Confederate defeat manifestly was the failure of Ewell to take Cemetery Hill when Lee suggested, after the Federal defeat on the afternoon of July 1, that he attack it. Ewell hesitated because he was unfamiliar with Lee's methods and had been trained in a different school of command.

Gen James Longstreet, commander of 1st Corps and a very capable leader, took the place of Jackson as the sounding board for Lee's ideas. He talked at length with Lee prior to the move into Pennsylvania and had ample opportunity to discuss the upcoming campaign. Here the history books differ. Writers favorable to Lee see no difference of opinion concerning the strategy of the Northern campaign. Longstreet's biographers are convinced that he had a better idea: to invade, then force the Army of the Potomac to attack Lee's army. This strategy of an "offensive defense," Longstreet was convinced, would lead to the crushing defeat of the Union forces. Lee was of the mind that he would fight a decisive engagement, and Lee only knew how to attack. Lee never made the point to Longstreet that he was the commander and Longstreet the trusted subordinate. This created serious problems at Gettysburg.

During the second and third days of the battle at Gettysburg, critics of Southern actions point at Longstreet's sullen attitude and slowness of action. This attitude was a result of Lee's rebuke concerning movement of Longstreet's corps around the left flank of the Union forces to block the lines of communication to Washington. Had Lee counseled Longstreet earlier on what was expected of him, Longstreet would have kept his own counsel and carried out his duties properly. Or more importantly in the study of operational art, Lee would have considered this option, and Gettysburg may have had a different outcome. By maneuver Lee may have isolated Washington from its chief defender, destroyed or significantly reduced that force, and shaped Northern opinion against the war. Even a halt in the war for negotiations would lessen the likelihood of renewed hostilities.

The last personality examined is J.E.B. Stuart. Much has been written about his actions during the second Northern campaign, with this common agreement: Stuart took Lee's order as license to roam the countryside and join Lee at his convenience. As Maruice notes:

> But it was dangerous to give so vague and general a direction to a commander of Stuart's well-known enterprise and penchant for sweeping raids. It apparently did not occur to Lee that Hooker's army might move promptly, get between his infantry columns and his cavalry, and make it impossible for Stuart to rejoin him in time to be of service.

Lee had other cavalry commanders, and they were utilized, but not the way Lee would use Stuart. Stuart also acted as Lee's intelligence officer, advising

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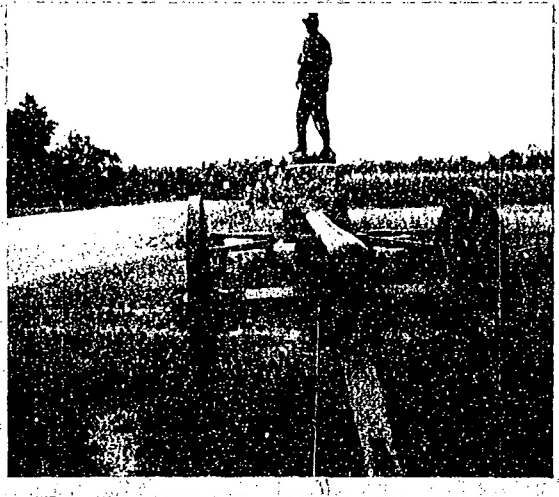

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Lee of possible enemy courses of action based on information Stuart gathered. So as Lee began his most critical campaign, he was missing a vital member of his staff, the G-2.

> *Operational intelligence provides* information which impacts on the campaign; it must reflect the broader perspective of operations. Operational intelligence thus must take a wider view over area and a longer view over time.

As Lee invaded the Pennsylvania countryside, there was only one force that could stop him. It was not the militia of Pennsylvania, composed mostly of New Yorkers and indicating the unwillingness of Pennsylvanians to fight for their state, or the loftier goal, their nation. Lee's assessment of the population was correct. The militia was quickly brushed aside. The Army of the Potomac, however, could defeat Lee, force him from Pennsylvania, and end the hopes of the Confederacy. But if this army was monitored, tracked, and enticed to a decisive battle at the time and place of Lee's choice, Lee could have won the battle on Northern soil that would have swayed Northern opinion. The man who could have set the stage for this battle, Stuart, was on a mission of his own choosing. Fate brought the two forces together, not intelligence.

Lee came to Gettysburg drawn by the sound of battle, in reality a skirmish between two small units. This battle was reinforced by fate, not tactical or operational decisions. This is not in concert with a sound campaign plan:

> Ideally, the operational commander fights only when and where he wants to. His ability to do this is largely a function of his ability to maintain the initiative and shape the events of war to his purposes. He must not become so involved in tactical activities that he loses his perspective.

Clockwise from top: Confederate dead at Gettysburg; a 10-pound Parrot gun from Capt James Hall's Maine battery overlooks the ground slightly north of where Confederate forces engaged Union troops on the first day of battle; photographer Alexander Gardner's photo of a dead rebel sharpshooter in the Devil's Den area shortly after the battle; monument of MajGen George Meade, commanding general of the Army of the Potomac at Gettysburg.

With the understanding Lee had of the strategic necessity to successfully campaign in the North, he should have influenced this battle, not fought it, at least not so quickly. But on the first day, he quickly stepped down from the operational to the tactical level. Initially, Southern forces did well; they forced the Union back at considerable cost to the Federals. Ewell was slow to seize the initiative, but his corps fought well. There was still time to influence the coming events. The battle would continue for three days, the Confederacy would reach its "highwater mark"; the war would rage for two more years, and the South would not see independence. This campaign, along with Grant's at Vicksburg, galvanized Northern public opinion, but not the way Lee had planned. It was, as Sherman wrote to Grant, for the Union "the best 4th of July since 1776."

The above illustrates a valuable lesson; if you must refocus from the operational level of war to the tactical, you must be sure of your tactics and your commanders if this is to be your decisive battle. Lee attempted over two days to conduct coordinated attacks across large frontages with commanders who had not worked together at the corps level. Never supervising, there was never coordination of the attacks. Conversely, the Union forces were able to move reserves to meet independent assaults without the need for extensive coordination.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the actions of Robert E. Lee during the period from Chancellorsville to Gettysburg serve as a teaching tool on the three levels of warfare. Tactical operations were Lee's forte. No one can find fault with Chancellorsville or his other battles. Chancellorsville was tactically perfect, the others very close. His campaigns followed the strategy of his nation. He continually made the invader suffer and kept the Federals from his capital city. Lee's strategic vision nearly brought his nation its independence with far fewer resources than his opponent. Lee's campaign into Pennsylvania initially achieved the goals he sought. Unfortunately, Lee's second campaign into the North offers lessons on the failure of a commander to focus on one level of warfare at a time. These are the lessons important for Marines. The operational commander should not fight battles. He must shape the battlefield for his subordinates by selecting the best terrain, by moving his forces into place at the proper time, and by enticing the enemy to the battle area. This is done by skillful use of reconnaissance and intelligence. It is called intelligence preparation of the battlefield. Lee utilized Stuart for this prior to the movement into Pennsylvania. When he lost Stuart's "eyes" and intellect, Lee lost the ability to locate, monitor, and influence Gen George Meade's army. The Marine Corps is now developing doctrine to use light armored vehicles in reconnaissance roles. This doctrine should help resolve problems similar to Lee's concerning missions, communications, and control of reconnaissance elements.

As an operational commander during the battles at Gettysburg, Lee failed. He quickly focused on the immediate battle and not on shaping later efforts. When he became directly involved, he did not see the shortcomings of his corps commanders; he failed to coordinate the efforts of his army; and the man tasked with the main attack on two different days did not clearly understand nor request Lee's intent. Lee said it best years later: "If I had had Stonewall Jackson with me, so far as man can see, I should have won the battle of Gettysburg." The operational commander must know himself and his subordinates. Prior to the most important campaign of his career, Lee changed the entire structure of his army, having never tested the individual commanders or the command structure that would serve him during the Gettysburg campaign. This structure and the commanders failed him, as he failed them.

While members of the command element of a Marine air-ground task force (MAGTF) work and train together, it is rare for MAGTFs higher than the Marine expeditionary unit to train for an exercise let alone a campaign. The lesson of the Gettysburg command structure is of utmost importance to the Marine Corps. Strict adherence to the principles of operational warfare would have attained the goals of Lee and his country. The lessons learned from Lee's campaign are still of value to the Marine Corps and the Nation. USMC

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