

Roots in Ripon

Roots in Ripon

Chuck Roots

11 December 2017

www.chuckroots.com

The Ripon Bulletin

He Won't Fight!

Recently, I wrote an article about General Robert E. Lee, commanding officer of the Confederate Army during our American Civil War. Lee very nearly pulled off the upset of American history by outmaneuvering the apparently hapless Union generals called upon by President Abraham Lincoln to carry the fight to the outnumbered Southern forces. By most historical accounts, the Civil War should have been over in a matter of months, not the four long years and 700 thousand deaths it extolled from a war-weary nation.

My sister Joy, came over for Thanksgiving last month, bringing me a couple of magazines she ran across that she knew I would treasure. As a Civil War buff, I have accumulated over the years a small library of books, magazines and other items pertaining to this horrific war. The two magazines Joy acquired for me are both copies of *The Civil War Times*: one dated August 1968, and the other August 1962. A section in the 1962 edition focused on the centennial edition of the Battle of Antietam. The summer months of 1862 are considered the high summer of the Confederacy. Never again would the cause of the South and her fight for independence come as close to success as it did under the leadership of Lee, Stonewall Jackson, Jeb Stuart, and other notable Southern generals.

Historians argue over the ineptness of Union (or Northern) military leaders. In my research, I have found two primary reasons for the Union army failing repeatedly to secure major victories in the early stages of the war. First, the Northern forces were not defending their homeland against an aggressor the same way the Southern forces were. This is one of the reasons the war was referred to by southerners as the "War of Northern Aggression."

Second, the Union general selected to head the Army of the Potomac (later to be called the Union army) was not willing to fight. General George B. McClellan, like his counterpart of the Confederate army, General Robert E. Lee, was second in his class at West Point. And like Lee, McClellan was a military engineer. He never commanded troops in the field against an enemy until the Civil War. And this was his undoing.

McClellan, referred to as "Little Mac", attended West Point from 1842-46. Shortly after graduation he was assigned to fight in the Mexican-American War. It was during this time that he contracted what he called his, "Mexican disease," better known to us today as, "Montezuma's Revenge."

Roots in Ripon

McClellan was viewed as an up-and-comer as a military officer, serving successfully in every command during his eleven years of service. During his time in the army, he used his fluency in French to publish a manual on bayonet tactics that he had translated from the original French. He also wrote a manual on cavalry tactics based upon Russian cavalry regulations. The Army also adopted McClellan's design for a cavalry saddle, known as the McClellan Saddle. It became standard issue for as long as the Army had a cavalry, and is still used today in ceremonial events.

Little Mac resigned his commission from the Army in 1857. He was married to Mary Ellen Marcy in New York City in 1860. During this time, he was the chief engineer and vice president of the Illinois Central Railroad, and then president of the Ohio and Mississippi Railroad.

Civilian life simply did not suit him. He continued to study battlefield tactics which bolstered his adeptness at training and preparing soldiers for combat when he rejoined the Army. Prior to the outbreak of the Civil War, McClellan decided to try his hand at politics. He supported the Democrat Party's presidential candidate, Stephen A. Douglas in the 1860 election. Later, he would run for president as a Democrat in 1864, in hopes of defeating President Lincoln. He re-entered the Army in the spring of 1861.

One of McClellan's shortcomings was his impatience and impertinence toward those who were his superiors. He was referred to in the press as a "Young Napoleon." He valued only career military men, showing utter disdain for volunteers. He often refused to obey political and military leaders, a tactic that would put him at odds with President Lincoln early in the war. He snubbed and insulted Lincoln, referring to him as "nothing more than a well-meaning baboon."

Oddly enough, McClellan did not come from the abolitionist point of view, as did many of his fellow officers in the Union Army. He believed the South should be allowed to practice slavery if that was their choice. He was vehemently opposed to federal interference in slavery. But he was just as opposed to states seceding from the Union.

But his unwillingness to commit troops in the field, always believing that Lee had superior numbers, caused him to be viewed as an inept battlefield commander. Sadly, he spent the remainder of his life attempting to rewrite his legacy. He died in 1885.

Lincoln's frustration with McClellan could be summed up in this phrase: "He won't fight!" General Ulysses S. Grant referred to Little Mac as "one of the great enigmas of the war."

General George B. McClellan simply did not have the heart of a warrior. And that cost the lives of countless men, both for the North and the South.