



When Intelligence Made a Difference

— 19TH CENTURY —

The Lost Order

by Jack Dempsey

“One of the most significant intelligence finds in American military history”¹

In the aftermath of 9/11, a phrase to promote vigilance by ordinary citizens became commonplace: “if you see something, say something.” Don’t fail to act, if you spy something out of the ordinary, quick action can be vital.

On a weekend day in the second year of the American Civil War, several citizen-soldiers in the US Army faced this very situation. What seemed on its face to be incredible – a priceless piece of enemy intelligence – came unexpectedly, in an unlikely way, into their hands. Each man made a key decision regarding this information that altered the course of history.

In the Fall of 1862, the official war aims of the US Government were in flux. Congress in mid-1861 had declared the war was being fought to defend the Constitution and preserve the Union. Then it enacted legislation designed to expropriate the property of those engaged in the Rebellion; President Abraham Lincoln reluctantly signed it. One of its provisions forfeited an owner’s right to recover an enslaved person if employed in a capacity against the federal government. Congress passed a second Confiscation Act in July 1862; Lincoln signed this without reservation. The law provided for “liberation of all his slaves” of persons engaged in treason, rebellion, or insurrection.

For several days in early September 1862, the Union Army of the Potomac had been cautiously probing the road network northwest of Washington, D.C., searching for the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. Not a single Union officer or enlisted man knew the precise whereabouts of their formidable enemy. The Confederates had had an almost

unbroken string of victories at First Bull Run, in the Shenandoah Valley, during the Peninsula campaign, at Cedar Mountain, and at Second Bull Run, and now Lee’s army had crossed the Potomac River to invade Maryland and take the war to the North. A chaotic command situation had forced Lincoln to reinstitute Major-General George B. McClellan into leadership of the Union forces after an unsuccessful attempt to take Richmond just a few weeks prior.

In the Peninsula Campaign of March to July, 1862, McClellan had been cautious to a fault. Believing in inflated assessments of enemy strength, he had advanced on the Confederate capital of Richmond at a snail’s pace after landing his massive army on the eastern tip of the James Peninsula. Approaching Williamsburg, defended by some 15,000 troops, McClellan ordered his more than 100,000 soldiers to engage in siege operations, a tactic used for a strongly entrenched and formidable foe. Weeks later, within a few miles of Richmond – so close Union soldiers could hear the church bells ringing – McClellan again paused. The new Confederate commander, Robert E. Lee, did not; he seized the initiative and took the offensive. In seven days of battles, the Union juggernaut was driven into a defensive camp along the James River. Lee then audaciously took his troops north, forcing the Union divisions back to defend Washington.

Confederates began crossing the Potomac into Maryland on September 4, threatening the nation’s capital, Baltimore, and Pennsylvania. In disarray and consistently defeated, the Union counterpart seemed a paper tiger. McClellan took command, but he lacked intelligence as to Lee’s intentions and believed again that he faced overwhelming odds. Spreading out into several parallel columns, the Federals advanced north and west, seeking to make contact.

Lee’s invasion was a high-stakes move. Another victory might bring Maryland into the Confederacy, bolster peace advocates in the upcoming Northern mid-term elections, and perhaps even prompt foreign recognition of the Confederate States of America. At a minimum, Lee hoped to keep his opponent out of Virginia until the approach of winter. Perhaps the arrival of the new year would find two irretrievably separate nations where there had been one – with human bondage a pillar of the economy and society of the new body politic.

Near Frederick, during a morning halt on September 13, two soldiers of an Indiana regiment noticed an object on the ground as their unit stacked arms in a farmer’s field. Several cigars were wrapped in paper. Rather than use it to light the smokes, Corporal

1. Jeffrey Wert, *The Sword of Lincoln: The Army of the Potomac*, New York: Simon & Schuster, 2005, p. 149.

Barton Mitchell and Sergeant John Bloss opened the enclosure. At the top, they read “Confidential” and “Hd Qrs Army of Northern Va.” Could this be a timely find? The paper bore the date of September 9th, only four days prior. This “Special Orders No 191” appeared to be detailed marching instructions for various units of Lee’s army, identifying known units and their commanders.

The two took the item to their company commander, Captain Peter Kop, who sent them to the regiment’s colonel, Silas Colgrove, who took it and rode to division headquarters. In charge was Brigadier-General Alpheus S. Williams, who also exercised temporary command of the Twelfth Corps on this day. Colgrove found Williams’s chief aide, Lieutenant Samuel E. Pittman, and shared the paper.

Colonel Silas Colgrove was a 56-year-old lawyer from Randolph County, a rural community in eastern central Indiana. He had served as justice of the peace, prosecuting attorney, and representative in the lower house of the State legislature. He had no real military experience. Michigander Sam Pittman was a 31-year-old Detroitier with employment history as bookkeeper, clerk, and bank teller, a founding member of a boat club, and a civilian without military training before accepting a commission to become staff aide. Brigadier-General Williams would turn 52 on the 20th. He had been a lawyer, judge, publisher, elected official, and militia man in Detroit. His military education derived from self-study, not West Point, and he had commanded against guerrillas in the 1846-1848 Mexican-American War.

As Pittman examined the document and reached its conclusion, he discovered some familiar words. The first of the final three lines represented that the order came “by command” of General Lee. For staff officer Pittman, who had issued similar orders in the name and by the direction of Williams, this phrase rang true. The last line identified the rank of the signer: “A A General,” connoting Lee’s assistant adjutant-general, analogous to the position that Pittman himself filled. In between, though, came the clinching proof to the entire matter. Could this matter simply be a trick, intending to mislead, a ruse de guerre? If Lee indeed had split his army into piece parts, making them vulnerable to attack, Pittman could be holding the blueprint for Union victory.

But how validate this signature of “R.H. Chilton?” In an amazing twist of fate, within the ranks of the Army of the Potomac, Pittman was just the man to do so. He had been employed as teller in a major Detroit bank before the outbreak of the Civil War. Across his

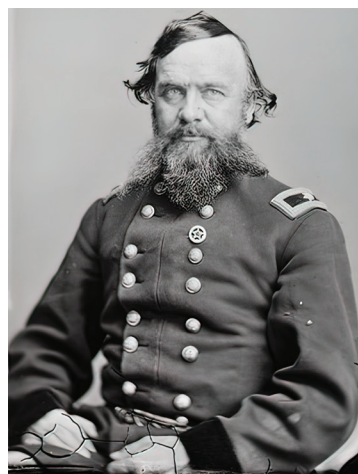
desk came requisitions for payment from the local U.S. Army quartermaster. Pittman had become conversant with the name, and the handwriting, of none other than ... Robert Hall Chilton. Yet, this Union staff officer of no formal military or intelligence training faced a moment of truth. What if he were wrong about the provenance of the document?²

Pittman decided to let his commander share in the decision. In that is good judgment: he did not talk himself out of passing it up the line. So, with no delay, Pittman approached Williams and placed the document into his hands, vouching for the genuineness of the signature. General Williams – “Old Pap” to the troops for his fatherly demeanor – also may have known Chilton among the 45,000 inhabitants of prewar Detroit, but he had no independent basis to verify the signature. The testimony of his aide was all Williams needed. Within moments, he dashed off a transmittal to McClellan accompanying the paper:

General

I enclose a General Special Order of Genl
Lee Commanding Rebel forces which was found
on the field where my Corps is Encamped.

It is a document of interest & is no
doubt genuine.³



Pittman earnestly desired to carry the package to Army headquarters. Williams vetoed the idea; the Twelfth Corps should be in readiness for this intelligence to be acted upon, and A.A.G. administration was essential to make it so. Thus, Pittman sent an aide-de-camp off to

McClellan, and the two Michiganders waited to see if their leader would continue to exhibit “the slows.”⁴

The rest, as they say, is history. Suddenly confident that “there is now no Rebel force immediately

2. See the document at: <https://www.loc.gov/exhibits/lincoln/lincoln-as-commander-in-chief.html#obj13>.

3. George Brinton McClellan Papers: Correspondence I, -1888; 1862; Sept. 11-15. 1862. Manuscript/Mixed Material. <https://www.loc.gov/item/mss318980084/>. 203-204 of 282. Photograph of Brigadier-General Alpheus S. Williams from Civil war photographs, 1861-1865, Library of Congress.

4. James B. McPherson, *Tried by War: Abraham Lincoln as Commander-in-Chief*, New York: Penguin Press, 2008, p. 141.

threatening Washington or Baltimore,” McClellan began to act upon this intelligence, issuing orders for an advance to take on Lee. He telegraphed the President at midnight: “I have all the plans of the rebels, and will catch them in their own trap.” On the 14th, McClellan fought and won the Battle of South Mountain, then deployed on the 16th along Antietam Creek near Sharpsburg for battle. Lincoln telegraphed: “God bless you and all with you. Destroy the rebel army if possible.”



The twelve daylight hours on September 17th would be the bloodiest day of the war to date, yielding some 23,000 total casualties. A day later, Lee’s army retreated into Virginia, badly hurt though not destroyed. The Army of the Potomac had won the field and the right to assert victory. Lincoln took advantage of it in order to make human rights a centerpiece of Union war policy. Within the week, he announced the emancipation of all enslaved persons within the Confederacy as of the first day of January 1863.

The President paid a visit to McClellan and the army in early October. During his inspection, Lincoln met with “Pap” Williams, and they had a long talk, sitting on a pile of logs. Whether they conversed about the Lost Order is undocumented.

Lincoln had hopes for a new offensive against what he perceived was a weakened foe. But he came to feel that McClellan had fumbled an opportunity to end the war and replaced him in November. The war for Union and liberty would be prolonged into 1865.

One of Lee’s staff officers would bemoan how the Lost Order episode “was a shabby trick for fate to play on us.”⁵ Perhaps. But the human element proved

5. Gary W. Gallagher ed., *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989, p. 141.

integral to this reversal of affairs. On the Confederate side, a staff failure to account for all copies meant a lack of awareness or alarm, producing no change in set plans. On the Union side, the role of each individual in the chain of custody proved essential, culminating with Pittman’s contribution and Williams’s reliance on it. They did their duty, and well.

Some have argued that Lee quickly knew that McClellan held the Lost Order. Ostensibly, a sympathizing civilian inside the Union camp saw the exuberant General and concluded that Lee’s plans had fallen into his possession. While something of a nice yarn, contemporary evidence is lacking. Lee’s communication on September 16 to Confederate President Jefferson Davis complained that McClellan “was advancing more rapidly than was convenient” – this, not a spy, had prompted alteration in Lee’s strategy. His official report on the campaign in August 1863 was the first acknowledgment of the Lost Order, coming after publications in the North revealed it on a widely accessible scale.

Renowned historians have referred to the episode as the product of a “fantastic accident,” “a piece of rare good fortune,” “one of the most extraordinary strokes of luck in all the annals of warfare,” where “the odds against” this occurrence were “a million to one,” as “one of the Civil War’s enduring mysteries,” and as how “fortune betrayed” the Confederacy. A key aide to Lee wrote early in the 20th century of how “there is no parallel to it in history.” That assertion came before subsequent feats such as World War II’s Ultra cryptanalysis successes. Forty years after Antietam, however, Walter Taylor’s assessment echoed Lee’s during the war: the Lost Order episode was “a great calamity” that severely injured the Confederacy.⁶

“You make your own luck” is a quote attributed to the great American writer, Ernest Hemingway.⁷

6. “Fantastic accident” – Bruce Catton, *The Centennial History of the Civil War*, Vol. II: *Terrible Swift Sword*, Garden City: Doubleday & Co., 1963, p. 448. “Rare good fortune” – Francis Palfrey, *The Antietam and Fredericksburg*, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1882, p. 22.

“Extraordinary stroke of luck” – Albert Castel, *Victors in Blue: How Union Generals Fought the Confederates, Battled Each Other, and Won the Civil War*, Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011, p. 115.

“Odds against” – James McPherson, *Crossroads of Freedom: Antietam*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 108. “Enduring mysteries” – Stephen W. Sears, *Landscape Turned Red: The Battle of Antietam*, New Haven: Ticknor & Fields, 1983, p. 114. “Fortune betrayed” – Allan Nevins, *The War for the Union*, Vol. II, New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1960, p. 218. “No parallel” – Walter H. Taylor, *General Lee, His Campaigns in Virginia, 1861-1865, With Personal Reminiscences*, Norfolk: Nusbaum Book & News Co., 1906, p. 124. “Great calamity” – Hal Bridges, “A Lee Letter on the ‘Lost Dispatch’ and the Maryland Campaign of 1862” in *Virginia Magazine of History and Biography*, Vol. 66, No. 2, Apr. 1958, pp. 164-166.

7. Hemingway in speaking to his own son, as quoted in Gregory H. Hemingway, *Papa: A Personal Memoir*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin,

“Papa” might have not have had it in mind, but the successive decisions by Sergeant Bloss and Corporal Mitchell, Captain Peter Kop, Colonel Silas Colgrove, Lieutenant Samuel Pittman, and Brigadier-General “Pap” Williams created an opportunity for Union arms to triumph. These six collaborated to galvanize the hesitant McClellan and the opportunistic Lincoln to great deeds.

Five of the six made it home from the war they helped win. Like Lincoln, the sixth, Belgian-born Kop, antebellum railroad conductor and the leader of Company F, did not. He was mortally wounded on September 17, likely in what students of the war know simply as “the Cornfield.” He died within a week. His final resting place can be visited within the Antietam National Cemetery, a long day’s march, about 25 miles, from the farm field where he had been party to an amazing intelligence coup.

The “Lost Order” might have gone undiscovered or destroyed inadvertently, or it might not have been passed to the top of the Union chain of command. It might have gone unverified; authentication might

have been dismissed. Each moment of delay could have undermined the huge advantage gained. One can speculate on the resulting alternative history. The extraordinary course of events, though, did happen. Just days later, U.S. war aims aligned with the goal of liberating millions of oppressed Americans. The deeds of the six heroes, and a President’s proclamation, proved momentous to succeeding generations of their people.

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1976, p. 119.