When Intelligence Made a Difference

— 19TH CENTURY —

First Battle of Bull Run

A First in Many Ways

by Greg Elder

The Battle of Bull Run, on July 21, 1861, was the first large battle of the Civil War, the first of two fought on the same terrain just north of Manassas Junction, Virginia. At the end of the day, the Confederates won exposing the myth that the Civil War would end by Christmas. Bull Run is often forgotten in terms of its importance in history. Dwarfed by future battles, the war continued for four years, accruing more than 622,000 deaths. However, Bull Run was important for ushering in a new era in technology in war, and particularly for military intelligence.

EARLY INTELLIGENCE EFFORTS

After President Lincoln's election on November 6, 1869, Southern states began to secede from the Union, initiating hostilities by firing on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861. The North called for reunification, and Lincoln pressed for action. Although recruiting a large number of men to take up arms, most signed only 90-day enlistment papers, compelling a speedy conclusion of the rebellion.

The Union established two armies in the Easter Theater of operations, one commanded by Brigadier General Irvin McDowell with a force of 35,000 stationed in Washington, DC, and another of 18,000 in the northern Shenandoah under Major General Robert Patterson. Confronting them were two Confederate armies – Brigadier General P.T.G. Beauregard's force of 20,000 at Manassas Junction and Brigadier General Joseph Johnston's 12,000 in the Shenandoah Valley – placed to disrupt Union incursions into Virginia. The Union had numerical superiority, but with access to railroads the Confederates had superior interior lines to move large numbers of men rapidly over long distances. If intelligence were available to the Confederates to forewarn of a Union advance from Washington, Beauregard could call on Johnston to come to his aid. However, Confederate President Jefferson Davis placed a high bar on the evidence required to authorize Johnston's movement, which could leave the Valley vulnerable. As such, timely and accurate intelligence became the prerequisite for Confederate success.

Intelligence was important for the Union as well. McDowell had three intelligence considerations before he began his campaign:

- the size and disposition of Beauregard's force at Manassas;
- the best route to Manassas and, more importantly, an avenue to cross the Bull Run, which stood between his own and Beauregard's force;
- Any movement by Johnston to come to the aid Beauregard.

McDowell, however, for political, organizational, and personal reasons was woefully unprepared to address these gaps.

Politically, the Union was at a great disadvantage in terms of intelligence collection. First, for months after his election, President Lincoln was averse to appearing too militaristic in addressing the secession; he wanted a peaceful resolution. This slowed mobilization, to include intelligence gathering. Second, the Confederate capital was initially in Montgomery, AL, and only moved to Richmond on 20 May, weeks after Virginia's formal secession. Without any established collection efforts in place before secession, the movement of Confederate capital's in the opening months of the contest would have complicated any fledgling efforts. Third, Washington, DC was a southern city, the government filled with a large number of Confederate sympathizers – the War Department had a particularly high number of Southerners. Known as the War Clerks, these sympathizers had access to all Union mobilization efforts and could listen in on conversations throughout the Department. Northerners took to whispering to each other as a means of limiting the risk to operational security. The telegraph between Washington and Richmond was not severed until after Richmond was declared the capital of the Confederacy, providing War Clerks and other southern sympathizers a means to rapidly communicate south information, limiting intelligence collection plans by the Union. As there were no spies in place, another

limitation was that a Union spy making his or her way to Richmond would have no placement and access for effective collection – the best they could do was provide information on what they saw or from rumors.

Organizationally, the Union was also ill-prepared to initiate operations against the Confederates. The United States lacked any form of intelligence organization before the war. Nobody in the War Department had experience in recruiting and training spies, nor was there a person versed in tradecraft or the development of bona fides for potential operatives. In short, the Union was slow in appreciating the value of intelligence, and had no plan to support intelligence collection.

In preparing to move on the Confederates at Bull Run, McDowell's largest intelligence gap – and failure – related to topography and infrastructure. McDowell has less than one regiment of cavalry, largely used to protect his flanks and rear, limiting his ability to conduct reconnaissance. He was, however, able to draw from scouts who knew the region. But McDowell was wary of the loyalty of Virginians, so required "eyeball evidence" regarding their findings; this eliminated any long-term planning. He had no useful maps of the region, and also lacked a Signals Corps for observations and communications. In mid-June 1861, a spy named William Johnston was able to spend three days in Beauregard's camp, providing a fairly accurate assessment of the Confederate forces, but provided no topographic information to exploit.

Conversely, the Confederates had exceptional timely, accurate, and actionable intelligence with which to operate. Unlike the Union, which had three primary intelligence priorities, Beauregard had only two:

When is McDowell beginning his advance to Manassas and via what route?

What is the strength of McDowell's force?

Unlike the Federals, the Confederates were well placed to address these priorities. In an intelligence campaign they would not match for the remainder of the war, the Confederates exploited operatives in Washington, DC, fully exploited poor Union operational security, and benefitted from abundance of open source intelligence.

As states seceded, Southern sympathizers in Washington established networks. One, centered around the DC socialite Rose Greenhow, proved highly effective in collecting intelligence for the Bull Run campaign. A widow with several children, Greenhow was strongly influenced by her past friendship
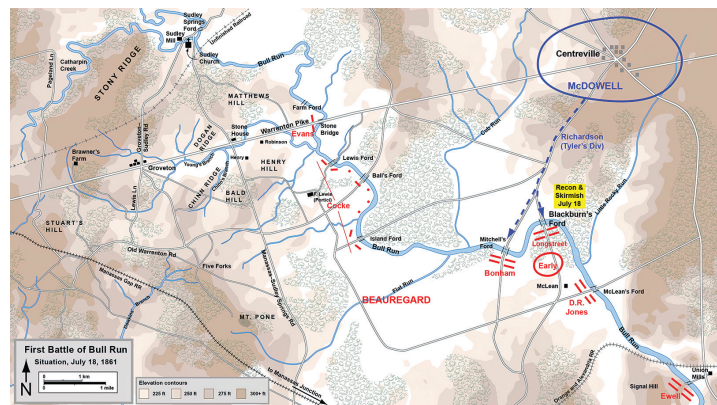

Mrs. Rose O'Neal Greenhow

with the former Vice President, John C. Calhoun from South Carolina. Because of her contacts, she was able to obtain sensitive information.

On July 10, 1861 Rose Greenhow sent word that "McDowell has certainly been ordered to advance on the sixteenth". This initial warning proved insufficient to stir President Jefferson Davis, who denied requests to relocate Johnston's army from the Shenandoah to Manassas. General Beauregard sent a plea to Greenhow for additional intelligence. On July 16, she sent word that the Federal forces would move out that very day, marching from Arlington to Manassas, via Centreville. This information corroborated other intelligence, and orders were dispatched directing Johnston to move. McDowell did, in fact, begin his march on the 16th.

Unfortunate to the longevity of the Confederate cause, Rose Greenhow practiced poor operational security. She soon aroused the suspicion of Union investigator and future intelligence chief Allan Pinkerton, who arrested her in August 1861, finding detailed maps of Washington fortifications, and numerous notes and letters outlining Union capabilities. She was taken under custody and moved to the Old Capitol Prison in January 1862.

Greenhow's network was only one source for the Confederates. The press proved important, and obtaining newspapers was one of the most important collection tasks. Due to the expansion of the telegraph, railroads, and utilization of the Associated Press to

disseminate information, numerous national newspapers made their way to Washington, DC everyday with timely information. "Our Government route" or "Secret Line" was used by the Confederates to get newspapers, intelligence reports, and other documents down the Eastern Shore of Maryland and then across Potomac and Rappahannock Rivers. Boldly relying on the U.S. mail along part of the route and local sympathetic farmers and couriers, newspapers could reach Richmond within 24-hours of publication.

Due to access that reporters had to the Union forces and government officials, the Northern press reported everything. On 3 July, the National Republican compiled a list of all the regiments that had arrived in DC since 18 April, including the names of commanding officers and troop strengths. The New York Herald listed 19 recently arrived regiments and placed the overall strength at 62 regiments. When General Patterson began his own march in the Shenandoah Valley to hold Johnston's force in place, the names of 24 of his regiments was published. And when McDowell began his movement from DC to Manassas, it was printed "little doubt" that Manassas Junction was the objective. From these reports, the Confederates were able to accurately deduce the Union troop strengths, intentions, and actual movements.

The Confederates exploited other advantages as well. Jefferson Davis, a former Secretary of War, appreciated the need for a SIGNAL Corp and, using his knowledge of the latest capabilities, purchased the new wig wag flag system for his armies. In the 1850's, Major Albert J. Myer, a surgeon with interest in communicating with deaf and blind, developed aerial wig-wag for military service. The system was feasible since 1600's with invention of telescope, but was not ever utilized. Myer's code, moving flags/torches right or left, like Morse's dots and dashes, enabled the communication of information as far as line of sight allowed. The key was mobility, as it could be easily moved and set up on high ground. The wig wag system could relate 25 words per minute, and could be secured using coded messages. Albeit fledgling, the Confederate ability to surveil and rapidly communicate tactical intelligence about Union movements proved important.

The Confederates also had a better sense of the importance of cavalry. Its limited cavalry forces were more integrated into the Confederate operational planning, particularly in conducting reconnaissance and providing topographic information. This too, played an important role in the battle.

The distinction between the Union and Confederate intelligence efforts was a key contributor to the ultimate rebel victory. The Union failed to effectively collect, analyze, or utilize information.

BATTLEFIELD INTELLIGENCE

After information was relayed from Rose Greenhow and through the press that McDowell was beginning his move on Manassas, a race began between the opposing forces. Could the Confederates unite Beauregard's and Johnston's forces before McDowell marched the seventeen miles to Manassas? Further, from a planning perspective, could McDowell get a clear picture of Confederate movements before the battle?
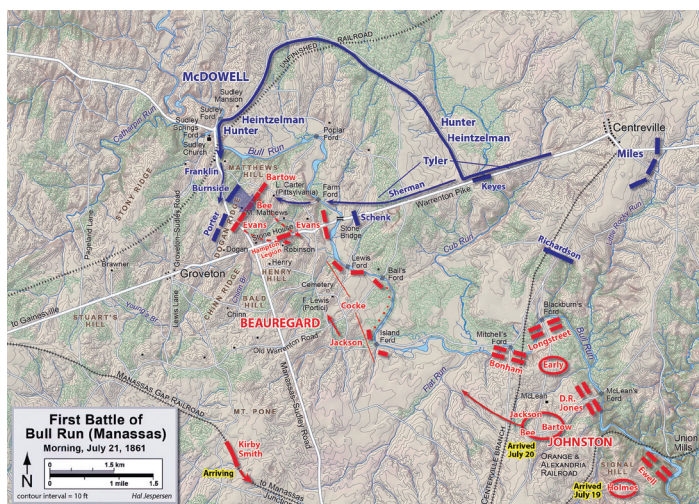
Johnston's movement from the Shenandoah to support Beauregard went unreported for two crucial days while McDowell lethargically marched west. Available intelligence went unheeded. Davis Strother, a writer, topographer, and Virginia native, knew the region and had access to Johnston's army. In mid-June, he detailed to General Patterson that Johnston's strength was 15,000, which he identified as "generous." Union staff under General Patterson estimated Johnston's force at 25-30,000. In early July, Strother interviewed locals who noted Confederate reinforcements arrived to bolster Johnston's force; Strother increased his estimate to 17,000. Meanwhile, Union staff inflated their estimate to 35-40,000. Then, on 18 and 19 July, Strother reported from local sources that Johnston was en-route to Manassas to support Beauregard. Patterson and his staff flatly ignored the warning. When Patterson finally sent a notification to McDowell on the July 20th, it was too late.

Another Union source of information, J. O. Kerbey, was a trained telegrapher behind Confederate lines in the Shenandoah. He identified the movement of Johnston but, as with Strother's reporting, was ignored. The information should have prompted McDowell to move more rapidly, and to attack Beauregard before he could be reinforced. Had this occurred, the mass of McDowell's 35,000 men against 20,000 may have changed the outcome of the battle.

The Union had access to some of the first observation balloons in history. Rapidly fielded at the outset of operations, McDowell ordered reconnaissance in late June by T.S.C. Lowe to confirm intelligence that rebels had 20,000 men. Lowe conducted several ascensions at Baileys Crossroads and Falls Church,
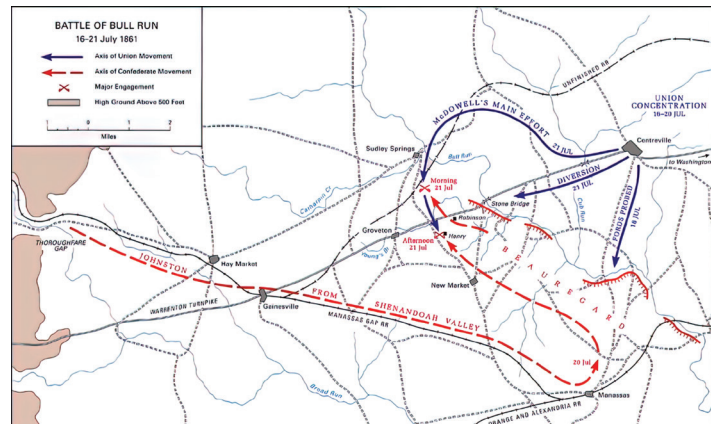
several miles from Manassas. Several topographical officers ventured aloft and produced a sketch noting location of Confederate campfires. Multiple attempts by Lowes competitors failed, most notably on the day of the battle. Lowes own balloon was torn and arrived too late for use. As such, the Union lost a valuable opportunity to observe the arrival and movement of Confederate forces as McDowell reached Bull Run.

The weeks prior to the Union advance allowed many opportunities to collect intelligence on ways to cross Bull Run, but no substantive efforts were taken. Without accurate topographic information, General McDowell was forced to adapt once he reached Bull Run. The Confederates held a strong defense position on the other side of the Run, so establishing a bridgehead or identifying avenues to cross the Run on the Confederate flanks became the first challenge. McDowell gave away his original plans when a Union division conducted a forced reconnaissance at Blackburn's Fords and was repulsed. Efforts were then made by Beauregard to further bolster defensive positions near the Ford, making it a poor location for further Union assaults. Having to develop another plan, McDowell delayed his operations for another day, enabling the Confederate reinforcements from the Valley to begin their arrival at Manassas Junction. McDowell would now face both Beauregard and Johnston. In short, McDowell's failure to collect intelligence in advance of the offensive not only resulted in a lack of visibility on where and how to strike the enemy, but in critical delays that allowed for virtual parity in the battle to come.

put several Union divisions on the Confederate flank by sunrise, and if successful, would give the Union a surprise and decisive local superiority. Despite several delays, which included the use of bridge that was unable to support the movement of heavy artillery, and failing to cross one of the divisions at the cow crossing, McDowell succeeded in getting parts of his army across the Bull Run before the Confederates could fully respond.

Confederate Captain E. Porter Alexander, observing from 8-miles southwest of Sudley Ford on Signal Hill, in the first use of wig-wag semaphore signaling in combat, sent the message to Colonel Nathan "Shanks" Evan, "Look out for your left, your position is turned." According the General Beauregard after the battle, "Capt. Alexander gave measurable and material assistance early in the day with his system of signals." Scouts corroborated the information at nearly the same time. This intelligence proved vital. Reinforcements were ordered to save the Confederate left.

Early Union attacks drove three Confederate brigades into retreat, and it appeared a victory was imminent. However, a Union delay and several fruitless efforts to re-take some captured artillery, gave time for the combined Confederate armies to gather for a major counterattack. Unprepared for the weight of the attack, McDowell's army was routed – his broken units streamed back across Bull Run.

Following the Battle of Bull Run, President Lincoln recognized that the key to winning the war was the principle of "Concentration in Time." As with the Battle of Bull Run, the Rebels had superior interior lines, enabling them to shift reinforcements to reach parity, the concept of "Concentration of Space." For the Union to win, they needed to attack with superior numbers on multiple fronts – concentration of time – to keep the enemy from shifting forces from one front to another. To

Despite these setbacks, McDowell still had a chance to win. Discovering a cow crossing and Sudley Ford several miles upstream from Blackburn's Ford, he planned an early morning march on 21 July that would

achieve this, Union forces needed superior intelligence. Lincoln noted that knowledge of the enemy was "the most constantly present, and most difficult" of the problems in maneuvering to bring superior forces to bear. To win, the Union would need to do a much better job in the realm of defense intelligence.

CONCLUSION

Intelligence proved vital in the Bull Run campaign – positively for the Confederates, negatively for the Union. OSINT provided visibility into size of Union forces and corroborated it's advance. Timely intelligence of McDowell's movement allowed for concentration of two Confederate armies. Tactical intelligence provided critical warning of the flanking movement. Conversely, Union commanders either lacked or ignored vital information.

As with so many historic examples, the Battle of Bull Run shows that inferior forces can win when exploiting intelligence. While intelligence does, from time to time, fall into our laps, the lesson to be learned is that it most often requires an all-source intelligence plan and the resources to meet the objectives. Priority intelligence requirements, dedicated collection assets, incorporation of technology, analysts, and consumers that understand intelligence are all important in this process. Furthermore, counterintelligence must play its critical role as well as operational security. Many things change over time, but the need of effective intelligence to support operations has been a steady truism.

Greg Elder is the Chief Historian of the Defense Intelligence Agency and the content manager for the DIA Museum. He has held many positions at DIA and at the Office of the Director of National Intelligence. Elder an adjunct professor at Johns Hopkins University and a consultant for the Hulu series "The Handmaid's Tale." He holds master's degrees from the United States Naval War College and Northeastern University, and completed additional graduate studies at the National Intelligence University, Norwich University, and the University of Maryland.