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*Battle
of.
FAIR OAKS.*

*By
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THE COMMAND AND GENERAL
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GENERAL JOHNSTON'S PLAN FOR THE BATTLE OF SEVEN PINES,
WHY IT FAILED AND THE PRINCIPLES OF WAR VIOLATED.

Let us first consider briefly the events leading up to the Battle of Seven Pines.

General McClellan's army of about seventy-five thousand was advancing up the Peninsula toward Richmond, opposed by about fifty thousand Confederate soldiers under General Johnston. McDowell's Corps of thirty thousand men was in the vicinity of Washington preparing to join McClellan. General Lee, in order to prevent McDowell from joining forces with McClellan, ordered Stonewall Jackson with a force of twenty thousand to march up the Shenandoah Valley feinting an attack on Washington. This maneuver had its desired effect and McDowell was retained with his entire force to protect Washington against Jackson's Corps. I - 189; V - 1 - 129.

McClellan's Army, at this time, was disposed as follows: North of the Chickahominy were Porter's Corps, Franklin's Corps and Sumner's Corps. These were generally in line along the river facing southwest with Porter's Corps on the right (west) flank, Franklin in the center and Sumner on the east flank, opposite the three bridges generally referred to as Sumner's upper bridge, Sumner's lower bridge and Bottom Bridge. IV-189; VI-108; I-199-200.

South of the Chickahominy were the Union Third and Fourth Corps under Heintzelman and Keyes. I-199,200; IV-189; VI-108.

These two Corps were disposed between the Chickahominy River on the north and the White Oak swamp on the south. Casey's Division was advanced, being about one mile west of Seven Pines, astride the Williamsburg Road. Three regiments of Condi's Division were in the vicinity of Fair Oaks while the remainder of the Division were at Seven Pines. Kearney's Division was about five miles east of Seven Pines on the Williamsburg Road near Bottom Bridge and Hooker's Division was south of Kearney's, resting its left flank on the White Oak Swamp near White Oak Bridge. IV-189; VI-108.

General Johnston decided to take advantage of this faulty

disposition of McClellan's forces and to attack the left wing south of the Chickahominy. Johnston's Army at this time was about sixty-three thousand strong and organized into four strong divisions under Longstreet, D. H. Hill, Magruder and Gustavus W. Smith, and two small divisions under A. P. Hill and Huger. I-200; II-III-217.

Johnston's plan of attack was simple and was briefly, as follows: Hill was to march his division by the Williamsburg Road and make a frontal attack against the Federal position. Longstreet, marching his division by the Nine Mile Road, was to join in the attack on Hill's left. Huger's division, marching by the Charles City Road, was to march between Hill's right flank and The White Oak Swamp, keeping abreast of the battle, while G. W. Smith's division, moving by the Gaines Road was to keep abreast of the battle on the left and protect the left flank. Longstreet was assigned the command of the right wing south of the York River Railroad. This command consisted of his own, Hill's and Huger's divisions. VI-87; IV-20.

General Johnston's order to General Smith was in writing, and as follows:

"Hq., Dept. of Northern Va.
May 30, 9:15 P.M.

"Maj. Gen. G.W.Smith;

"General, - If nothing prevents, we will fall upon the enemy in front of Major General Hill (who occupies the position on the Williamsburg Road, from which your troops moved to the neighborhood of Meadow Bridge) early in the morning, as early as practicable. The Chickahominy will be passable only at the bridge, a great advantage to us. Please be ready to move by the Gaines Road, coming as early as possible, to the point at which the road to New Bridge turns off. Should there be cause for haste, Major General McLaws, on your approach, will be ordered to leave his ground for you, that he may reenforce General Longstreet.

"Most respectfully your obedient servant,

"J.E.Johnston."

VII- Vol. XI - 563; VI-89.

Johnston's order for General Huger was written and read:

"Headquarters Dept. of Northern Va.,
May 30, 1862, 8:30 P.M.

"Major General Huger:

"General, - The reports of Major General D.H.Hill give me the impression that the enemy is in considerable strength in his front. It seems to me necessary that we should increase our force also; for

that object I wish to concentrate the troops of your division on The Charles City Road, and to concentrate the troops of Major General Hill on the Williamsburg Road. To do this it will be necessary for you to move as early in the morning as possible, to relieve the brigade of General Hill's division now on the Charles City Road. I have desired General Hill to send you a guide. The road is the second large one diverging to the right from the Williamsburg Road. The first turns off near the toll-gate. On reaching your position on the Charles City Road, learn at once the route to the main roads, to Richmond on your right and left, especially those to the left, and try to find guides. Be ready if an action should begin on your left, to fall upon the enemy's left flank.

"Most respectfully, your obedient servant,

"J. E. Johnston."

"P.S. It is necessary to move very early."
VII - Vol. XI. - 938; IV - 67.

On the following day, May 31, Johnston, wrote Huger:

"I fear that in my note of last evening, of which there is no copy, I was too positive on the subject of your attacking the enemy's left flank. It will, of course, be necessary for you to know what force is before you first. I hope to have that ascertained for you by cavalry. As our main force will be on your left, it will be necessary for your progress to the front to conform at first to that of General Hill. If you find no strong body in your front, it will be well to aid General Hill; but then a strong reserve should be retained to cover our right."

VII - Vol. XI. - 938; IV-67,68.

Johnston's orders to Longstreet were issued verbally and were not confirmed by written instructions. VI-89; V-133; VIII-141.

As expressed and repeated in his orders, it was General Johnston's plan and his wish to have the battle waged as early in the morning as practicable. I-90; IV-23.

A heavy rain fell during the night of 30 May, making the roads almost impassable and the bridges over the Chickahominy River unsafe. I-200; II-III-217; V-133.

An examination of the map will show that the routes assigned to Smith, Longstreet, Hill and Huger, all run east and west and are generally parallel. IV-189; VI-108. It was intended that all of these troops march simultaneously at dawn on 31 May. III-III-234; V-133.

Longstreet, due either to some misunderstanding of his orders, or for some reason of his own, marched his division by the Williamsburg Road instead of by the Nine Mile Road. He arrived at

Gillies Creek ahead of Huger, built a bridge and crossed in front of him. VI-91; I-201. This resulted in part of his division being in front of Huger on the Charles City Road and part of it behind Hill on the Williamsburg Road. VI-91; I-201; VIII-143. At 6:00 A.M., General Smith reported to Johnston that part of Longstreet's division was in front of him on the Nine Mile Road and that part of it was on the Williamsburg Road. On receipt of this information, Johnston sent an order by Lieutenant Washington to Longstreet to move three of his brigades to the New Bridge Fork. Lieutenant Washington got on the wrong road and rode into the Union lines at 10:00 A.M., which gave General Keyes the first warning of the approaching attack. VI-90,91; IV-34.

Hill, in the meantime, who was to make the main attack, was still waiting for his brigade, which Huger was to relieve on the Charles City Road. VI-93; V-134, so that instead of attacking early in the morning the attack did not jump off until after 1:00 P.M. VIII-143; IV-57.

As the subject of this paper is the Plans of General Johnston for the Battle of Seven Pines and the principles of war violated and why the attack failed, I will not describe the actual battle, but shall now take up each Principle of War separately and attempt to show how it was, or was not, complied with in General Johnston's original plan, and later by his subordinates in the execution of the original plans.

PRINCIPLE OF THE OBJECTIVE.

The principle of the objective was complied with. The objective was that portion of the Union Army which was south of the Chicakahominy River. I-200; II-III-217.

PRINCIPLE OF THE OFFENSIVE.

The principle of the offensive was complied with in that Johnston's plans and orders were to assume the offensive. VII-XI-563; VI-89.

PRINCIPLE OF MASS.

In General Johnston's plan for the attack the principle of

mass was complied with in that he planned for the mass of his force under General Longstreet, about thirty thousand men, to launch the main attack on both sides of the Williamsburg Road, VIII-140; V-133, while Huger's was to march abreast of the battle on the Charles City Road and Smith's division on the Gaines Road to protect the flanks of the main attack. VI-87; IV-20. In the execution of this plan, however, the principle of mass was not carried out. Longstreet placed three of his brigades (which Johnston had planned to be in the main attack) with Huger on the Charles City Road. VIII-143; IV-32. Instead of Longstreet attacking with his whole division on Hill's left, he attacked with only the four brigades of Hill's division and one brigade of his own. IV-65; VIII-143, or a total of only five brigades out of the thirteen under his control.

PRINCIPLE OF THE ECONOMY OF FORCE.

The principle of the economy of force was complied with in so far as General Johnston's plan was concerned. Only a small division was ordered to keep abreast of the battle on each flank - Smith's on the north and Huger's on the south. VI-87; IV-20. In the execution of the plan, however, the principle of the economy of force was not wholly complied with in that Longstreet ordered an additional force of three brigades to follow Huger on the Charles City Road when the main attack was ordered on the Williamsburg Road. VIII-143; IV-32.

THE PRINCIPLE OF MOVEMENT.

The principle of movement was complied with in Johnston's Plan. All forces were ordered to move and given routes to march by. VI-87; IV-20. In the execution of the plan, Longstreet neither moved on the route assigned nor as rapidly as he should have moved. IV-148; VI-91.

THE PRINCIPLE OF SURPRISE.

The principle of surprise was provided for in General Johnston's plan for the attack, in that he ordered the troops to move early. VII-Vol. XI-563; IV-67. However, he gave them no definite hour to start, merely telling them to start early and leaving it to the Division Commanders as to what hour constituted early. VII-Vol. XI-563;

IV-67. It was his plan to have the battle waged as early in the morning as practicable. I-90; IV-23.

In the execution of this part of the plan it is sufficient to say that because of Longstreet's taking the wrong routes the Union Army discovered the threatened attack by capturing Lieutenant Washington, who was sent with a message to Longstreet to move three of his brigades to the New Bridge Road. VI-90-91; IV-34.

The element of surprise was further lost by the fact that the attack was not launched until afternoon. VIII-143; IV-67.

THE PRINCIPLE OF SECURITY.

The principle of security was provided for and amply carried out. Smith's Division, on the Gaines Road and Huger's on the Charles City Road, constituted flank guards, while Hill's Division was already in contact with the advance elements of the Union force. VII-Vol. XI-938; IV-67.

THE PRINCIPLE OF SIMPLICITY.

Johnston's plan for the attack was simple. IV-189; VIII-139. There were three columns and three parallel roads, one road for each column.

THE PRINCIPLE OF COOPERATION.

Cooperation means acting or working jointly together. In the orders quoted above to Generals Smith and Huger it will be noted that neither was told what the remainder of the Confederate force was to do, or the part that each was to play in the ensuing battle. Huger was merely told what he himself was to do and Smith was told nothing about either Longstreet or Huger. VII-Vol. XI-938; IV-67. It can therefore readily be imagined that cooperation under such conditions was difficult, if not impossible. Longstreet did not cooperate by either marching on the routes assigned VI-91; I-201, or by joining in the attack with his division on Hill's left. IV-63; VIII-143.

Longstreet was assigned command of the right wing, when Huger was senior to Longstreet. IV-72; VIII-142. It will further be noted in General Johnston's order to Huger nothing was said of his

division being placed under Longstreet's control. VII-Vol.XI-938; IV-67. This is not conducive to cooperation. Johnston's orders to Longstreet were verbal and were misunderstood by the latter. VIII-142; IV-19. Such misunderstandings are not conducive to cooperation. In order to insure cooperation orders must be explicit and simple; each commander must know not only his own job but something of the plan as a whole and he should by all means know who is the commander of the Corps or Division of which his own force is a part. As stated above, these things were not all present in Johnston's plans and orders of the Battle of Seven Pines.

CONCLUSIONS.

Having now discussed General Johnston's plans for the battle of Seven Pines and the manner in which they were executed, and having pointed out the principles of war violated either in the plans or the execution of them, I will give my conclusions as to why these principles of war were violated, and how the violations might have been avoided, and lastly why the attack failed.

It is believed that Johnston's orders to Longstreet should have been written as were his orders to both Smith and Huger. A written order is always much less apt to be misunderstood; it can be referred to when in doubt instead of having to rely wholly upon one's memory. There seems to be no doubt now as to what Johnston's orders to Longstreet were; - to march down the Nine Mile Road and attack on Hill's left. There also seems to be no doubt but that these instructions were violated and that Longstreet marched part of his command on the Williamsburg Road. Whether this violation was due to a misunderstanding or to bull-headedness, no one can say nor can anyone deny that this misunderstanding (or whatever you may choose to call it), had more to do with the failure of Johnston's plans for the battle than any other. As stated above, this misunderstanding might have been avoided by issuing written orders, it could also have been avoided or corrected immediately by the proper supervision on Johnston's part. He evidently

issued his orders and then left the execution wholly in the hands of his division commanders. It is believed that after issuing his orders he should have used his staff and, himself if necessary, to see that the orders which he issued were properly carried out.

It is also believed that he should have acquainted all commanders with the general plan of attack, in order that they might better have understood the part, which they themselves were to play. This, he failed to do. An examination of the orders quoted above to Huger and Smith will disclose no information of the general plan of attack. The information, which is now required to be given in our Paragraph One of a Field Orders is almost wholly lacking.

It is further believed that the relative rank of his commanders should have been determined prior to the day of the battle. Longstreet was placed in command of the right wing when he was junior to Huger. Much loss of time resulted from this, while Longstreet and Huger were arguing about rank. Again, if Longstreet's orders had been in writing, this might have been avoided.

As stated above, it was Johnston's plan to attack early on 30 May. Why then did he not march his command during the evening of 29 May instead of directing them to march early on the morning of 30 May? In looking over his orders to Smith and Huger one is given the impression that time is the very essence of the plan - to march early. Why then did he not give them a definite time to be in position and by timely inspection see that they marched in time to attack early?

Johnston says in his book, V-133, that Huger was directed to engage the enemy on Hill's right. It is doubtful if even the most careful reader could read this intention in the order actually issued to Huger. That Huger failed to comply with it (as Johnston claims he intended it) can not be wondered at. Judging from this one instance I believe I am justified in saying that the orders were not as explicit as they should have been. Ropes bears this statement out. VIII-141.

One can not read the accounts of this battle without won-

dering what was the matter with Longstreet. As pointed out above, he not only failed to march by the route assigned him, but allowed himself to be unnecessarily delayed all along the route. Instead of joining in the attack on Hill's left with his division he actually committed less than one brigade on the first day and these troops were not engaged until late in the afternoon.

Longstreet's story of the battle is a book of alibies and both he and Johnston try to place the blame on Euger. Their statements are not substantiated by Ropes, Smith or the Rebellion Records, and were, therefore, considered with caution unless substantiated by other writers.

Johnston's plans for the Battle of Seven Pines failed because of the lack of cooperation on the part of General Longstreet. The principle of secrecy was not carried out in the execution of the plan, due to Longstreet's marching on the wrong road, his slowness in marching and his slowness in committing his force in the battle. Keyes states in his book that if the attack had been launched two hours earlier his (Keyes) force would have been either killed or captured.

Every thing connected with the failure of Johnston's plan seems to point to Longstreet. It was due to his lack of cooperation that the principle of secrecy was violated and due to his lack of cooperation that the principle of mass was violated. Johnston can be justly criticized for not keeping himself informed of Longstreet's movements and correcting them before it was too late. Had he done this he could still have carried out his original plan.

The Battle of Seven Pines offers us an excellent example of the importance of Cooperation. Because it was lacking here resulted in the violation of two other principles, mass and secrecy, and we see as well conceived, simple and perfectly workable plan fail because one man did not comply with the Principle of Cooperation.

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- VII. Rebellion Records.
- VIII. Story of the Civil War (Hopes)

VII-122 means page 122 of The Rebellion Records.