

Historian's Corner



- Part 7 -

DOTMLPF ARTILLERY INSIGHTS FROM THE AMERICAN CIVIL WAR: PERSONNEL

An eight-part series by Dr. John Grenier, the FA Branch Historian

The “P” in DOTMLPF stands for personnel. A close look at the numbers of Soldiers who served in federal and confederate armies shows that Field Artillery occupied a small but significant place in the American Civil War (ACW) order of battle. It suggests too that Redlegs’ performance on the battlefield was mixed and reminds us that the ACW was a war to end slavery from the federal perspective but a war to preserve the racial hierarchy of the pre-war South from the confederate perspective.

Over 62,000 men served in the confederate artillery. All told, 750,000 Southerners took up arms against the Republic, which means that artillerymen accounted for a little over 8% of the confederate armies. Historical reenactors generally do not cosplay (a portmanteau of costume and play) confederate artillerymen, and they instead focus on Gettysburg as the “High-Water Mark” of the Confederacy and, perhaps, the most important battle of the war. Gettysburg also marked the low point of the Army of Northern Virginia’s (ANV) artillery arms performance, and much of that can be attributed to personnel. General James Longstreet, Robert E. Lee’s most-trusted corps commander, ordered Colonel Edward Porter Alexander, commander of a FA battalion in his corps, to silence the federal guns on Cemetery Ridge, the object of the confederates on July 3rd, 1863. Alexander gathered and deployed 150 artillery pieces (about half of the ANV’s total) in a two-mile-long line along Seminary Ridge, and his and Henry Hunt’s federal batteries engaged in a long-range counter-battery duel starting around 1:00 p.m. After two hours of desultory fire (the federals stopped engaging earlier to preserve ammunition to repulse the confederate Infantry assault that they knew was coming) and with smoke completely obscuring his gunners’ targets, Alexander took a knee. He recommended that Longstreet order the Infantry forward across an open field that was three-quarters of a mile long. The confederate artillery had failed to even marginally incapacitate the Army of the Potomac’s (AoP) artillery or Infantry on Cemetery Ridge. The federals annihilated George Pickett’s, Issac Trimble’s and James Johnston Pettigrew’s divisions (in the “Lost Cause” narrative of the war, the advance is called Pickett’s Charge, but other ANV divisions also suffered staggering losses on the afternoon of July 3rd, 1863) in about fifteen minutes. Pickett’s after-action report was scathing, and perhaps he called out Alexander. We will never know exactly what it said, because after reading it, Lee ordered Pickett to destroy it. Although Pickett carried a deep bitterness toward Lee for the rest of his life, when asked the reason for the failure of his “charge,” he replied, “I’ve always thought the Yankees had something to do with it.”

The federal armies recruited 147,000 Redlegs. Over the course of the war, 2.1 million men served in the federal forces, including nearly 179,000 African Americans (over 8% of the entire army). Redlegs therefore accounted for roughly 7% of federal troops, which gives a figure on par with both confederate artillerymen and United States “Colored Troops.” Cavalry, it should be noted, accounted



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for about 14% of federal manpower totals, thus double the contribution of Redlegs. Multiple armies—to include the AoP, the Army of the Cumberland, the Army of Tennessee, etc.—operated under the “Union Army” umbrella, and the experience of Redlegs varied over time and place.

The Colored FA regiments tell us much about the war’s changing political and social nature. The federal government began recruiting African American Soldiers for Infantry formations in early 1863. Significant manpower shortages, the failure of conscription to replace its losses (New York City erupted in draft riots in the summer of 1863, and AoP troops marched directly from the Gettysburg battlefield to quell them) and having found success in recruiting free African American Soldiers led the Union leadership to expand their efforts to the FA. In the spring of 1864, federal armies began forming United States Colored Heavy Artillery (USCHA) regiments. Most of the African Americans who served in the USCHA regiments that the federals recruited in the border states (Delaware, Maryland, West Virginia, Kentucky and Missouri) and the deep south were enslaved men who fled to Union camps in search of emancipation. The 8th USCHA, for example, was the first African American artillery unit to be recruited in Kentucky, nominally a neutral state. Kentucky, behind only Louisiana, in fact provided more African American Redlegs than any other state. The most famous—for tragic reasons—of the USCHA regiments was the 6th USCHA (initially called the 1st Regiment Alabama Siege Artillery [African Descent]) that federal officers formed among formerly enslaved men and boys in early 1864. On April 12th, 1864—three years to the day that confederate artillery fired on Fort Sumter in South Carolina to start the war—troops under Lieutenant General Nathan Bedford Forrest—later, a founder of the Ku Klux Klan—murdered over 200 6th USCHA Soldiers at Fort Pillow near Henning, Tennessee as they attempted to surrender. The confederates also made around 55 African American Soldiers prisoners of war, and they took them to Mississippi and Alabama where they returned them to hard labor rather than sending them to prisoner camps. The Fort Pillow Massacre enraged opinion in the free states and in the Army, and federal officers were sure to include the remnants of the 6th USCHA in their campaigns to give the traitorous denizens of the Lower Mississippi River Valley a generational lesson, at the point of a bayonet, on the price of rebellion and succession.

The focused enlistment of formerly enslaved males—virtually all of whom were illiterate—in the USCHA flew in the face of normal federal FA-recruiting practices, which suggests that there may have been more at play (see the 6th USCHA’s occupation of Natchez, Mississippi after the Fort Pillow Massacre) than simply filling holes in rosters. ACW Redlegs were “considered to be soldiers of a different order [aka a “higher caliber” ... the pun is purposeful] than those who served in the Infantry and Cavalry.” Analyses show that Redlegs came from “significantly different socioeconomic backgrounds” than Infantry and Cavalry Soldiers. They often were skilled tradesmen, educated clerical workers and professionals, and most of them hailed from towns (with better education systems compared to rural settings) than farms. Statistically speaking, fewer Redlegs deserted—desertion was the bane of ACW armies—or went absent without official leave than the typical infantryman.

One federal officer noted that “batteries derive all their value from the courage and skill of the gunners.” While physical and moral courage may have been abundant in those who voluntarily

enlisted to save the Union, skill took time, training and supervision to develop. Turnover from battlefield losses and disease was significant in all types of formations and often crippling. FA batteries often drew a great deal of focused enemy fire—they were especially prominent targets for Infantry that could “reach out and touch them” with rifled muskets—and their casualty rates were about the same for most Infantry units. The federal armies thus demanded a steady stream of new enlistees that they could mold into artillerymen. With less than 12% of federal Soldiers draftees, FA recruiters faced competing with Infantry and Cavalry recruiters for the pick of the litter. “For the most part,” Dr. Earl Hess explains, “it was possible to screen out poor material, but maintaining adequate numbers was more difficult. This was a more acute problem for artillery than for Infantry or Cavalry. Even if an Infantry regiment dropped from an initial strength of 1,000 men to 300 (as many did by 1863) or even to 100 (as some did by 1864), it could still function in the field. A [FA] piece needed nearly its full complement of nine men to work effectively. It also required at least two to six drivers to manage the limber and caisson for that piece.” Note that those afflicted with hippophilia will find Hess’s Chapter 10, “Artillery Horses,” in *Civil War Field Artillery: Promise and Performance on the Battlefield* especially interesting. Meanwhile, the lack of a centralized process for accessions and assessments of Redlegs hindered placing the best people in the units that most needed them. More than 80% of all FA units on both sides “had to be created from scratch,” which added to the difficulties that both the confederate and federal artillery arms faced as they tried leverage and build upon experience.

We can assume that ACW artillerymen could recognize some of the “truths” of today’s Army. To paraphrase: people—not equipment—make the critical difference. The right personnel, highly trained and working as a team, will accomplish the mission; the best equipment in the world cannot compensate for a lack of the right personnel. When we consider all the other issues in the DOTMLPF domains, even accounting for the failure of Alexander’s artillery at Gettysburg, the fact that ACW artillerymen accomplished as much as they did is a credit to them as Soldiers and Redlegs.

To be continued...

