Time Machine

CIVIL WAR COMM

Reliable information a luxury to early warfighters

By Mr. Gerald Sonnenberg
AFCA Public Affairs

Today's warfighter has come to depend on the methods used to gather information, as well as the reliability of that information in making crucial decisions. During the American Civil War, 1861-1865, the devices used to provide information to the warfighter were much simpler and less reliable than the highly technical systems seen today.

Commanders depended upon the resources at hand such as cavalry reconnaissance, the telegraph, scouts, and semaphore or signal flags for "current" information. Eventually, hot air balloons with telegraph lines attached to the ground were used for the first aerial reconnaissance of an active battlefield. Often, commanders had to count on plain dumb luck.

In September 1862, the war was not going well for the Union. Having experienced more defeats than victories, the Union Army suffered from low morale, and President Lincoln very much wanted to announce his Emancipation Proclamation, which freed slaves in states rebelling against the Union. To do this, it was decided the announcement should be made on the heels of a military victory.

That victory seemed to rest on the shoulders of Maj. Gen. George McClellan, commander of the Union's Army of the Potomac. Fired once by Lincoln for failing to take the "wide open" Confederate Capital at Richmond, Va., during the Peninsula Campaign two months earlier, McClellan regained command in September after his replacement, Maj. Gen. John Pope, was defeated at Second Manassas in late August. McClellan was known as a great organizer, but his flaws were being overly cautious and reluctant to act.

These flaws were most evident Sept. 5 when Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee's plans for the disposition of his entire force were dropped and lost by one of his officers. Wrapped around three cigars, they were found by a Union private and taken to McClellan. But even with superior forces, and Lee's plans unveiled, McClellan failed to act.

Perhaps the Union commander was suspicious about the way the information was obtained, but reports from advance scouts should have relieved his doubts. Despite advance knowledge and 10 days to intercept Lee's advancing army, McClellan failed to stop the capture of Harper's Ferry, Va., and 11,000 Union soldiers Sept. 15. In addition, his slow reaction at Sharpsburg, Va., kept the Union victory at Antietam two days later from being complete. Even though it gave Lincoln enough of a victory to announce his Proclamation, it could have saved thousands of lives and won the war for McClellan and the Union.