ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Edward Porter Alexander

By **Maury Klein**

In an army filled with eccentrics, pious men, and willful, reckless individuals, Porter Alexander occupied a unique place. The Confederacy had no other officer quite like him. Only 26 when the war began, he saw more action than most other officers. He played an active role at First Bull Run and took part in the surrender at Appomattox. Between those events he participated in every major eastern campaign as well as James Longstreet's ill-fated foray into eastern Tennessee in the fall of 1863. He was not only a brilliant officer and field commander but the Confederacy's most versatile one as well, performing a wide variety of roles besides gaining a reputation as Lee's most talented artillery officer.

Alexander was born May 26, 1835, on a small plantation in Washington, Georgia, the sixth of ten children of Adam Leopold and Sarah Gilbert Alexander. His parents were refined, cultured people who reared their children with loving care and strict Presbyterian discipline, educating them on the plantation with tutors imported from Massachusetts. In 1853 he entered West Point and graduated third in his class in 1857, which earned him a commission in the Engineers Corps. For a time he taught at West Point; in 1858, he accompanied an expedition sent to Utah to subdue the Mormon uprising. A year later he gained prominence by assisting Albert J. Myer in devising a set of signals that became popularly known as the "Wig Wag" system.

In 1860 Alexander married Bettie Jacqueline Mason, the daughter of a Virginia physician, with whom he had five children. Later that year he was ordered to Fort Steilacoom in remote Washington Territory. A devout hunter and fisherman, Alexander fell in love with the wilderness region and would have been content to remain there indefinitely. "I had a position for life," he recalled, "& an assured support in the profession I loved; & I had only to get the most pleasure I could out of my surroundings." But the firing on Fort Sumter destroyed his personal Eden. Although offered a chance to stay on the West Coast and keep out of the fighting, Alexander felt a deep responsibility

to join his family and state in support of the Confederate cause. He resigned from the army and returned home.[1]

Once enlisted in the Confederate army, he found requests for his services coming from every direction. Unlike many officers who pushed incessantly for promotion and advancement, Alexander adopted a fatalistic attitude; he would not intervene but let circumstances dictate his future. "I always feel better satisfied when my wishes are not consulted or gratified," he explained later, "for then I feel sure that the whole matter is providential & that my path is chosen for me by a wiser judgment than my own."[2]

Fate led him into an amazing variety of roles. He served brilliantly as chief of ordnance and signals for what became the Army of Northern Virginia, and helped create and fly the South's only observation balloon. In November 1862 he took command of an artillery battalion in Longstreet's Corps. Although the artillery was a stepchild in the army's organization, he came to prefer it to any other service and resisted all efforts to lure him into other duties. Fame and glory held less interest for him than the technical and organizational challenges of an infant service. Within two years he emerged as the Confederacy's most talented artillery officer and one of the finest in American military history.

As a field officer Alexander was unsurpassed. He thought and moved quickly, had a superb eye for terrain and a sure instinct for the proper placement of guns. At Fredericksburg, his first battle as a battalion commander, he persuaded Lee's engineer to locate the guns on the brow rather than the reverse slope of each hill as Lee had directed. The guns inflicted much of the devastation on charging Union brigades. Thereafter Lee and Longstreet tapped Alexander regularly for reconnaissance as well as gun placement.

Although lacking the flamboyance and magnetism of a Jeb Stuart, Alexander proved a tough but endearing commander, sometimes overbearing in his demands but tempering them with a warm personality and amusing eccentricities. His quick, agile mind was receptive to new ideas, which fed his genius for organization. The standard practice of the day was to attach single batteries to infantry brigades under the leadership of the brigade's commander. This scattered the guns, fragmenting their firepower and leaving them in charge of officers who knew little if anything about how to employ them effectively. The result was ineffective gun usage, administrative snarls, and constant friction between infantry and artillery officers.

As early as 1861 Alexander urged the formation of separate artillery battalions under the command of artillery officers. Finally, in February 1863, Lee approved a reorganization plan that abolished divisional and brigade batteries, replacing them with battalions of four guns each along with larger reserve battalions. Each regular battalion

[1] E.P. Alexander, *Military Memoirs of a Confederate: A Critical Narrative. With Sketch-Maps by the Author*. Dayton OH: Morningside Bookshop, 1977 ed. with introduction by Maury Klein, (New York: Scribner's, 1907), 5.
[2] Ibid., 3.

was attached to a division and made responsible to its commander. Each corps received two reserve battalions, and the existing army reserve of two batteries with six guns each remained intact. Every battalion had its own field officers to command it in battle. The new system gave the artillery more flexibility and allowed mass grouping for concentrated fire. The artillery became an independent arm directed by officers with specialized training. The modern era of artillery usage had dawned; eventually the Federal army adopted the battalion system, as did most of the armies of Europe.

Alexander's own battalion emerged as one of the Confederate army's most efficient and close-knit units. Although the aging Colonel Joseph B. Walton remained the titular head of the artillery of Longstreet's Corps, responsibility for directing field action fell increasingly to Alexander. This awkward arrangement caused some problems and friction, but Alexander justified it with brilliant performances at Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and the Tennessee campaign. Finally, in March 1864, Alexander was promoted from colonel to brigadier general and formally made chief of the corps' artillery—a position he held through the last dreary campaigns of the war.

After Appomattox Alexander resisted the temptation to join a foreign army and accepted a position teaching mathematics and engineering at the University of South Carolina. In 1871 he became superintendent of the Charlotte, Columbia & Augusta Railroad, thereby launching a career in railroading that over the next twenty years would culminate in the vice presidency of the Louisville & Nashville Railroad and the presidency of the Central of Georgia Railroad. As always, he was not content merely to perform his duties. He studied the rail industry closely and wrote extensively on its problems. His wife died in 1889, and three years later he married her niece, Mary Mason. In 1892 he retired from the Central and returned to his plantation on South Island, off the coast of South Carolina, to plant rice, turn the island into a hunting and fishing paradise, and pursue a wide range of other interests.

One of those interests, predictably, was the war itself, especially its military aspects. In 1897 President Grover Cleveland, who hunted ducks at South Island, asked Alexander to arbitrate a boundary dispute between Nicaragua and Costa Rica. For nearly three years Alexander remained in Greytown, Nicaragua where, in his ample spare time, he began to write down his recollections of the war. Already he had earned a reputation as a writer during the postwar years, filling magazines such as *Harper's Weekly: A Journal of Civilization*, *The Century Magazine*, and *Forest and Stream* with articles on a wide variety of topics ranging from railroads to nature lore with a Darwinian twist. By the 1880s New York editors knew his work well and thought highly of it. Especially did they crave war reminiscences, which Alexander gradually began to furnish.

During his long stay in Greytown he began filling large ledgers sent him by his daughter Bessie with personal reminiscences and anecdotes, relying on his remarkable memory. After his return in August 1900 Alexander declared that "The work of the rest of my life is to be to sell the Islands . . . & to write over my recollections." He wanted to create a different kind of memoir, one not centered around his personal experiences but

devoted rather to a scholarly analysis of the actions and decisions taken by both sides. This inevitably involved criticism even of the sainted Lee and Jackson, which Alexander knew would raise protests. Drawing on every available source he could locate, including interviews, he explained that "I want to tell the story professionally, & to comment freely on every professional feature as one would comment on moves at chess, even tho' it may seem to reflect on Lee or Jackson or any body else."[3]

The *Military Memoirs of a Confederate* published in 1907, did indeed drawn indignant responses from some southerners for its critical comments, but it was also hailed as the finest account of the war by a major participant. It retains that reputation to this day. In effect, Alexander had accomplished something even more remarkable. The *Memoirs* remained of the most useful accounts of the military elements of the war, one in which Alexander pruned himself out of the narrative to the point where the reader scarcely realized that he was a brilliant artillerist who played a major role in several campaigns. This reticence led historian T. Harry Williams to observe, "One could wish that he had written two books—a general history and a personal narrative."[4]

But he had done exactly that. Williams did not know about the Greytown ledgers, which constituted the personal narrative of his own experience. Together the book and the ledgers comprised two distinct accounts by one of the most talented and versatile participants in the war. Once the book was published, however, Alexander was too tired and ill to do anything more formal with his personal recollections. He suffered from aphasia and, after a severe stroke, died on April 28, 1910. His personal memoirs, garnered from his ledgers were published posthumously in 1989. [5]

Born	May 6, 1835, Washington Georgia
Died	April 28, 1910
Buried	Magnolia Cemetery, Augusta, Richmond County, Georgia
Father	Adam Leopold Alexander
Mother	Sarah Gilbert

[3] Ibid., 7; E.P. Alexander, *Military Memoirs of a Confederate: A Critical Narrative. With Sketch-Maps by the Author.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1962 ed. with introduction by T. Harry Williams, (New York: Scribner's, 1907), vii.
[4] Ibid., xxiv.
[5] Edward Porter Alexander, *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander,* ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989).

Career Milestones	Graduated West Point 1857 | Captain CSA May 1861 | First use of signal flags in combat First Bull Run May 1861 | Major CSA July 1861 | Lieutenant Colonel CSA December 1861 | | Commander Artillery Battalion Longstreet's Corps November 1862 | Colonel CSA December 1862| Gettysburg cannonade preceding Pickett's Charge July 3, 1861 | Brigadier General CSA February 1864 | Published *Military Memoirs* 1907 | Published posthumously *Fighting for the Confederacy* 1989.

****