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## Army After-Action Reports, Circa 1860s

Ted Ballard

Current Army regulations require that in combat and contingency operations command reports be prepared by the units involved, down to brigade/regiment/group level. (1) These "after-action reports" are to be narrative, accurate records of significant operations.

During the Civil War both Union and Confederate commanders also submitted after-action reports, called field returns. Commanding officers down through the regimental level were required to submit returns following every battle, skirmish, or other engagement in which the unit participated. After the war these field returns were compiled by the Office of the Secretary of War and published in 128 volumes by the Government Printing Office. Entitled *War of the Rebellion*, these volumes are the primary source of official records for any research into combat actions of the Civil War. The following two examples of these early after-action reports are presented for comparison with the current reporting system.

Maj. George L. Anderson commanded the 1st Battalion, 17th Infantry, during the Battle of Second Manassas. The 17th Infantry was in one of two brigades of regulars of Maj. Gen. Fitz-John Porter's V Corps, which were involved in the confused and piecemeal attacks against the center of Lt. Gen. Thomas J. ("Stonewall") Jackson's line. Anderson's field return, submitted within a week after the battle, reflects some of that confusion:

"I have the honor to report that this battalion, under my command, arrived at Manassas Junction on the 29th ultimo, and during the afternoon of that day was marched out on the road to Gainesville and brought under fire of the rebel batteries. On the morning of August 30, 1862, we arrived at Bull Run, and were put into position about 9 o'clock a.m. to the right of the center of the line of battle. Here we remained until nearly 2 o'clock p.m., at which time we were advanced into a cornfield and remained there several hours, being the whole day under the enemy's fire and losing several men.

About 5 o'clock p.m. I was ordered to retire in line of battle, and when out from under fire to march my command by the flank to the vicinity of Bull Run and give the men something to eat, as they had then been some eighteen hours without food. On my way to obey this order, and when nearly to the summit of Bull Run Hill, I was ordered to halt, and asked by a major general, who I afterward learned was Maj. Gen. [John] Pope, "What troops are these and where are you going?" Upon receiving the required information, [I] was soundly berated for the movement and ordered to remain where I was. Soon after I received orders through a staff officer to advance into timber on our right, as we then were being faced by the right flank. This officer I referred to my brigade commander, but prior to his return received peremptory orders to ad-

vance from a general whom I subsequently was informed was Maj.Gen. [Irvin] McDowell.

In obedience to this order I filed to the right and advanced toward the timber, and followed a road which brought me on the extreme left of the woods. I here entered the woods, and feeling my way along finally came out on the other side in an open plain. We had not advanced a hundred paces on the plain before a battery which flanked us opened, and I retired to the shelter of the woods again. I now halted the battalion and proceeded in person in search of the enemy's infantry. In this I did not succeed only so far as to hear musketry some distance on my right, which appeared to be slowly advancing toward me. Finding the Second U.S. Infantry...posted on the line of the road by which I advanced, I marched my battalion out to support his left.

The firing from our right now rapidly approached, and soon two lines of the rebels appeared at a short distance immediately in our front. A well directed fire was now opened upon them from our whole line, with apparently a most destructive effect, and sustained at intervals as often as the enemy appeared. It was at this point my battalion suffered its principal loss. Suspecting all the time we were being flanked, I sent to our left just before we opened fire, but could learn nothing.

About 7 p.m., finding the Second Infantry were retiring, I did likewise, and had hardly gone back 100 paces when, my left wing becoming exposed in an open plain, the enemy opened a brisk fire upon us from a battery, but without any known effect, as I immediately marched by a flank under the shelter of the timber. While doing so my line was cut and several companies badly scattered by a regiment of volunteers, who, in spite of the best efforts of myself and officers, could not be checked or diverted from their course at that moment. I am happy to say, however, that as my battalion emerged into the open plain beyond the timber the divided portions joined immediately, the scattered men rapidly joining their companies, there was not a man

missing by the time we were brought to a halt, some 300 yards farther on. To say that both officers and men behaved to my entire satisfaction would hardly express it, and when I consider that less than 70 of the men had ever been under fire before, and that three companies were recruits, besides having nearly 50 recruits scattered through the other companies, their retiring in line of battle in good order from their original position in the cornfield, under a brisk fire of shells, over fences and deep ditches, and again when all felt the day was lost, to maintain their organization while retiring under a severe fire through a tangled underbrush and with other troops rushing through their ranks, may be considered remarkable.

Of my officers I cannot speak too highly, and where all behaved as admirably it is almost impossible and would seem almost partial to name individuals; but I must be allowed to speak of Capt. J. P. Wales (acting field officer) and First Lieut. W. W. Swan (acting quartermaster). Their services during the entire day were invaluable, and to their coolness and persistent efforts I am not a little indebted for the good behavior of the battalion. Capt. W. J. Temple, who accidentally came more immediately under my personal observation than the other company commanders, won my admiration by his calm calculation and economy in the use of his ammunition.

Below I append a list of my casualties, also the number of men who went into action. I have employed my best efforts to select correctly those men whose behavior appears to entitle them to honorable mention; also those whose other qualifications, together with gallant conduct, would seem to fit them for the position of second lieutenant. Each class will be found under its appropriate head.

Trusting the conduct of myself and the battalion will meet with the approbation of my commanding officers, I am, sir, very respectfully, your obedient servant..."( 2)

## **U.S. Air Force Academy Military History Symposium Announced**

The United States Air Force Academy will hold the Sixteenth Military History Symposium, "Tooling for War: Military Transformation in the Industrial Age," 21-23 September 1994. For further information, write to Maj. John Farquhar, HQ USFA/DFH, 2354 Fairchild Drive, Suite 6F37, USAF Academy, Colorado 80840-6246 or phone (719) 472-3230, FAX (719) 472-2970.

Confederate field returns followed generally the same format as those for Union returns. During the Battle of Gettysburg Col. William R. Aylett commanded the 53d Virginia Infantry of Brig. Gen. Lewis A. Armistead's brigade. When Armistead was mortally wounded during Pickett's Charge on 3 July 1863, Aylett assumed command of the brigade only to also fall with a wound. Later recovered, he submitted the brigade's after-action report:

"I have the honor to submit the following report of the part borne by this brigade, commanded by Brig. Gen. L. A. Armistead, in the battle of July 3, 1863, near Gettysburg, Pa.

After a march of about 25 miles on the 2d the brigade bivouacked about 4 miles from Gettysburg, on the Chambersburg turnpike. From this position it moved at 3 a.m. on the 3d instant to the right of the town and took position as a second line or support to the first line of assault, composed of the brigades of Generals Garnett and Kemper, with orders to follow, when they moved forward, and carry the enemy's position.

Shortly after the line was formed our artillery, posted on a hill in our front, opened with a severe fire on the enemy's position, which was responded to with great rapidity. Although the men were for an hour exposed to a very severe fire, the brigade suffered but slight loss, and took its position with alacrity and precision when the line was ordered to advance. The brigade moved on across the open field for more than half a mile, receiving, as it came in range, fire of shell, grape, canister, and musketry, which rapidly thinned its ranks; still pushed on until the first line of the enemy, strongly posted behind a stone wall, was broken and driven from its position, leaving in our hands a number of pieces of artillery, how many is not known.

By this time the troops on our right and left were broken and driven back, and the brigade exposed to a severe musketry fire from the front and both flanks and an enfilading artillery fire from the rocky hill some distance to the right. No supports coming up, the position was untenable, and we were compelled to retire, leaving more than two-thirds of our bravest and best killed or wounded on the field.

For particulars of our loss I refer you to the list of casualties herewith submitted, and for the part borne by the different regiments to the reports of regimental commanders filed herewith.

Where all conducted themselves with gallantry and coolness it would be invidious to specify individuals; but I must be permitted to remark that the whole brigade acted with the utmost steadiness and bravery,

and only fell back when its numbers were so small that it could accomplish nothing by remaining.

This report would fail in completeness and in rendition of justice to signal valor and heroic behavior were it omitted to notice particularly the gallant conduct of our brigade commander, General L.A. Armistead. Conspicuous to all, 50 yards in advance of his brigade, waving his hat upon his sword, he led his men upon the enemy with a steady bearing which inspired all breasts with enthusiasm and courage, and won the admiration of every beholder. Far in advance of all he led the attack till he scaled the works of the enemy and fell wounded in their hands, but not until he had driven them from their position and seen his colors planted over their fortifications.

In consequence of the great loss of field officers, the command of the brigade devolved upon Lieutenant Colonel White, Fourteenth Virginia, who retained it until his wound rendered him unable to do his duty. He was succeeded by Major Cabell, Thirty-eighth Virginia, who retained command until I was sufficiently recovered to assume it. I am, major, very respectfully, your obedient servant..." (3)

Command reports of recent operations such as JUST CAUSE and DESERT STORM may not be quite as colorful as those from the Civil War, but they are just as important in recording the Army's history. During World War II, the first European Theater of Operations historian, Col. W. A. Ganoë, captured the importance of after-action reports when he said, "History is the last thing we care about during operations and the first thing wanted afterwards. Then it is too little, too late, and too untrue." (4)

Perhaps the submission of timely, accurate reports will help negate to Colonel Ganoë's dictum.

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#### Notes

1. AR 11-33, *The Army After Action Reporting System* and AR 870-5, *Military History: Responsibilities, Policies and Procedures*.
2. U.S. War Department, *War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1885), series 1, vol. 12, part 2, pp. 501-02.
3. *Ibid.*, series 1, vol. 27, part 2, pp. 999-1000.
4. Pamphlet, HQ, ETOUSA, 1 Jan 44, sub: Ganoë's Instructions to Unit Commanders and Historical Officers.