



Military Memoirs of a Confederate: A Critical Narrative

Edward Porter Alexander

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In the narrative of the Civil War, Edward Porter Alexander has loomed larger in death than in life. Just 25 years old when the war broke out, Porter Alexander had already served as an engineer and officer in the U.S. Army, but the native Georgian resigned his commission in May 1861 and joined the Confederacy after his home state seceded. Porter Alexander spent 1861 as an intelligence officer, and he served as part of a signal guard, but he soon became chief of ordnance for Joseph Johnston's army near Richmond. Half a year later, Johnston would be injured during the Peninsula Campaign at the Battle of Seven Pines, after which he was replaced by Robert E. Lee. Over the course of 1862, Porter Alexander took on more roles in the Army of Northern Virginia's artillery branch, particularly under James Longstreet's 1st Corps. Though he participated in several battles, he played his biggest role at the Battle of Gettysburg. On the third day, Lee decided to make a thrust at the center of the Union's line with about 15,000 men spread out over three divisions. Though it is now known as Pickett's Charge, named after division commander George Pickett, the assignment for the charge was given to Longstreet, whose 1st Corps included Pickett's division. Lee's decision necessitated a heavy artillery bombardment of the Union line in an attempt to knock out the Union's own artillery before beginning the charge that would cover nearly a mile of open space from Seminary Ridge to the Union line on Cemetery Ridge. Lee tasked Porter Alexander, in charge of the 1st Corps' guns, to conduct the artillery bombardment. What resulted was the largest sustained bombardment of the Civil War, with over 150 Confederate cannons across the line firing incessantly at the Union line for nearly 2 hours. Unfortunately for Porter Alexander and the Confederates, the sheer number of cannons belched so much smoke that they had trouble gauging how effective the shells were. As it turned out, most of the artillery was overshooting the target, landing in the rear of the Union line. Reluctant to order the charge, Longstreet commanded Porter Alexander to order the timing for the charge. As Longstreet and Alexander anticipated, the charge was an utter disaster, incurring a nearly 50% casualty rate and failing to break the Union line. Porter Alexander would continue to serve under Longstreet's corps for most of the rest of the war, and he famously suggested to Lee at Appomattox that the Confederate army should disband and melt away instead of surrender. Porter Alexander would later regret the suggestion, and Lee scolded him for it anyway. Though he had served with distinction during the Civil War, it was Porter Alexander's memoirs that have kept his name alive today. While many prominent officers on both sides wrote memoirs, Porter Alexander's were among the most insightful and often considered by historians as the most evenhanded. With a sense of humor and a good narrative, Porter Alexander skillfully narrated the war, his service, and what he considered the successes and faults of others, including Lee, when he thought they had made good decisions or mistakes. As a result, historians continue to rely heavily on his memoirs as a source for Civil War history.

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