Lieutenant General Thomas Jonathan Jackson was a United States Army officer who later joined the Confederate States Army and fought in the American Civil War, where during the First Battle of Bull Run he earned his famous nickname "Stonewall". One of the most effective field generals in American history, his battlefield tactics and maneuvers are still studied as part of military curriculum.

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Early life

He was born in Clarksburg, a mountain town in one of Virginia’s western counties, the son of a lawyer who got himself involved in a series of bad investments and dying of typhoid when Thomas was two, leaving his family deep in debt. Five years later his mother died, and Thomas, brother Warren, and sister Laura, would spent the remainder of their childhoods among several different relatives[1]. It was during his childhood that Thomas would develop a quirky personality. He complained of a stomach malady for which no doctor could find a cause. Later, while at West Point, he sat bolt upright in his seat, allowing his spine to never touch the back of his chair; the reason being he needed to keep his internal organs in alignment, thus aiding digestion. He convinced himself that the use of pepper in his food made his left leg itch, and he was often seen sucking on lemons. When in battle his men, seeing his left arm raised, assumed he was praying to his Maker; Thomas had a different explanation: his left arm was heavier than his right, and by lifting it “the blood might run back into his body and lighten it”[2].

Despite not having much of a formal education while growing up (he had the equivalent of a fourth grade education), he did receive an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point in 1842. Although his start was slow, he made up for it by intense study, often reading his books by the dim light of the coal fire long after his classmates were asleep; he would claw his way up the class standings, and graduate 17th in a class of 59 by the time he graduated in 1846[3].

Early military career

He joined his new regiment, the First Artillery, in Mexico, where the United States was engaged in war. Here he would distinguish himself at Veracruz, serving with the most advanced batteries while constantly under Mexican fire; he would earn promotion to first lieutenant for “gallant and meritorious conduct.” Then he had heard that fellow officer John B. Magruder was in command of a captured enemy battery, and was looking for officers. Knowing Magruder would soon be involved in battle, Jackson pushed to join him, and became involved in the thick of the fighting at Churubusco. He would leave the war as a brevet major, amid public praise by General Winfield Scott. It was in Mexico that Jackson learned qualities that he would take advantage of in the coming Civil War, abilities which would help make him famous: resourcefulness, a clear mind when the enemy fire was at its hottest, and sheer bravery[4].

His peacetime service in the army rather tedious, he resigned his commission in August
1851 and became a professor of artillery tactics and natural philosophy at the Virginia Military Institute. Though he worked hard at his new duties, he never became a popular or highly successful teacher. A stern man, his devotion to his cadets' education coupled with his religious beliefs, earned him the derisive titles “Deacon Jackson,” “Old Jack,” and “Fool Tom.”

V.M.I. also offered him the opportunity to meet, and marry, Elinor Junkin, daughter of the Reverend Dr. George Junkin, at the time the president of nearby Washington College. The marriage took place on August 4, 1853, and the union was “a great source of happiness,” as Jackson would write to his sister; indeed, the Jacksons were already expecting their first child. Fourteen months after the marriage Jackson would bury his wife, along with her stillborn child. Despite never belonging to a church, he was a deeply religious man, and his religion gave him comfort. He wrote to Laura “I am reconciled for my loss and have joy and hope of a future reunion where the wicked cease from troubling and the weary are at rest.”

Jackson would remarry by 1857, the new bride being Mary Anna Morrison; although they were deeply in love, she had to put up with his strict regimen, which included early morning walks and morning family prayers on time; if one was late, Jackson would simply begin without him.[6]

The Civil War

The American Civil War began on April 12, 1861, and within days Jackson offered his services to Virginia; he was then ordered to bring his corps of cadets from V.M.I. to Richmond, where he was commissioned as a colonel in the state forces and charged with organizing volunteers into an effective fighting brigade. His first assignment was to fortify and defend Harper’s Ferry, and hold it if possible. This was the entry to the Shenandoah Valley, and soon Jackson would withdraw to the more defensible position at Winchester when General Joseph E. Johnston took over command of the Confederate forces in the valley.

In July 1861 Federal forces moved south from Washington into Virginia, and Johnston moved south to unite with General P.G.T. Beauregard near Manassas to meet the advance of General Irvin McDowell's Federal army in what would become the First Battle of Bull Run. It was here that Jackson stationed his brigade in a strong defensive line, withholding the enemy against overwhelming odds; a nearby brigade commander, General Bernard Bee, would rally his own men by saying “There stands General Jackson like a stone wall,” thus earning for Jackson the sobriquet that would remain for the rest of his life.

By the spring of 1862 Jackson was again in the Shenandoah Valley, his diversionary tactics preventing reinforcements being sent to Major General George B. McClellan, the Union commander waging the Peninsula Campaign against the Confederate capitol of Richmond. Jackson’s strategy and ultimate victory in the valley quite possibly accounted for General Robert E. Lee’s later victory later in the Seven Days’ Battles. By rapid movement of his First Division (his “Foot Cavalry”), Jackson engaged with several Federal units separately and defeated them. By the end of May he had attacked General Nathaniel P. Banks, driving him out of Winchester and the Valley, and back to the Potomac River.[7]

He then quickly moved to the southern end of the valley, defeating the Union at Cross Keys on June 8, then at Port Republic the following day. Lee then brought Jackson's troops by road and railroad to Richmond to attack the right flank of McClellan's army. But Jackson arrived a day late, possibly because of a lack of experience in large-scale action; despite this mild tarnish to his reputation, McClellan was beaten back severely and was ordered to evacuate the peninsula.

Federal forces then began regrouping under Major General John Pope when Lee joined Jackson near Manassas. The Second Battle of Bull Run commenced when Jackson was sent to attack the rear of Pope’s forces by a wide, encircling movement, decisively beating him. Lee then had taken his forces across the Potomac into Maryland, and to protect Richmond, Jackson was sent in mid-September to capture Harpers Ferry, which was carried out successfully, enabling him to return in time to rejoin Lee in Sharpsburg for the Battle of Antietam. Unfortunately, Lee lost that engagement and his forces had to journey back into Virginia.

Lee would regroup his forces, dividing it into two corps: Lieutenant General James Longstreet commanding one, and the newly-promoted Lieutenant General Stonewall Jackson the other. Taking his army to Fredericksburg, Virginia in December, Lee divided his forces again the Army of the Potomac under Major General Ambrose Burnside; Jackson took his corps around the Union left and utterly defeated Burnside’s rash attack.

Battle of Chancellorsville
While both armies were sitting on opposite sides of the Potomac, Burnside was replaced by Major General Joseph Hooker, who, at the end of April 1863, attempted to turn the Confederate position south of Washington along the Rappahannock River. It was there that the team of Lee and Jackson made their boldest move. Lee divided his army, leaving a small body to meet Federal troops on the Rappahannock. Lee then moved his main body, including Jackson's corps, to meet the threatened envelopment Hooker had planned in the woods near Chancellorsville. On May 2 Lee again divided his army, keeping only 10,000 men to face Hooker directly, while the remainder was sent around Hooker's right, and with it Jackson's entire corps. The surprised Federals were routed by Jackson's men, who suddenly appeared out of the woods by the thousands. Completely flanked by an army that numbered less than half of his own men, Hooker was forced to withdraw.

Death

That same evening, Jackson had ridden forward to reconnoiter enemy lines, and upon returning to his own lines he was accidentally shot by his own men. The wounds were serious, but not life-threatening; however his left arm was shattered and had to be amputated. In a small cabin at Guinea Station, Virginia he was left to recuperate, but pneumonia had set in, and he died under a week later. His last words were what author James Robertson ascribed to pleasant images of his boyhood home at Jackson's Mill. "Let us cross over the river, and rest under the shade of the trees"[8].

Assessment

The aide to Jackson, Lieutenant Henry Kyd Douglas, once said of the general when he first laid eyes on him, "General Lee was the handsomest man I ever saw. John C. Breckinridge was a model of manly beauty, John B. Gordon a picture for the sculptor, and Joseph E. Johnston looked every inch a soldier. None of these things could be said of Jackson"[9]. Jackson, as it turned out, had surprised many. Of Lee's lieutenants in battle, Jackson was considered his right arm and his most effective battlefield commander. The qualities of each man complimented the other, Jackson trusting Lee to the point of merely nodding his head in agreement with Lee's plans before carrying them out. He was a master of surprise tactics and rapid movements, his own plans kept so secret that even his officers did not know of them until he was ready to make a strike. Despite this, and despite his many eccentricities, his own men completely trusted him and fought effectively under his command.

References


Further reading

- Douglas S. Freeman|Freeman, Douglas S. *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command* (3 volumes), Charles Scribner's Sons, New
York (1946).


**Links**

- Virginia Military Institute's Jackson archive site


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Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson (January 21, 1824 – May 10, 1863) served as a Confederate general (1861–1863) during the American Civil War, and became one of the best-known Confederate commanders after General Robert E. Lee. Jackson played a prominent role in nearly all military engagements in the Eastern Theater of the war until his death, and played a key role in winning many significant battles. Lieutenant General Thomas Jonathan Jackson was a United States Army officer who later joined the Confederate States Army and fought in the American Civil War, where during the First Battle of Bull Run he earned his famous nickname "Stonewall". One of the most effective field generals in American history, his battlefield tactics and maneuvers are still studied as part of military curriculum. Stonewall Jackson was born Thomas Jonathan Jackson on January 21, 1824, in Clarksburg (then Virginia), West Virginia. His father, a lawyer named Jonathan Jackson, and his mother, Julia Beckwith Neale, had four children. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson was the third born. ADVERTISEMENT. Thanks for watching! Visit Website. When Jackson was just 2 years old, his father and his older sister, Elizabeth, were killed by typhoid fever. As a young widow, Stonewall Jackson’s mother struggled to make ends meet. In 1830 Julia remarried to Blake Woodson.