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Tazewell County Board

*Continuing a Family Tradition of Community Service*

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### **November ASO Magazine Column**

## **Philip Sheridan's Temper Accomplishes the Impossible**

*"Did he really say that?"*

*"Well he usually knows what he's talking about. Let him go ahead and do it."*

General Ulysses S. Grant, May 6<sup>th</sup>, 1864, responding to a challenge by a subordinate

Many leadership lessons can be learned from the command of General Ulysses S. Grant. One of my favorite books is "Cigars, Whiskey and Winning; Leadership Lessons from Ulysses S. Grant" and the whole book consist of taking leadership lessons from Grant's life and applying them to today's corporate business world. One read through this book and you can truly see that the lessons of today can be learned from analyzing our past.

The above quote is not found in that book, but easily could be. General Grant had just arrived and taken command of all Union Armies in March of 1864 and had made changes to the command structure which included replacing some Eastern Theater generals with Western Theater generals. By May of 1864, General Grant and his Union Army start pushing towards their new stated goal, the destruction of the Army of Northern Virginia, and the army's nemesis, Confederate General Robert E. Lee. As they start pressing, tempers are flaring up and down Grant's command staff. Grant's new leadership staff starts to turn on one another and is questioning the wisdom of their new Commander in Chief.

As we will soon see, these generals (Eastern vs. Western Theater) fighting in the same Union army did not have the same fighting styles, temperament, or respect for one another. As a matter of fact, Grant's two top generals in the Army of the Potomac are the prime examples of this difference. Representing the Eastern Theater, General George Meade, the hero of the Battle of Gettysburg. Meade had commanded the Army of the Potomac since shortly before the battle, but since the battle he had done little with the army. Representing the Western Theater, General Philip Sheridan, who had been brought with Grant to take charge of the cavalry units.

As the Union forces moved south in May of 1864, they first found and fought the Army of Northern Virginia in the vicinity of Chancellorsville, Virginia, with the great battle of The Wilderness. After two days of battle, the army had already lost 17,500. In December of 1862, General Burnside had lost 13,000 after attacking nearby Fredericksburg, and then in May of 1863, General Hooker had lost 17,000 after attacking on this very same ground. In these previous years, after such a terrible loss of life, the army had retreated back to the protection of the North. But here is where Grant showed he was going to be different. Instead of once more retreating, Grant ordered his men to move to Spotsylvania further south and closer to Richmond.

To start this action, General Meade ordered General Sheridan's cavalry forces to race ahead and get to the town before the Confederate Army. To accomplish these orders, Sheridan's cavalry would have to leave during the dark, rainy, foggy night. To make the mission harder, Lee's Army was positioned closer and Sheridan's cavalry would have to travel twice as far as the Confederates. Sheridan and his cavalry

would lose the race to Spotsylvania and thus another major battle over the next few weeks would be the result.

In his anger over this loss, General Meade would confront the individual he blamed, General Philip Sheridan. Meade had no respect or use for the cavalry. He viewed their role in the army as nothing more than skirmishers and guards of the baggage train. It was the night of May 6<sup>th</sup> when General Meade found General Sheridan and told him of his disgust of his lack of action and told him so in no uncertain terms. While Meade outranked him and was his commanding officer, Sheridan responded with the same disrespectful language and tone that he had just received.

Ending the disagreement, Sheridan told Meade "I could whip Jeb Stuart if you would only let me. But since you insist on giving the cavalry directions without even consulting or notifying me, you can command the cavalry corps yourself. I will not give it another order." This was the civil war version of "take this job and shove it". Resigning as he stormed out, he left a shocked and stunned Meade standing.

It should be clarified that Confederate General Jeb Stuart was the Army of Northern Virginia's cavalry commander and had become famous over the course of the war for embarrassing the Army of the Potomac over and over again. His cavalry was hated by the leadership of the north more than any other Confederate unit. During General McClellan's Peninsula Campaign in the summer of 1862, Stuart and his cavalry made a famous round trip ride over four days and over a hundred miles completely around McClellan's Union Army, destroying their communications and scouting his weaknesses which led to the failure of the entire Campaign. Every officer in the Union Army wanted Stuart dead.

Meade went straight to General Grant to reprimand Sheridan for his insubordination. When Grant did not respond the way he expected, he repeated Sheridan's boast. "Did he really say that" Grant asked. "Well, he usually knows what he is talking about. Let him go ahead and do it." Later that same night, General Sheridan was back in the saddle and leading his cavalry of 10,000 men to the outer suburbs of Richmond. Stuart answered the challenge and led his outnumbered southern cavalry to Yellow Tavern, just six miles from Richmond, and engaged the Union in battle. Sheridan ordered his men to charge and split the Confederates in two, during which Stuart was shot by a dismounted Michigan cavalryman.

Accomplishing his boast, Sheridan returned to find his unit completely separated from Meade's command and reporting directly to Grant. While killing Stuart did nothing to help the upcoming battle at Spotsylvania, it made a dramatic point about the proper use of cavalry and helped boost the image of the Union Cavalry. It also maintained the peace between these officers and allowed Grant to keep the services of both men. Meade would stay by Grant's side till the very end of the war, effectively serving as his right hand man and together with General William Sherman would be the second only to Grant in the Union Army.

Sheridan's next assignment would be to destroy the Shenandoah River Valley, which had long been the breadbasket of the South. In the same fashion as Sherman did with his famous March to the Sea, Sheridan would completely burn and devastate the Shenandoah Valley to the point of making it a wasteland for the remainder of the war. To the South, Sheridan would become hated only slightly less than Sherman, with both men being considered nothing more than devils.

Grant could have easily done as requested and reprimanded Sheridan. I believe he did not because of his faith in Sheridan's abilities. He also had nothing to lose. By sending Sheridan out, he removed an obstacle from General Meade and allowed him to focus clearly on the upcoming Battle of Spotsylvania. If Sheridan had failed, he could then more openly reprimand Sheridan. By allowing him the opportunity to succeed, he opened the door for the cavalry to develop into the great war weapon they became.

Today we all too often attack young, energetic individuals who attempt to do what we perceive as the impossible. Rather than allowing them to develop, we try to shield them and control their development. If we could only step back and trust in their training and abilities, much like Grant trust Sheridan, we could be surprised as we see the impossible accomplished.

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