

**Mosby and his Rangers: Mid-Late War
Irregular Warfare, Northern Virginia
1863-1865**



History

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Abstract

Regular armies have fought and continuously seek outmaneuver the opposing force by several means including practicing methods of fighting not normally associated with the known practices of waging warfare. Pre Civil War America had known nontraditional forms of combat resembling closely those forms used by the Spanish guerrillas against Napoleon in early 18th Century. The nontraditional form of combat has been largely neglected by the researchers of the Civil War America where it rather than than a side show played a crucial role in the outcomes and prolongation of the war by affecting the three levels of war across the DIME. The most prominent unit of the Confederate Armies was the 43 Virginia Cavalry commanded by John Singleton Mosby.

“Mosby was larger than life, a monster that would spring out of the darkness to attack isolated outposts and sentries and steal horses, supplies, and weapons, before fading back into countryside.”

– Private Nathan Middlebrook, artillerymen Union Army.¹

In an article published in Civil War History magazine in 2010,² Daniel Southerland claims that contrary to the generally held position by most of the researchers who have published on the American Civil War, the guerrilla war – largely ignored and superficially analyzed – far from being a side show was a crucial part of the larger war that the Confederate waged against the Union. It influenced the tactical, operational and strategic levels of war among both soldiers and politicians.

Pre Civil War America had known untraditional forms of combat resembling closely those forms used by the Spanish guerrillas against Napoleon in early 18th Century. The war of independence from the British Crown, Mexican and Indian Wars all contributed to a body of knowledge that shaped the thinking of military and political leaders on the use and measures to counter irregular warfare. The practitioners of irregular warfare differed in their roles and scope despite the fact the methods used were similar and for that reason a distinction should be made between those who were engaged in irregular warfare activities.

In the American Civil War there were generally four types of irregular combatants: the outlaws; the bushwhackers or jayhawkers; the partisan rangers and finally cavalry raiders.

¹ Mackey, R. (2005). *The Uncivil War: Irregular Warfare in the Upper South, 1861-1865* USA: University of Oklahoma Press, p. 87.

² Sotherland, D (2010). Sideshow No Longer: A Historical Review of the Guerrilla War. *Civil War History*, 46(1), 5.

Definitions act as gateways into the areas of study of irregular warfare but rarely convey its complexity in theory or practice. In addition, capricious categorizations can lead to a misleading and seemingly irreconcilable divide between forms of irregular war.³ Ultimately, some arbitrary distinctions must be made in order to grasp the business at hand, without losing perspective on the numerous 'grey areas' endemic to irregular warfare.

For the purpose of this paper we are going to use the definitions used by Lieber's work latter issued to union army as general Orders Number 100 (1863) in which partisans, in contrasts to other irregulars – seen as outlaws or simple criminals who were not granted the lawful combatant status and therefore prisoner of war privileges upon capture-- refer to small, elite conventional forces given an unconventional role who were member of organized units and tightly controlled by their parent units. According to Francis Leiber, "the partisan acts chiefly upon enemy's lines of connection and communication, and outside of or beyond the lines of operations of his own army, in the rear and in the flanks of the enemy."⁴

The definition above will help us analyse the missions of the most famous Confederate partisan ranger unit, the 43rd Virginia Cavalry commanded by John Singleton Mosby, its approach to warfare, support, the treatment from northern and southern authorities and the effect that partisan rangers had in overall war effort encompassing strategic, operational and tactical levels of war.

Terrain: When the Civil War began in 1861, the Shenandoah Valley had a military significance second only to the Mississippi River Valley.⁵ It served to sustain large armies as well as act as an avenue of approach from both sides. The regions in which Mosby's Rangers operated with dense forests and imposing hills and mountains, provided a perfect base of operations for irregular units.

Terrain probably is the most significant aspect of this type of warfare because it allowed Mosby to decide where and when to fight. If Union forces appeared in overwhelming numbers, Mosby's rangers used the terrain to withdraw and fight when the odds were in their favor. Union forces engaged in combating guerrilla activity could not be everywhere at once without spreading their forces too thinly and invited attack from locally superior guerrilla forces. According to Mosby "the military value of a partisan's work is not measured by the amount of property destroyed, or the number of men killed or captured, but by the number he keeps watching."⁶

Support: History has shown repeatedly that few guerrilla activities succeed without some form of support. Regardless of the amount of munitions available, guerrillas must look for shelter, care

³ Baylys, J, Wirtz, J, Gray, C, Cohen, E, (2007). *Strategy in the Contemporary World*, NY: Oxford University Press, p.166.

⁴ Jeffrey, W (1990). *Mosby's Rangers: The True Adventures of the Most Famous Command Of The Civil War*. NY: Simon & Schuster, p.35

⁵ Ibid., 187.

⁶ Military Quotes, John Singleton Mosby, 1833-1916, Confederate Cavalry Leader (2013) retrieved from http://www.quotequotes.com/quotes_by_category/m/military/military_quotes_004.html

for casualties and continually replenish their supplies, including food and water. In addition, they must constantly update their intelligence on the whereabouts and activities of enemy forces.

Virginia had a large slave owner population and obviously supported the Confederate cause thus allowing Mosby to operate safely. The safe house served as residences, watchtowers and signal stations for the rangers. On some occasions, locals served as couriers as well as provided warning on the presence of enemy.⁷

Support, however, is interlinked with and inseparable from the legitimacy of the organization. Mosby forbade attacking or looting Unionist civilians preferring to focus his effort in Union regular units. Mosby avoided problems encountered in other areas where mass depopulation hampered the effectiveness of irregular activity by limiting the war to combatants only.

In addition, because Mosby recruited his rangers mostly from local population he was able to create a network of support within the populace who was inclined to support the guerrillas because of the pre-war relationships.⁸

Command and Control: The Partisan Ranger Act of 1862 ensured that partisan units acted on orders of Confederate Armies. In contrast to bushwhackers and irregular activity that existed in other southern states, Mosby rangers were established as a unit under direct control of the Army of North Virginia granted by Special Orders number 82 of General Robert E. Lee.

Generals Stuart and Robert E. Lee always provided Mosby with written instruction throughout his service as an independent commander.⁹ Therefore all mission assigned to Mosby rangers were part of the strategy employed by Confederate commanders. Mosby was routinely employed to conduct operational and tactical level reconnaissance and raids in support of conventional operations. In addition it was used to gather information about the Union forces' disposition, composition, and current activities.

Personnel: The basic requirements for service in Mosby's forty-third Virginia Cavalry battalion were simple: either the trooper was combat experienced; added special skills or talents to the command, or was part of what was considered the social elite of the antebellum era. The presence of soldiers from the professional and planter classes of Virginia, mixed with the smattering of men with Virginia Military Institute, West Point and Naval Academy training did much to encourage discipline and military efficiency.¹⁰

Mosby recruited generally in local area.¹¹ There were certain advantages in local recruiting for partisan operations. Men like John Bush and Sam Underwood had lived within Union lines for

⁷ Jeffrey W. *op.cit.*, p.79

⁸ Miller, J. (1990) *Unconventional Warfare in the American Civil War*, retrieved from <http://www.dtic.mil/2Fcgibin/2FGetTRDoc%3FAD%3DADA429020&ei=cZdYUaL0GrPI4APXvoHwAg&usg=AFQjCNGBiOmSfdk1NrsJOhZrHcSSN17HA>

⁹ Jeffrey W. *op.cit.*, p.40

¹⁰ Mackey R., *op.cit.*, p.82

¹¹ Southerland D. *op.cit.*, p.166

most part of the war and were intimately familiar with Union camps¹² facilitating operations in Union's rear. Using intimate knowledge provided by local recruits of Union forces whereabouts in a daring operation Mosby's man achieved a remarkable success by arresting Union General Stoughton in 1863.

Tactics: Mosby operated against Union forces in north central Virginia, between Washington DC and Harpers Ferry. The region, by 1865, would be known as Mosby's Confederacy. He rarely conducted battalion size operations. Typically the assault parties would comprise ten–or twenty men detachment aimed at specific objectives under his command or competent officers.

Lacking numbers Mosby tactics relied on speed and shock. The effects of attacks were impressive. Rapidly and violently executed, Mosby's men armed with only six shot revolver, the Colt. 44, operating during night made it seem that rangers had more men than it was in reality. If the rangers had not surprise and shock in their side, they could not stand up to Union forces.¹³

Union counter measures: The Clausewitz dictum that "*The first, the supreme, the most far reaching act of judgment that the statesman and commander have to make is to establish by that test the kind of war on which they are embarking...*"¹⁴ did not resonate quite well with Union Commanders. General Crook and Hunter's understanding of the problem was largely informed by their experience in irregular warfare activity in the antebellum era. So when confronted with the problem they applied "known solution for known problems."

Union forces until late in war misidentified Mosby rangers with bushwhackers. These misperception hindered Union operations against Mosby simply because of misunderstanding of who Mosby and his men were.¹⁵ Furthermore Union forces were blind of Mosby's mission–intelligence gathering and attacks on Union lines of communication that directly supported the Army of Northern Virginia. One other reason that Mosby was successful was the failure of the Union forces to grasp that it was fighting a partisan and not a guerrilla war.

Union commanders to counter Mosby's activity used several measures which were applied in other theatres of operations in the Southern states.¹⁶ Most notably is the establishment of static defensive positions along lines of communications for example picket posts; blockhouses at important rail road bridges or maintaining large garrison in towns. A second form was the frequent patrolling and sweeping operations especially in the pro Confederate areas. A third form applied without discrimination was the holding accountable and reprisals against civilians for guerrilla activity. Lastly the most effective measure which almost realized Mosby's annihilation was the

¹² Mackey R., *op.cit.*p.80

¹³ *Ibid.*,p.83.

¹⁴ Howard M., Paret P., (1989), *On War: Carl Von Clausewitz*, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, p.88

¹⁵ Mackey R., *op.cit.*p.79

¹⁶ Beamer C., (1988). *Grey Ghostbusters: Eastern Theatre Union Counter Guerrilla Operations in the Civil War, 1861-1865*, USA: Ohio State University Press