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FROM CIVIL WAR HERO TO INDIAN FIGHTER: THE LEGACY OF PHILIP SHERIDAN

By Rose Thoroughman

General Philip H. Sheridan was once described by Abraham Lincoln as “a brown, chunky little chap, with a long body, short legs, not enough neck to hang him, and such long arms that if his ankles itch he can scratch them without stooping.”¹ Despite his unimpressive looks, Philip Sheridan looms large in the history of the United States’ military. He is regarded as one of the most impressive generals to come out of the American Civil War, and he proceeded to achieve the rank of a four-star general before the end of his military career. Under the guidance of generals Grant and Sherman, Sheridan promoted and exhibited the military tactic of total warfare. However, he is most well remembered for the role he played as a Union general during the American Civil War and his many years spent afterwards fighting in the Indian wars.

Philip Henry Sheridan was the son of poor Irish immigrants, and it is unknown exactly when and where he was born. He claimed both Albany, New York and Somerset, Ohio as his birthplace on various official documents. In his memoirs, Sheridan clarified the confusion by explaining that he was born in Albany on March 6, 1831 and later spent his childhood in Somerset.² Sheridan attended school until he was fourteen, when he became a clerk in a local general store.³ In 1848, he received an appointment to the United States Military Academy at West Point. At the academy, Sheridan was a mediocre cadet, and he was suspended for a year after getting into a fistfight with a fellow classmate.⁴ After returning to West Point, Sheridan graduated near the bottom of his class, in July of 1853.

According to historian Lance Janda, “although it might seem reasonable to assume the seeds of total war theory were planted during

¹ Paul Andrew Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1985), 2.

² Philip Henry Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 1992), 1.

³ Paul Andrew Hutton, “Phil Sheridan’s Frontier,” *Montana: The Magazine of Western History* 38, no. 1 (Winter 1988): 18.

⁴ Joseph Wheelan, *Terrible Swift Sword: the Life of General Philip H. Sheridan* (New York, NY: Da Capo Press, 2012), 4.

[Sheridan's] days at West Point, such was not the case."⁵ The academy focused on equipping officers with skills that were applicable during peacetime, and there was little emphasis on the teaching of tactics and strategy. In short, West Point became mostly a school of civil engineering.⁶ European ideas influenced the scarce strategic thought taught to the cadets. West Point, in particular, tried to imitate French doctrine and thought. Napoleonic warfare served as the model for all cadets to follow. Cadets studied the strategic ideas of Antoine Henri, Baron de Jomini. He was considered the foremost authority on Napoleonic warfare, and according to military historian Russell Weigley, "Jomini's interpretation of Napoleon became the foundation of the teaching of strategy at West Point."⁷ He disliked needless violence, and he disapproved of soldiers living off the land and destroying civilian property.

After graduating from West Point in 1853, Sheridan became part of the First Infantry and became stationed at Fort Duncan in Texas. He soon transferred, however, to the Fourth Infantry and found himself at Fort Reading in California. Sheridan then spent the next ten years on the frontier in the Pacific Northwest. During this time, his assignments mostly involved maintaining peace with the Indian tribes and the American settlers. He accepted leadership roles and gained recognition as an able leader after several skirmishes with the Indians. In the spring of 1861, the American Civil War began, and Sheridan was anxious that the war would end before he returned from the Pacific Northwest.⁸ However, in September of 1861, Sheridan was able to make his way east when he was promoted to captain and ordered to join the Thirteenth Infantry. According to historian Paul Andrew Hutton, "patriotism was the guiding principle of [Sheridan's] life."⁹ In his personal memoirs, Sheridan writes:

My patriotism was untainted by politics, nor had it been disturbed by any discussion of the questions out of which the war grew, and I hoped for the success of the Government above all other considerations. I believe I was

⁵ Lance Janda, "Shutting the Gates of Mercy: the American Origins of Total War, 1860-1880," *The Journal of Military History* 59, no. 1 (January 1995): 7-8.

⁶Russell F. Weigley, *The American Way of War* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1973), 81.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

⁸ Hutton, "Phil Sheridan's Frontier," 21.

⁹ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 11.

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was uninfluenced by any thoughts of the promotion that might result to me from the conflict, but out of a sincere desire to contribute as much as I could to the preservation of the Union.¹⁰

He was first assigned to a desk job at General Henry W. Halleck's Missouri headquarters. Sheridan maintained this position for almost a year until he requested an appointment as a colonel with the Second Michigan Cavalry in the spring of 1862. General Halleck agreed to Sheridan's transfer, and the new colonel soon impressed his superiors by leading several successful raids and performing admirably at the battle of Boonville, Missouri, where his 750 men defeated 4,000 Confederate soldiers.¹¹ Sheridan was again promoted and this time to that of a brigadier general of volunteers in September of 1862.

A turning point in his military career came after his charge up Missionary Ridge in November 1863. William Tecumseh Sherman led the effort to take Missionary Ridge from the Confederate forces who were already occupying the ridge that overlooked the city of Chattanooga. After four failed attempts, Sherman's men were unable to take the ridge, and it seemed an impossible undertaking. However, Sheridan and the Army of the Cumberland were able to overtake the Confederate forces. Furthermore, unlike other Union commanders, Sheridan and his army did not stop once taking the ridge, but forced the Confederates to retreat all the way to Chickamauga Station.¹² This successful and bold charge had impressed General Ulysses S. Grant who had watched the assault. Grant later said:

Sheridan showed his genius in that battle, and to him I owe the capture of most of the prisoners that were taken. Although commanding a division only, he saw in the crisis of that engagement that it was necessary to advance beyond the point indicated by his orders. He saw what I could not know, on account of my ignorance of the ground and with the instinct of military genius pushed ahead.¹³

Sheridan had not given up, and Grant gained respect for him after this event. When Grant went east in March 1864 as General in Chief, he offered

¹⁰ Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan*, 66.

¹¹ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 12.

¹² *Ibid.*, 14.

¹³ Bruce Catton, *Grant Takes Command* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Company, 1968), 90.

Sheridan command of the cavalry of the Army of the Potomac. Sheridan accepted, and his role in fighting increased. He went on to defeat the Confederate cavalry commander J.E.B. Stuart and his infamous horsemen at Yellow Tavern. After this victorious effort, Sheridan received command of the Army of the Shenandoah.

The Shenandoah Campaign is considered one of the major highlights in Sheridan's military career. The Shenandoah Valley in Virginia functioned as an important resource for the South throughout the war, and this valley was renowned for its fertile countryside and dense forests.¹⁴ Grant realized that as long as it remained under Confederate control, the Shenandoah Valley would continue to provide raw materials to the Confederacy. Consequently, in order to break Southern resolve, Grant sought to rob the Confederacy of its resources through the destruction of the valley. This would be left up to Sheridan to oversee and complete, and he received his orders in August 1864 to take control of the Shenandoah Valley. Grant sent additional orders stating, "Do all the damage to rail-roads and crops you can. Carry off stock of all descriptions and negroes so as to prevent further planting. If the war is to last another year we want the Shenandoah Valley to remain a barren waste."¹⁵ Sheridan appears to have shared Grant's belief that to win the war and break the Southern people's resolve required much more than battles. It required destruction of agriculture and railroads. He attempted to sabotage everything of military value in the valley and set fire to fields and mills. In October of 1864, Sheridan wrote to Grant informing him of his accomplishments:

I have destroyed over 2,000 barns filled with wheat, hay, farming implements; over seventy mills filled with flour and wheat; have driven in front of the army over 4,000 head of stock, and have killed and issued to the troops not less than 3,000 sheep...the Valley, from Winchester up to Staunton, ninety two miles, will have but little in it for man or beast.¹⁶

Clearly, Sheridan approved of and utilized Grant's strategy of total warfare. Grant showed his pleasure at the result of this campaign in a letter to

¹⁴ Lisa M. Brady, *War Upon the Land* (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2012), 74.

¹⁵ Sheridan, *Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan*, 266.

¹⁶ Janda, "Shutting the Gates of Mercy: the American Origins of Total War, 1860-1880," 10.

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Sherman. He wrote, “Sheridan has made his raid and with splendid success so far as heard. . . You will see from the papers what Sheridan has done.”¹⁷

By the end of the Civil War in April of 1865, Sheridan was seen as a hero alongside the likes of Grant and Sherman. Hutton stated that “Sheridan emerged from the Civil War as the premier Union combat leader.”¹⁸ Several years later in 1867, Sheridan assumed command of the Department of the Missouri. This was composed of Missouri, Kansas, Indian Territory, and the territories of Colorado and New Mexico. As commander of the Department of the Missouri, Sheridan’s duties included protecting the newly freed slaves and keeping peace in the southern regions, as well as maintaining frontier forts and escorting westward bound settlers and travelers.¹⁹ Peace between Indians and settlers on the frontier was precarious, and treaties did little to create any lasting peace between settlers and Indians. Though the 1867 Treaty of Medicine Lodge had established reservations for several tribes, including the Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Comanche, the tribes refused to settle on the allotted land.²⁰ Sheridan’s strategy for subduing the belligerent tribes paralleled the tactics he exhibited during the Shenandoah Valley Campaign. In a letter to Sherman, who had risen to command the entire army, Sheridan wrote, “The best way for the government is to now make them poor by the destruction of their stock, and then settle them on the lands allotted to them.”²¹ His plan to destroy the Indians’ stock meant ridding the Indians of their horses and buffalo. At the outset of his winter campaign of 1868-1869, Sheridan believed that if the buffalo herds were greatly reduced then the hostile tribes would lose morale and concede to living on the reservations. In addition, he used the harsh winter weather of the Great Plains to his advantage as an ally in the campaign.

Sheridan fully understood the dangers and advantages of campaigning during the winter. He knew that the Indians were encamped in fixed camps for the winter and that their horses were generally weaker at this time as well.²² To successfully carry out this campaign meant that his own

¹⁷ Ulysses S. Grant, *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant*, ed. John Y. Simon (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1985), 174.

¹⁸ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 19.

¹⁹ Janda, “Shutting the Gates of Mercy: the American Origins of Total War, 1860-1880,” 11.

²⁰ Hutton, “Phil Sheridan’s Frontier,” 23.

²¹ David D. Smits, “The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865-1883,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 25, no. 3 (Autumn 1994): 323.

²² Weigley, *The American Way of War*, 159.

troops had to be able to withstand the bitter winter temperatures of the Great Plains. Sheridan viewed the perils of such a campaign as part of battling the Indians, and he readied his troops for severe weather.²³ During his winter campaign of 1868-1869, Sheridan conducted aggressive attacks on the Indians, and his attacks were mainly focused on the Southern Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Comanche in northern Texas and the western regions of Indian Territory.²⁴

In the spring of 1869, Sheridan was promoted to lieutenant general, and he was given command of the Division of the Missouri, an expanse of land that was over one million square miles. The Sioux, Choctaw, Cheyenne, Arapaho, and Blackfoot tribes resided in this large portion of American territory. When dealing with these tribes, Sheridan used the same manner of aggression that had proven successful in his previous campaigns. These campaigns, however, were different because he no longer personally led men into battle. The Winter Campaign of 1868-1869 had been his last field command. Now as the U.S. army's second-ranking officer, Sheridan planned and directed troops rather than leading them into actual battle.²⁵ Regardless of this new position, his strategies remained the same and proved successful in forcing the Indians to surrender and comply with previous treaties by settling on reservations. According to historian Lance Janda, "The key to this success was the high vulnerability of Native-American families and their resources. To a much greater degree than the Confederate Army, Native-American raiding parties depended on tenuous sources of supplies."²⁶ Sheridan understood this principle and relied ever more heavily on the strategy of total warfare to deal with the Indians.

In 1870, Sheridan accompanied the Prussian Army to observe their tactics while they fought in the Franco-Prussian War. Sheridan was surprised at the limited attacks on supplies and also civilians. He commented to Bismarck:

The proper strategy consists in the first place in inflicting as telling blows as possible upon the enemy's army, and then

²³ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 55.

²⁴ Janda, "Shutting the Gates of Mercy: the American Origins of Total War, 1860-1880," 12.

²⁵ Wheelan, *Terrible Swift Sword: the Life of General Philip H. Sheridan*, 249.

²⁶ Janda, "Shutting the Gates of Mercy: the American Origins of Total War, 1860-1880," 12.

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causing the inhabitants so much suffering that they must long for peace, and force their government to demand it. The people must be left nothing but their eyes to weep with over the war.²⁷

When he returned to America, Sheridan once again had to fight the Indians, but this time the focus was a bit different. Since the tribes had at last moved to the reservations, Sheridan now concentrated on how to keep them there. The battles between the army and the Indian fighters became fiercer and more complicated when various tribes began to band together in an effort to drive away the U.S. army. Once again, Sheridan turned to destroying resources, and this time his focus was set on annihilating the southern and northern buffalo herds.

In the 1870s, hunting parties began to arrive by train to hunt the estimated 50 million buffalo that roamed the Great Plains. Sheridan saw these hunters as both helpful and necessary to the efforts of subduing the Indians. Historian Lance Janda stated, in regard to the buffalo, that “Sheridan actively encouraged their extermination.”²⁸ The army provided military escorts to protect the hunters and to aid in hunting down the buffalo. Soon both the northern and southern herds of buffalo were nearly exterminated, and this policy of destroying the animals in order to subjugate the Indians proved successful.²⁹ Serious Indian resistance and attacks came to an end on the frontier with the army’s defeat of the northern Plains Indians in 1877 and with the annihilation of the buffalo.

In 1884, Sheridan became the Commanding General of the Army after Sherman retired. This was the highest position within the army, and Sheridan had been intent on inheriting this position.³⁰ After receiving this promotion, Sheridan moved to Washington D.C. where he spent the last few years of his life. During this time, he focused on modernizing the army and making the officer corps more professional.³¹ Rumors circulated in

²⁷ Janda, “Shutting the Gates of Mercy: the American Origins of Total War, 1860-1880,” 12.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Smits, “The Frontier Army and the Destruction of the Buffalo: 1865-1883,” 338.

³⁰ Roy Morris, Jr., *Sheridan: The Life and Wars of General Phil Sheridan* (New York, NY: Crown Publishers, 1992), 380.

³¹ Wheelan, *Terrible Swift Sword: the Life of General Philip H. Sheridan*, 299.

Washington D.C. reported that Sheridan might run for president, but he had no desire to do so.³² In May of 1888, Sheridan had a series of heart attacks after returning from a trip to inspect the site for Fort Sheridan in Chicago.³³ When his serious condition was made known, Congress brought back the rank of four-star General of the Army. This rank had been established in 1866 for Ulysses S. Grant, and it combined the positions of general and lieutenant general. William Tecumseh Sherman had inherited this title from Grant, and an act was passed that stated that after Sherman's retirement this rank would cease to exist. However, on June 1, 1888, Sheridan became the fourth General of the Army in U.S. military history. The previous holders of this rank were Washington, Grant, and Sherman.³⁴ Nearly two months after his most recent promotion, Sheridan suffered a massive heart attack and died at the age of fifty-seven on August 5, 1888.

Philip Sheridan left his mark on U.S. military history through his contributions during the Civil War and Indian Wars. He was aggressive in both strategy and tactics and did not shy away from demonstrating this aggression towards civilians during the Civil War. This was exhibited during the Shenandoah Valley Campaign in 1864 when Sheridan destroyed everything that had military value in the valley in order to prevent further goods being supplied to the Confederacy. Several years after the Civil War ended, Sheridan and his frontier army subdued the Plains Indians using this same kind of warfare. His army campaigned during the winter, burned the Indians' possessions, and used violence to ensure that the Indians stayed on their reservations. Furthermore, Sheridan and his forces aggressively hunted the buffalo herds to near extinction in the hope of depriving the Indians of a food source and lowering their morale. In conclusion, General Philip Sheridan's contributions to the United States and military history include his aggressive strategies and tactics and his role in solidifying the United States during the Civil War and Indian Wars.

³² Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 370.

³³ Hutton, *Phil Sheridan and His Army*, 371.

³⁴ Wheelan, *Terrible Swift Sword: the Life of General Philip H. Sheridan*,