

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Fitz John Porter

By **Brian Burton**

Most wars produce controversial commanders. The Civil War was no exception.. In fact, many commanders remain controversial 152 years (at this writing) after the battles ended. Few if any fought harder, however, to redeem their reputation than Fitz John Porter, the Union general cashiered for his behavior at Second Bull Run.

Porter was born on August 31, 1822, in New Hampshire, the scion of a distinguished family of Navy men. His grandfather had fought in the American Revolution, his father and uncle in the War of 1812. His cousins included David Dixon Porter and (by adoption) David Glasgow Farragut, both of whom would distinguish themselves in the U.S. Navy in the Civil War. Porter's father died when he was nine, however, and perhaps influenced by his mother he entered West Point in the fall of 1841.

Porter graduated in 1845, eighth-ranked out of 41 in his class, and was assigned to the 4th U.S. Artillery. He reported to Fort Monroe, Virginia, but soon the Mexican War broke out. In 1847 Porter's Battery G joined Major General Winfield Scott's army at Vera Cruz. During Scott's campaign to capture Mexico City, the battery and Porter particularly distinguished themselves at Molino del Rey, where they fought their way to the city's gate, losing six men killed and 21 (including Porter, now a first lieutenant) wounded. Porter was brevetted a captain for his efforts during the battle.

When the war ended, Porter spent time at Fort Monroe, Fort Pickens in Florida, and West Point as an instructor of artillery. In 1853 the superintendent, then-Colonel Robert E. Lee, appointed Porter adjutant, an important administrative support position. During his time at West Point Porter developed a close friendship with fellow instructor George Brinton McClellan, who had graduated one year later than Porter. He then spent several years as an Assistant Adjutant General, including to Colonel Albert Sidney Johnston in what is sometimes known as the Utah Expedition.¹ During this time, he married Harriet Cook of New York; they had four children.

¹ The Utah Expedition was sent by President James Buchanan to overawe the residents of the Utah Territory, most of whom were members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons). The government was concerned about treatment of federal appointees, but also reflected the prejudices against various Mormon practices, including polygamy.

After the 1860 election, Porter was detailed for two important tasks by Scott, the Army's commander-in-chief. The first was to inspect the defenses in Charleston Harbor in South Carolina. There is some evidence that Porter and Scott collaborated on the assignment of Major Robert Anderson to the command there and the movement of Anderson's force from Fort Moultrie to Fort Sumter.

Porter's second task was to evacuate forces from Texas, where Major General David Emanuel Twiggs had surrendered the U.S. installation in San Antonio. The troops there were allowed to march to the Gulf coast, where Porter got them boarded (perhaps under duress) and away from immediate danger.

On his return, Porter headed to Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, to organize volunteer troops and forward them to Washington. While in Harrisburg Porter, without telegraphic communication from Washington, ordered men to St. Louis to secure the arsenal there from seizure. He then became the chief of staff to Brigadier General Robert Patterson, who had command of all of Pennsylvania's forces. Patterson moved to the Shenandoah Valley in conjunction with Brigadier General Irvin McDowell's advance on the main Confederate army near Manassas Junction. Patterson's task was to hold another Confederate force in the Valley to prevent their junction. He failed, thus contributing to McDowell's defeat along Bull Run. One interpretation has been that Porter's unwillingness to fight contributed to Patterson's failure; it seems more likely that confusion and reaction to engagements kept Patterson from succeeding

After Bull Run, McClellan took McDowell's place as commander of what became known as the Army of the Potomac. Not long after that McClellan summoned Porter to his side. At first Porter was training troops, but he eventually gained command of the 3rd Division of the III Corps. In April 1862 McClellan moved the army to the Virginia Peninsula between the York and James rivers, landing near Fort Monroe. Porter's division led one line of march toward Yorktown, where Confederates made their first major stand. When McClellan halted his force and began siege operations, he relied on Porter to direct the siege.

During the siege, Porter went aloft in the basket of one of Professor Thaddeus Sobieski Constantine Lowe's observation balloons. A mooring cable broke, and Porter rose and drifted without control toward the Confederate lines. He was able to open the valve to release gas from the balloon, make sketches of the Confederate lines, and use the winds to guide him back to friendly territory.

After the Confederates retreated from Yorktown in early May, Porter was named commander of the V Corps. His own division, taken over by Brigadier General George Webb Morell, and a division primarily of Regular Army units under Brigadier General George Sykes comprised the corps.

By late June 1862 Porter's corps was alone north of the Chickahominy River near Richmond, albeit with one more division, Brigadier General George Archibald McCall's

Pennsylvania Reserves. General Robert E. Lee, commanding the Army of Northern Virginia, saw Porter's position as a weak point and devised a plan to flank it, attack and defeat Porter as he was retreating, and sever McClellan's supply line. The first attack, on June 26, was on McCall's position behind Beaver Dam Creek; it was repulsed with heavy Confederate losses. That night, Porter retreated behind Boatswain's Swamp to cover vital crossing points on the Chickahominy while McClellan made final preparations to retreat to the James River and establish a new base there.

By the afternoon of June 27 Porter's men were in place behind Boatswain's Swamp. Shortly afterward the Confederate attacks began. For several hours, Porter worked to patch up his lines against the attacks, using reinforcements McClellan sent him from south of the river. Finally, in the evening, Confederate charges all along Porter's front forced his men back, off the field, and across the river.

Porter's corps spent the next two days marching south and east toward the James. McCall's division wound up at the Glendale crossroads on June 30 through some confusion on Porter's part and was decimated during the battle there.

The next day, July 1, McClellan put Porter in charge of his line atop Malvern Hill to make a final stand. Again, throughout the day Porter moved units to soft spots in his line. But blessed with an even stronger defensive position than he had at Boatswain's Swamp and supported by more artillery, Porter easily held off the disjointed Confederate attacks. That night he urged McClellan to march on Richmond. But McClellan refused and the army retreated to Harrison's Landing.

While the Seven Days battles raged, Major Generals Henry Wager Halleck and John Pope came from the Western theater—Halleck to be general-in-chief, and Pope to take command of the Army of Virginia, those forces in the Washington, D.C.-Virginia area not assigned to McClellan. Pope had overlapped one year at West Point with Porter, and the pre-war army was like a small town; everyone knew or knew of each other. Porter's opinion of Pope was unflattering; he called Pope "an ass."²

By mid-August, when Pope was maneuvering against Lee in north-central Virginia, McClellan responded to orders by moving his army back down the Peninsula so it could come to Pope's aid. Porter's corps was in the lead, as had become the norm. It moved faster than called for in McClellan's orders (after Porter had received information regarding Pope's situation) and marched 60 miles in under four full days, arriving at Newport News on August 18. Porter embarked for Aquia Creek on the Potomac east of Fredericksburg; upon landing, the men took trains to Fredericksburg and then marched to support Pope. Porter arrived at Warrenton Junction August 27.

² Quoted in C. Anders, *Injustice on Trial: Second Bull Run, General Fitz John Porter's Court-Martial, and the Schofield Board Investigation That Restored His Good Name* (Zionsville, IN: Guild Press, 2002), 38.

Later that day began the sequence of events leading to Porter's court-martial. Pope, timing the order 6:30 p.m., told Porter to move his men to Bristoe Station, about 10 miles northeast, beginning at 1:00 a.m. August 28, to help push Major General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson from Manassas Junction. Porter, receiving the order sometime after 9:30 p.m., decided marching at 1:00 a.m. was impracticable; instead he set the time for 3:00 a.m. His lead units arrived at Bristoe Station about 10:00 a.m.; Porter blamed this delay on the moonless night, wagons blocking the road, and the fatigue of his men. Meanwhile, Jackson had left Manassas Junction.

Porter stayed at Bristoe Station until early August 29, when he was ordered to march to Centreville, northeast of Manassas Junction. The V Corps got at least to Manassas Junction itself, a few hours later, when Brigadier General John Gibbon arrived with verbal orders from Pope to head instead toward Gainesville, west of Manassas Junction, with his corps and Brigadier General Rufus King's division of McDowell's Army of Virginia corps. Pope made this change because Jackson and many Union troops were not where Pope had thought they were. Porter asked for the order in writing and had it soon after.

Also at Manassas Junction was McDowell, who out-ranked Porter. McDowell told Porter to wait while he sent Pope a message protesting King's attachment to Porter, but finally at about 10:00 a.m. he told Porter to get moving. Shortly after, Pope sent what came to be known as the Joint Order. This order replaced King's division back under McDowell's command and ordered both McDowell and Porter toward Gainesville. It then, however, told the generals to halt when they established communication with Pope's force, mentioned the likelihood of withdrawing to Centreville that evening, emphasized the importance of being able to do so, and specifically mentioned that if advantages were to be gained by not absolutely following the order, the generals were free to depart from it.

Porter advanced to Dawkins' Branch, a small creek in a ravine that crossed his road, found Confederate cavalry, and halted. Soon McDowell brought information that Major General James Longstreet had arrived with the rest of Lee's army and was between Porter and his objective. McDowell, in command by virtue of rank, told Porter either that he needed to fall back some, he should stay where he was, or he should attack along the same line, while McDowell himself took his troops to join Pope and hopefully link up his left with Porter's right. McDowell then left.

Porter, with knowledge that Longstreet was present and an opinion (he tried and failed to confirm) that Confederates were between his men and Gainesville, first tried to move to his right to hook up with Pope. But the terrain and other obstacles prevented that. He then asked McDowell for King's division back to try to force his way through to Gainesville, but McDowell refused, advising Porter to stay where he was or to withdraw. Porter elected to stay where he was. His presence worried Lee enough that he did not attack Pope's left that day.

Pope, however, did not know Longstreet had arrived, for McDowell did not pass that news along to him. He therefore, after an afternoon of attacking Jackson, and not

hearing anything from Porter, sent at 4:30 p.m. a message ordering Porter to attack Jackson's right flank. Porter didn't receive this order until sometime after 6:00 p.m. He immediately ordered Morell to attack, but Morell protested and Porter cancelled the attack.

Porter during this time also sent two messages intimating that he was considering withdrawing from his position or had already determined to move back to Manassas Junction. In response Pope sent, at 8:50 p.m., a peremptory order for Porter to join Pope with his command. Porter didn't receive this order until early in the morning of August 30. He immediately moved his men toward Pope, but his vague orders and sloppy staff work meant two brigades went to Centreville instead. After trying without success to convince Pope that Longstreet was on Jackson's right, not in support, Porter deployed his men in the center of Pope's line. At one point Pope thought Lee was retreating and changed Porter's role to the lead in a pursuit, but Porter finally attacked Jackson about 3:00 p.m. King's division joined most of Morell's division in the attack; Porter held most of Sykes' division to exploit success. But Confederate artillery hurt Porter as his had hurt Southern infantry at Malvern Hill, and although there was at least one breakthrough, the Confederate line held. Porter did not commit Sykes' men, and those who made the attack had to retreat through more artillery fire.

Porter and his men were forced back when Longstreet delivered a crushing counterattack, although some of Sykes' Regulars helped stop the Confederates. That evening Pope's army retreated across Bull Run toward Washington.

After Second Bull Run, Pope was relieved of command, as was Porter. But McClellan, back in command of the Army of the Potomac, put Porter back in charge of the V Corps on the march to Antietam Creek. During the battle there on September 17, 1862, the V Corps was McClellan's reserve and engaged in no hard fighting. According to one account, Porter's shake of the head helped convince McClellan not to support Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside when he was hit by Major General Ambrose Powell Hill's late-day attack.

Two days after Antietam Porter again led an advance, but it was short-lived. Following the Confederates across the Potomac, a few of Porter's brigades were stopped by a larger force of Confederates and re-crossed the river. Following that action at Shepherdstown, the Army of the Potomac rested until late October, when it again entered Virginia to advance against Lee's army. On November 7 McClellan was relieved of command, and three days later Porter was relieved as well. One week after that he was placed under military arrest.

Porter's arrest was accompanied by a court of inquiry against McDowell. The latter, however, wound up testifying against Porter, so Porter was the lone officer tried for the failure at Second Bull Run. Several reasons likely combined to lead to this outcome. Porter was a Democrat and a friend of McClellan, he was known to have criticized Pope before the battle, he was seen by Pope and others to have failed his commander, and (perhaps

most important) Radical Republicans who had supported Pope felt the need to find a scapegoat so their favorite general did not appear to be incompetent.

On November 25 members of the court to try him were named, and on December 1 he was notified of the charges against him. Essentially, those were that he disobeyed several orders—from August 27 by not moving at 1:00 a.m.; the Joint Order of August 29 by not attacking; the 4:30 p.m. order of the same day for the same reason and that he'd withdrawn his force from its position, and the 8:50 p.m. order of that day by not bringing his entire command to Pope—and that he'd attacked weakly and slowly on August 30. These, according to the then-current Articles of War, were capital crimes. The court included nine officers, and the prosecutor was Judge Advocate General Joseph Holt. Former Maryland Senator Reverdy Johnson, who had represented the slave owner in the Dred Scott case, was Porter's chief counsel.

After more than a month of testimony, and a closing argument by Johnson, the court deliberated for about three hours on the afternoon of January 10, 1863, and then found Porter guilty of six of the nine specifications. He did not have to defend himself against the specification of attacking weakly on August 30; he was found not guilty of disobeying the 8:50 p.m. order of August 29. Holt wrote a summary of the case, essentially a brief by the prosecution, for President Lincoln, who confirm the court's findings on January 21. Porter was cashiered from the army, the only organization he'd worked for in his adult life. He learned of the judgment through a reporter that same day.

After settling in New York with his family, Porter had to find a way to earn a living. At this he was only periodically successful and frequently had to go into debt to survive in the manner to which he aspired. He worked in mining in Colorado, construction in New Jersey, public works in New York City, and managing the coal and iron businesses of his friend, New Jersey Senator Theodore Fitz Randolph. During the late 1870s he was assistant receiver of the Central Railroad of New Jersey. For a short period in the early 1880s he worked for the Excelsior Life Saving Car Coupling Company, which was attempting (unsuccessfully) to market an invention of his eldest son Holbrook. Finally, in 1884, he was named police commissioner for New York City.

During all this period Porter's real focus was on clearing his name. Porter was a Democrat and a friend of McClellan's, both of which meant that Republicans, hard-war advocates, and people who disliked or opposed McClellan (the 1864 Democratic presidential nominee) would have preconceived notions of his guilt. His efforts and those of his supporters (primarily Democrats who were loyal to McClellan, as well as McClellan's military supporters) were long and diverse. They began in 1863, one appeal sent directly to Lincoln by men who included noted orator Edward Everett. President Andrew Johnson was beseeched beginning in 1866, as was then-acting Secretary of War Ulysses S. Grant. Former Confederates confirmed parts of Porter's account. Major General John McAllister Schofield, a cadet at West Point during Porter's time as an instructor and then general-in-chief, also was applied to. No progress was made, and both Grant and Schofield showed an inclination to believe Porter guilty. Pope kept responding to Porter's

appeals, as did Republicans in and out of Congress. Once Grant became president Porter submitted two separate appeals to him. Both were ignored.

When Rutherford B. Hayes, a veteran of Second Manassas, gained the presidency in the 1876 election, Porter's friend Senator Randolph discussed the case with Hayes. On the basis of that discussion Porter sent an appeal to Hayes, who created a board of army officers to review the case so Hayes would be more fully informed on the issue. That board consisted of Schofield, Brigadier General Alfred Howe Terry, and Colonel George Washington Getty (who had commanded a brigade in the Army of the Potomac Artillery Reserve under Porter during the Seven Days).

The Schofield Board began hearing witnesses in June 1878 at West Point. More than six months later the board ended hearings, and in March 1879 it unanimously recommended to Hayes that Porter be restored to his position in the army and the court-martial verdict thrown out.

Reaction was strong throughout the country, mostly in favor of Porter. Hayes, however, merely transmitted the report to Congress. Eventually the House and the Senate both introduced relief bills, but although the Senate's bill passed, the House's bill did not. Then James A. Garfield, who had served on the original court-martial, was elected president and took office in March 1881. Porter's cause looked difficult.

However, Garfield was assassinated that fall, making Chester A. Arthur (who had not served in the field in the war) president. Also that fall, Grant went public with his reversal of opinion on the case. Convinced by the Schofield Board's report of Porter's innocence, Grant wrote to Arthur expressing his new view and asking the president to review the documents himself. Arthur did not act on Grant's suggestion, but on the advice of his attorney general he granted Porter a pardon in 1882. Grant was not satisfied, and later that year he went public with his opinions. Again in 1883 the Senate passed a relief bill, but the House failed. In 1884, a bill passed both houses, but Arthur vetoed it and the Senate could not override the veto.

That fall, Democrat Grover Cleveland was elected president. Before Arthur left office, he sent Congress Porter's latest appeal. As Congress did not meet until December 1885, nothing could be accomplished that year, but in 1886 the issue came up one last time. First the House, then the Senate passed the relief bill. On July 1, 1886, Cleveland signed it, and word came to Porter at his office in New York. At age 63 and after nearly 24 years, Porter was legally free of the court-martial's judgment. In August, he was officially reappointed a colonel of infantry; two days later he retired from the army.

Porter continued as police commissioner until 1888, when he moved from that office to the one of fire commissioner. One year later he resigned that office and became president of a paving and roofing company in New York; then in 1892 he was appointed cashier of the New York Post Office, retiring finally in 1897. He then moved back to Morristown, New Jersey, where he died May 22, 1901.

Although Porter’s case has never entirely faded, most observers now believe Porter innocent of most if not all of the charges from the court-martial. Opinions on his military ability have been and still are more divided; they are tied in many cases to opinions on whether his performance at Second Manassas was the result of loyalty to McClellan or incompetent generalship. It may be safest to conclude that Porter’s name will always evoke strong views among historians and those interested in the Civil War and 19th-century politics.

Fitz John Porter

| | |
|-------------------|--|
| Born | August 31, 1822 Portsmouth, New Hampshire |
| Died | May 22, 1901 Morristown, New Jersey |
| Buried | Green-Wood Cemetery, Brooklyn, New York |
| Father | John Porter |
| Mother | Eliza Chauncey Clark |
| Career Milestones | 1845 West Point Graduate 1845 brevetted Second Lieutenant 4 th U.S. Artillery 1847 Served in the Mexican American War 1847 Promoted to Captain for bravery 1847 Wounded at Chapultepec and promoted to Major 1849-1853 West Point Instructor 1853-1855 Adjutant to the Superintendent at West Point 1856-1858 Served at Fort Leavenworth 1859-1860 organized defenses of Charleston Harbor, SC 1861 promoted to Colonel of the 14 th Pennsylvania 1861 promoted to Brigadier General in command of the 3 rd Division of the III Corps of the Army of the Potomac 1862 promoted to Major General and assigned command of the V Corps 1862 Led his Corps in the Peninsula Campaign 1862 Led his Corps in the Battle of Second Bull Run 1862 Court martialled and dismissed from the army for his performance at the Battle of Second Bull Run 1862-1883 worked at various jobs and worked to clear his name 1878-1879 A Board of Army Officers held a hearing and exonerated Porter 1882 Pardoned by President Chester A. Arthur 1884-1888 Appointed Police Commissioner for New York City 1886 Congress passed a relief bill and it was signed by President Grover Cleveland making Porter legally free of the |

| | |
|--|--|
| | Court Martial's judgement. 1886 reappointed Colonel of Infantry and two days later retired from the army 1888-1897 held various government posts in New York until retirement in 1897. |
|--|--|
