



This year marks the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the outbreak of the American Civil War, an epic four-year struggle in which thousands of Irish-Americans played a part. Of all these, the most notable was Philip Henry Sheridan (1831-1888).

To put it mildly, Phil Sheridan led a life that courted controversy. Indeed, controversy even attends the specifics of his entry into this world. Was he born in Albany, New York? Or Somerset, Ohio? Or Boston, Massachusetts? Or on a ship crossing the Atlantic? Or in Killinkere, County Cavan?

Sheridan himself told different stories at different times, identifying locations ranging from Albany to Boston to Somerset. His mother's account was a little less varied, on one occasion naming Albany and on another stating that he was born on the sea voyage. As for Killinkere, there's a marker in front of a stone house identifying it as his birthplace, and Richard O'Connor's 1953 biography claimed that local parish records note a Philip Henry Sheridan's birth in March 1831.

But there is no dispute on some things. He was the third child of John and Mary Meenagh Sheridan from Killinkere. And he did grow up in Somerset, where his father rose from labourer to subcontractor engaged in road-building and canal-digging. Mind you, the term "grow up" should be used advisedly, as it was not by accident that he was later known as *Little Phil* - a reference to his physical stature which came to no more than five feet and five inches.

Abraham Lincoln, his Civil War president and commander-in-chief, described him this way: "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."

Through the influence of Congressman Thomas Richey, a customer of the Somerset dry goods store where he worked, the teenaged Sheridan got into West Point in 1848. But his tenure there wasn't distinguished. In his third year he was suspended for attacking a classmate, and when he graduated in 1853, he was ranked 34<sup>th</sup> in a class of 52.

Commissioned as a brevet second lieutenant, Sheridan was assigned first to Fort Duncan, Texas, and then to Fort Reading, California. But he seemed to be on a career path with very limited prospects. The army was small - less than 14,000 men - and promotion opportunities were meagre.

### The Civil War

The Civil War changed that. In addition to the army's expansion, the exodus of southern officers to join the Confederates created prospects for upward movement. After nearly eight years without a promotion, Sheridan was raised to first lieutenant. Two months later he was a captain. Then in the autumn of 1861, he was transferred to Missouri. Once there, he began to make his mark.

As a commander, Sheridan was noted for being bold and aggressive. His critics would extend that description to include reckless showboating. But in the estimation of biographer Roy Morris, there was an additional dimension to Sheridan's modus operandi: "Not the least - one might even argue the greatest - of his talents was the one he learned first, as a fourteen-year-old shop clerk in central Ohio: moving merchandise and keeping records. In military parlance this is quartermastering, the careful marshaling of men and supplies. Sheridan may have thrown his troops into the hardest fighting once they reached a battlefield, but they were seldom hungry or ill-provisioned when they arrived there."

Sheridan made his first impression at the Battle of Booneville in July 1862, as a consequence of which he earned promotion to brigadier general. Then at Stones River over the 1862-63 new year, he conducted what has been described as "one of the bravest fighting retreats of the war,"

losing 40% of his division in the process. It didn't go unnoticed, Ulysses S. Grant himself observing: "It was from all I can hear about it a wonderful bit of fighting. It showed what a great general can do even in a subordinate command; for I believe Sheridan in that battle saved Rosecrans' army." By April 1863, he was a major general.

Seven months later, Sheridan's performance at the Battle of Missionary Ridge earned Grant's personal approbation again. And he had picked the right place to make a good impression. In early 1864, Grant became lieutenant general of the army, a rank whose only previous occupant was George Washington.

With the Overland Campaign about to begin, Sheridan's career took its next step via command of the cavalry corps of the Army of the Potomac. Initial results were mixed, so much so that his immediate superior, Major General Meade, went to Grant to complain about him. However, when Grant heard Meade's account of Sheridan's boast that "he could thrash hell out of Stuart any day," he responded "Let him start right out and do it." (The Stuart in question was Jeb Stuart, the flamboyant and glamorous Confederate cavalry commander.)

So on May 9, 1864, Sheridan moved towards Richmond, the Confederate capital, with 10,000 troops. The intent was to draw Stuart into combat. It worked. On May 11 at Yellow Tavern, six miles north of Richmond, they met. Stuart was killed. To quote Morris: "No longer would the romantic figure of the Confederate horseman, so strikingly personified by Jeb Stuart, loom larger than life in the popular imagination."

Being an election year, 1864 offered opportunity to the Confederacy. If Lincoln were to lose and be replaced by a Democrat, then a negotiated peace was in the offing. Indeed, if the radical peace wing of the Democrats had their way, the North would simply end hostilities immediately, effectively accepting the South's secession. And given the widespread weariness with the war, there was a distinct possibility that the Democrats would win. As late as August 23, Lincoln personally expected to be defeated.

With an eye to precluding this, Sheridan got a new assignment - command of the freshly established Army of the Shenandoah. The intent was clear. Throughout the war, the Confederacy had sent armies from Virginia up through the Shenandoah Valley to attack Maryland and Pennsylvania, even harassing Washington. Sheridan's mission was to permanently shut this off, not merely repulse the latest incursion. Grant's instructions were blunt: Sheridan was to render the Shenandoah Valley useless as a base of operation for the

Confederates.

Sheridan made his move in September, driving the Confederates out of Winchester after a battle which at one point saw him riding up and down the line urging his troops to "kill every son of a bitch." Lincoln was pleased, as was Grant who added: "If practicable, push your success and make all you can of it." Sheridan did, ejecting the retreating Confederates from Fisher's Hill.

In October, the scorched earth phase began in earnest. Sheridan's men seized livestock, burned barns and mills, and destroyed railroads. It was *hard war*, remembered by its victims as "the Burning." The Confederate army would no longer have a base in the Shenandoah Valley, and civilian supporters would be confronted with the price of their support for the Confederacy. Sheridan himself summed up the thoroughness of the job by noting that a crow wishing to cross the Shenandoah "would be compelled to carry his own rations."

Later in October, a surprise Confederate counter-attack at Cedar Creek was beaten back, at least in part due to Sheridan's personal intervention in the battle (giving birth to the poem *Sheridan's Ride*

). With that victory, the threat through the Shenandoah was largely eliminated. Sheridan received two rewards - a personal letter of thanks from Lincoln and another promotion. He was still four months shy of his 34

<sup>th</sup>

birthday.

As the Civil War moved to its now inevitable end, Sheridan had one more turn in the spotlight. True to form, it was characterised by relentlessness and a desire to be at the centre of the action. Or as he himself put it: "Feeling that the war was nearing its end, I desired my cavalry to be in at the death." So interpreting his orders liberally, he headed to join up with Grant at Petersburg. In effect, he went to where Lee's army was.

On April 1, 1865, he cut off Lee's lines of support at Five Forks, taking more than 5,000 prisoners in the process. On April 6, he captured almost 10,000 more at Saylor's Creek. In his report, he observed: "If the thing is pressed I think Lee will surrender." Lincoln's response was clear: "Let the thing be pressed." On April 9, Sheridan blocked Lee's escape at Appomattox. Later that day, Lee surrendered. The war was essentially over. Grant summarised Sheridan's contribution succinctly: "I believe General Sheridan has no superior as a general, either living or

dead, and perhaps not an equal."

Not everyone is impressed. Lawyer-historian Eric Wittenberg has written a revisionist assessment that finds Sheridan wanting in most respects. Although he credits Sheridan's performance in the final days of the Civil War, he takes issue with most of the rest. In addition to military incompetence, he finds Sheridan to be insubordinate, vindictive, self-promoting and dishonest. In this telling, Sheridan's rise in the ranks is mainly attributed to Grant's sponsorship.

Still, Wittenberg notes that he has essentially produced a case for the prosecution. In addition, he acknowledges the inspirational effect Sheridan had on his troops, observing that "this man's very presence gave men confidence that they could do anything." While it's possible for an incompetent general to have that kind of positive impact on his troops, it does seem counter-intuitive for it to be maintained over a long campaign.

Further, one is left to wonder just how it was that Sheridan fooled men like Grant and Lincoln. Perhaps they were wise enough to know that the fog of war renders all men fallible; and to concurrently recognize that, warts and all, Sheridan brought real value to the table.

The most controversial part of Sheridan's life came after the Civil War. But that's another story - perhaps a Rediscovering Phil Sheridan Part Two.

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