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# *From Raids to Recon: Special Operations in the Civil War*

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# Premise

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**Were there missions conducted in the Civil War that would meet the modern definition and criteria of a successful Special Operations mission today?**



# Modern Definition of Special Operations

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A Special Operation is conducted by forces specially trained, equipped, and supported for a specific target whose destruction, elimination, or rescue (if hostages) is a political or military objective



As defined by ADM William McRaven from his book,  
SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare and Practice: 1995



# Types of Modern Special Operations

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Types:

- ***Unconventional Warfare (Guerrilla Warfare)\****
- ***Direct Action (Raids)\****
- ***Special Reconnaissance\****
- Foreign Internal Defense (FID)
- Counter Terrorism
- Coalition Warfare
- Humanitarian/Civic Action (HCA)
- Psychological Operations (Psyops)
- Civil Affairs

***\* Most common Civil War missions***



# Modern Special Operations Definitions

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- **Unconventional Warfare** - Military and paramilitary operations conducted in enemy-held, enemy-controlled, or politically sensitive territory. Includes **guerilla warfare**, evasion and escape, subversion, sabotage, and other operations of a covert or clandestine nature; normally of long-duration. Mainly conducted by indigenous forces organized, trained, equipped, supported, and directed in varying degrees by special operations forces
- **Direct Action** - Overt or covert action against an enemy force. Seize, damage, or destroy a target; capture or recover personnel or material in support of strategic/operational objectives or conventional forces. Short-duration, small-scale offensive actions. **Raids, ambushes**, direct assault tactics; mine emplacement; standoff attacks by firing from air, ground, or maritime platforms; designate or illuminate targets for precision-guided munitions; support for cover and deception operations; or conduct independent sabotage normally inside enemy-held territory
- **Special Reconnaissance** - Infiltration behind enemy lines to provide the theater level commander with intelligence on the enemy or to gather information on the terrain, local populace, etc. of an area. Verify through various collection methods information concerning enemy capabilities, intentions, and activities in support of strategic/operational objectives or conventional forces

**NOTE: In the Civil War, these types of missions were known as Irregular Operations**



# Types of Irregular Warfare/Units in the Civil War

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- **Irregular Warfare** - all forms of conflict, from raids to bushwhacking, that did not involve the main armies from either side. Included are Recon, Guerrilla Warfare, and Raids (direct action) activities

- **Types of Irregular Units:**

- **Guerrilla**- self-constituted armed sets of men in times of war, who form no integrant part of an organized army, take up arms and lay them down at intervals, and carry on petty war by conducting raids, extortion, massacre, and destruction; who cannot carry many prisoners, and therefore generally give no quarter (Francis Lieber, 1862; issued as GEN ORD 100, Union Army, 1863)

**NOTE: Brigands and Bushwhackers**- were considered “worst” types of guerrilla organizations

- **Partisans**- small, elite units given an unconventional mission or role (43<sup>rd</sup> VA Cavalry BN, Blazer’s Scouts, Jesse Scouts, McNeill’s Rangers ). More akin to today’s special operations forces

**NOTE: Partisan organizations communicated with and received orders and direction from their respective main armies or legitimate government authorities**



As defined in the book, “The Uncivil War: Irregular Warfare in the Upper South, 1861-1865”, by Robert R. Macksay, 2000



# Guerrilla Units and Leaders

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## Confederate

### Individuals

William Quantrell  
Bill Anderson  
Jesse/Frank James  
Cole/Jim Younger  
George Todd  
Champ Ferguson  
Joseph Porter  
Jack Henson

### Units/Organization

Quantrell's Raiders  
Missouri Guerrillas  
Arkansas Guerillas  
Deserters

## Union

### Individuals

SEN James Lane  
John Brown  
Charles Jennison  
"Tinker" Dave Beaty

### Units/Organizations

JayHawkers  
Deserters  
Beaty's Partisans  
Heroes of America  
Peace Society



# Partisan Individuals

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## Confederate

John Mosby  
John McNeill/Jesse McNeill  
John Hunt Morgan  
Nathan Bedford Forrest  
John Taylor Wood  
Charles W. "Savez" Read  
John Yates Beall  
Harry Gilmor  
Turner Asby  
Elijah "Lige" White  
Joe Shelby  
M. Jeff "Swamp Fox" Thompson  
James McGee  
Joe Barton  
Adam "Stovepipe" Johnson

## Union

William B. Cushing  
James Andrews  
Ben Grierson  
James Wilson  
Charles Carpenter  
(Jessie Scouts)  
Richard Blazer  
Harrison Gray Otis

*Conducted operations under the auspices of  
legitimate government authorities*



# Partisan Units

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## Confederate

43<sup>rd</sup> VA Partisan BN\*  
1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> KY Cavalry (1862)  
McNeill's Rangers\*  
1<sup>st</sup> MD Cavalry BN

## Union

Blazer's Union Scouts  
Jessie Scouts  
1<sup>st</sup> Arkansas Cavalry  
1<sup>st</sup> Missouri Cavalry  
Loudon Rangers

***Conducted operations under the auspices of legitimate government authorities***  
***\*Only 2 Confederate partisan units allowed to operate after repeal of***  
***Partisan Ranger Act (17 Feb 1864)***



# Partisan-Style Operations in the Civil War

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## Confederate

- ***Mosby's Fairfax Raid***
- Morgan's Christmas Raid
- Van Dorn's Holly Spring Raid
- Forrest's Memphis Raid
- St Albans, VT Raid
- Hampton's Beefsteak Raid
- J.T. Wood's NE Coast Raid w/CS Tallahassee
- CSS Hunley's Attack on the Housatonic
- Forrest's "Floating Cavalry" Attack on Johnsonville, TN
- C.W. Read's June 1863 NE Coastal Raid
- Mosby's Greenback Raid
- Jesse McNeill's Capture of Union Generals Crook and Kelley
- Adam "Stovepipe" Johnson's capture of Newburn, IN
- Jones & Imboden's West VA Raid
- McCausland's PA Raid

## Union

- Andrew's Raid
- Grierson's Mississippi Raid
- Dahlgren-Kilpatrick Raid
- Wilson's Raid
- Cushing's Southport Raid
- ***Cushing's CSS Albermarle Attack***
- Cushing's Recon of Cape Fear River
- Cushing's capture of FT Anderson
- Averell's December 1863 Raid
- Streight's April 1863 AL Raid
- Ellet's Riverine Capture of Memphis



# Central Concept of Modern Special Operations

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## ***Relative Superiority (RS):***

*A condition that exists when an attacking force, generally smaller, gains a decisive advantage over a larger or well-defended enemy. It is:*

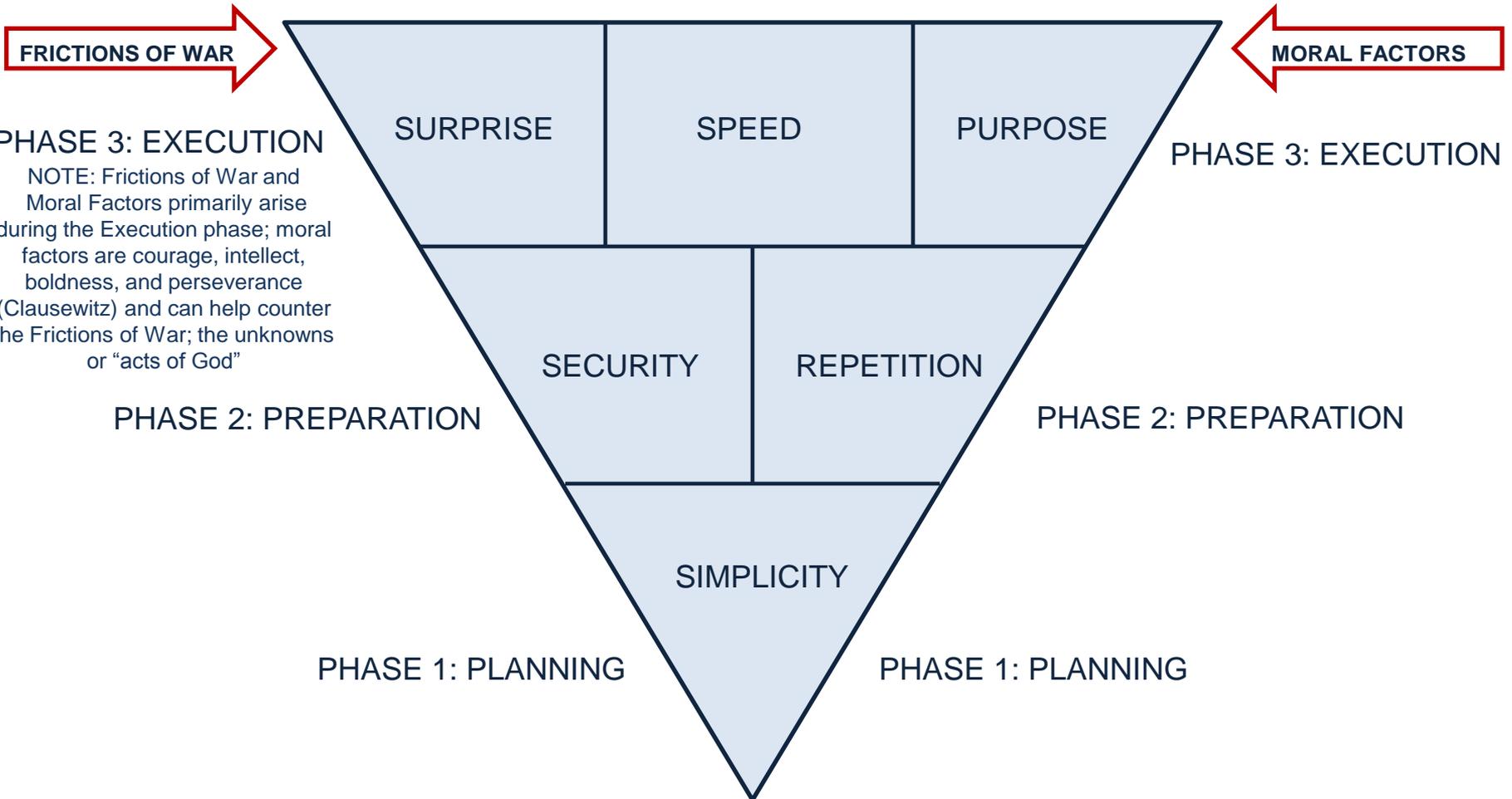
- a. Achieved at the pivotal moment in an engagement*
- b. Once achieved, it must be maintained to accomplish mission*
- c. If lost, RS is difficult to regain*

*Key to Spec Ops mission is to gain RS early in the fight*

As defined by ADM William McRaven from his book,  
SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare and Practice: 1995



# The Special Operations Model



*In the 3 phases of a military operation, Planning, Preparation, and Execution, a simple plan (Phase 1), carefully concealed, repeatedly and realistically rehearsed (Phase 2), and executed with surprise, speed and purpose (Phase 3), achieves Relative Superiority*



# Six Characteristics of Relative Superiority

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- **Simplicity** - Most crucial yet most difficult characteristic: 3 elements needed to achieve simplicity: (1) Limit number of objectives; (2) Good intelligence reduces unknown factors and number of variables; (3) Innovation eliminates or avoids obstacles that compromise or complicate mission execution      NOTE: Simplicity does not imply “easy”!
- **Security** – Prevent the enemy from gaining foreknowledge of your actions; specifically timing and means of infiltration or insertion
- **Repetition** – Performance of complex tasks and tactical skills as a matter of routine to facilitate quick reactions and the capability to adjust to threats
- **Surprise** – Catching the enemy off guard; even when he is expecting you
- **Speed** – Getting to your objective as fast as possible
- **Purpose** - Two aspects: (1) A clearly defined mission statement; and (2) Personal commitment

Note: These 6 principles are interconnected and rely on each other for success

As defined by ADM William McRaven from his book,  
SPEC OPS: Case Studies in Special Operations Warfare and Practice: 1995



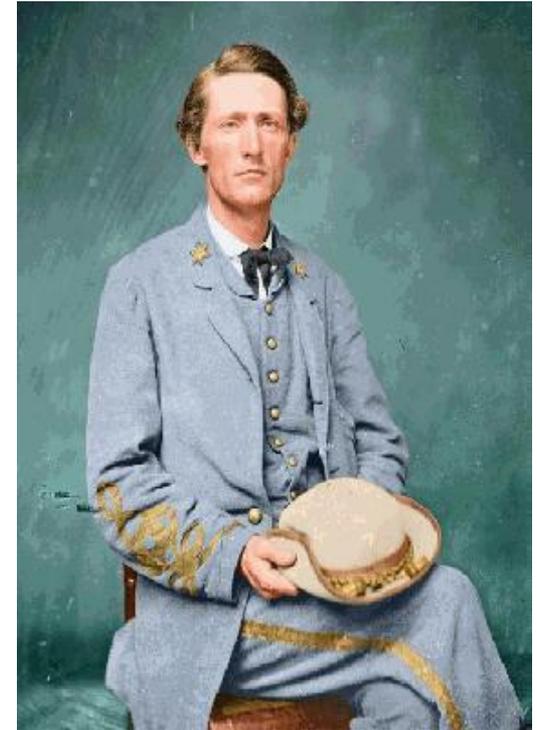
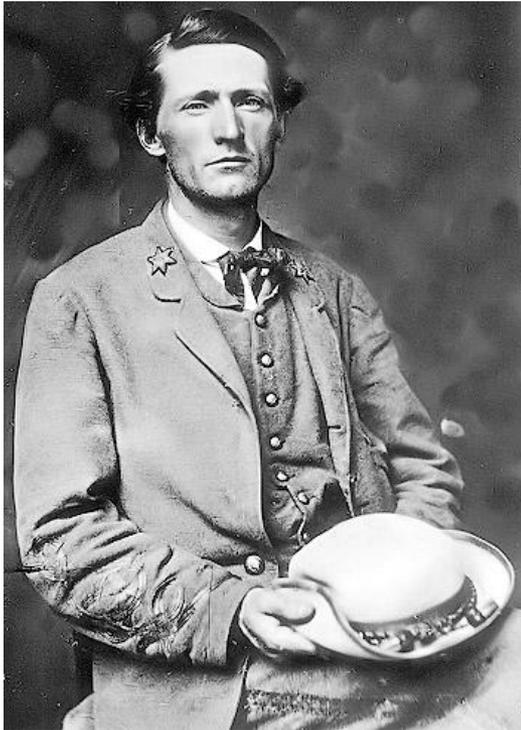
# Criteria for Case Studies

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- Partisan/Individual operations that demonstrate the 6 Characteristics that achieve Relative Superiority and lead to successful mission completion
- Size: operations conducted with 100 individuals or less
- Impact: the result of the operation affected the outcome or conduct of the war at a tactical, operational, or strategic level



# Case Study 1: Mosby's Fairfax Raid



- Who: John Mosby's Virginia (VA) Partisan Rangers  
What: Harassing Federal forces in northern VA  
When: March 8-9, 1863  
Where: Fairfax, VA  
Why: To "snatch" (kidnap) COL Sir Percy Wynham, Union Army



# Background for Fairfax Raid

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- Mosby begins operating with small group of partisans in January 1863 to harass Union forces in northern VA area of operations
- Within 3 months he becomes a great nuisance to federal forces in Fairfax and Loudoun counties
- Frustrated that a local Union cavalry commander, COL Percy Wynham, publicly calls Mosby and his men “horse thieves”-- a huge insult to their honor
- Mosby determines to kidnap COL Wynham for the purpose of embarrassing local Union forces



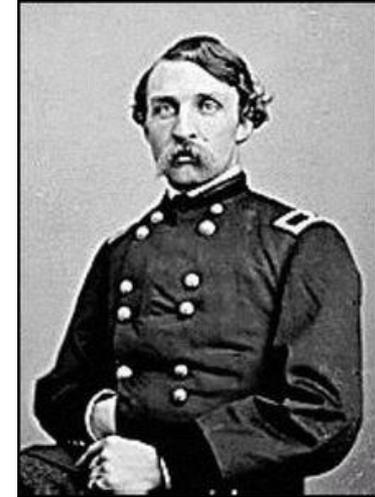
# Objective of Fairfax Raid



Planned

COL Percy Wynham

- British soldier of fortune, fought with Garibaldi in Italy
- Local cavalry brigade commander, chases Mosby to no avail
- Calls Mosby a “horse thief” impugning Mosby’s honor
- His troopers considered him “bombastic”



Actual

Edwin B. Stoughton

- Commander of Vermont Infantry Brigade
- Considered brave, but is also considered a dandy and a “fop”
- Fond of women and brandy
- During Mosby’s raid he is staying in a house in Fairfax 4 miles removed from his Brigade



# 43<sup>rd</sup> VA Partisan Ranger BN



- Normally handpicked young men from the local northern VA area
- Expert horsemen
- Live among local populace when not conducting missions with Mosby
- Do not have to endure the tedium of regular army life
- Mosby keeps his soldiers under tight rein throughout war; those who violate Mosby's orders are sent back to the regular army-- considered a great punishment
- Allowed to keep or sell a certain amount of Union supplies they capture



# John Mosby: The Gray Ghost



- One of the greatest partisan leaders in US military history
- Born in Powhatan County, VA in 1833
- Admires SC's Gen Francis Marion from American Revolution
- Serves prison time for shooting a man; though later pardoned
- Studies law while incarcerated and afterwards becomes a lawyer
- Initially is against Virginia seceding from the Union
- Joins Fitzhugh Lee's 1<sup>st</sup> VA cavalry regiment at beginning of the war
- Becomes a favorite of Jeb Stuart, but disliked by Fitzhugh Lee
- Participates in Stuart's ride around McClellan in 1862

- Captured at Beaver Dam railroad station in June 1862; exchanged a few weeks later
- In December 1862 Stuart gives him operational independence in northern VA
- Wounded twice, but never caught by Union forces while CDR of 43<sup>rd</sup> VA BN of Cavalry
- Disbands his unit at the end of the war instead of surrendering
- Mosby's wife meets with US Grant, resulting in Mosby receiving a pardon
- Due to Grant's kindness to his wife, Mosby becomes a Republican and supporter of Grant
- Becomes US consul to Hong Kong
- Works in General Land Office and in the US Dept of Justice
- Dies in 1916



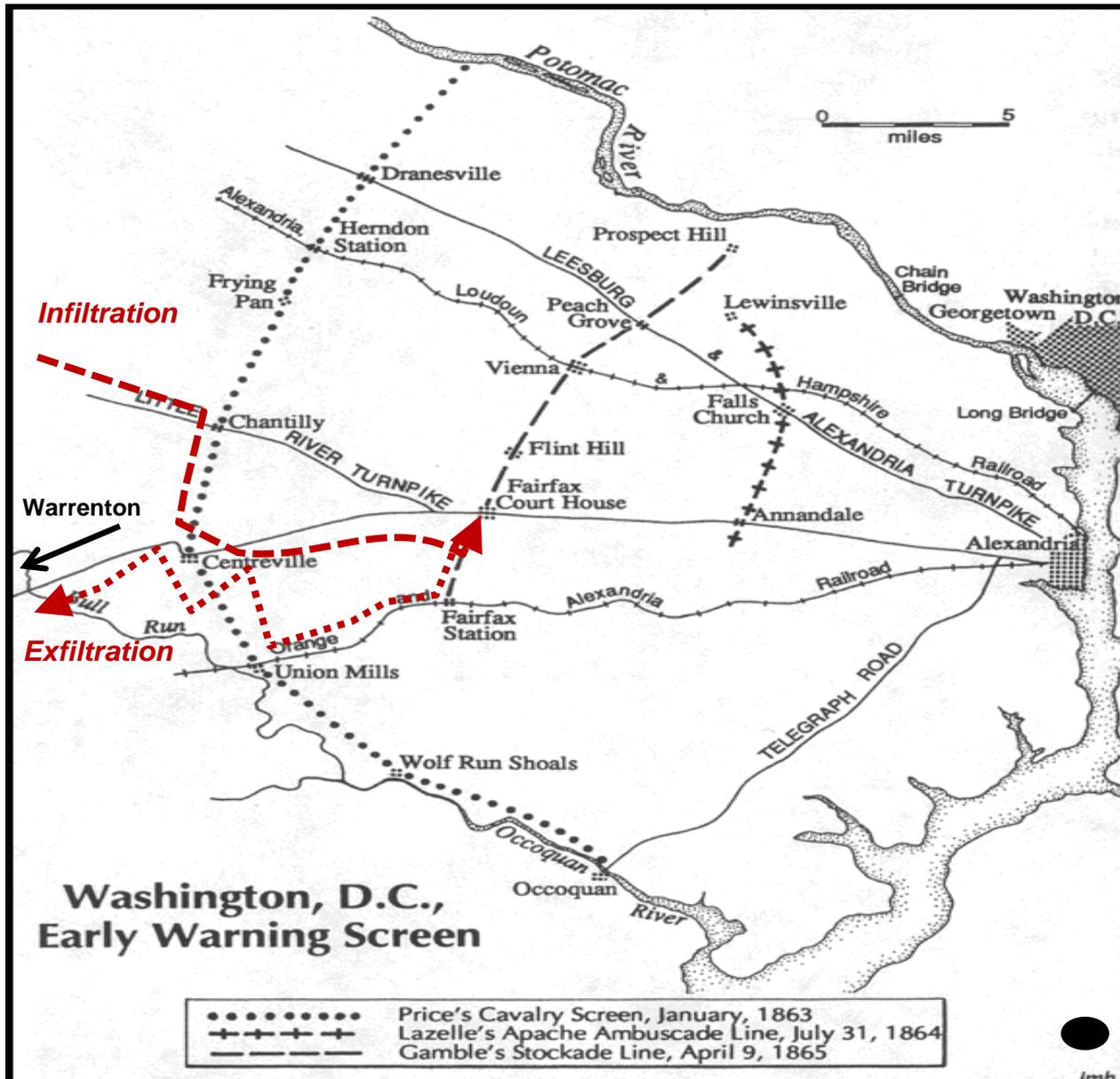
# Actions Before the Raid

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- Mosby starts planning for raid 4-6 weeks in advance
- Gathers intelligence on Union dispositions from locals and Union prisoners
- Decides to conduct night raid to take COL Wynham; secondary targets will be Union prisoners, weapons, and horses
- Uses “Big Yankee” Ames (Union deserter, 5<sup>th</sup> NY Cavalry) expertise to discover and plan for gaps in the Union picket lines for different entrance and exit points
- Engages skills of another trooper (Underwood) who is an expert guide who knows the “deer and rabbit” paths in the county
- Collects Union overcoats and raingear from prisoners to wear during the night raid but plans to remain in grey uniforms
- Only shares mission details with 1 trooper (Ames) for security
- Orders an assembly at Dover on afternoon of March 8; 29 troopers show up



# Mosby's Infiltration Route



# Mission Timeline & Events



*Gunnell House Today (Rectory)*



*Former Bedroom at Gunnell House*

- Reaches Fairfax courthouse around 2 AM, quietly begins taking prisoners and horses
- Once in Fairfax Station Mosby learns that Wynham is in DC, but then learns that BG Stoughton, a Vermonter, is staying down the street in a Dr. Gunnell's house
- Mosby takes 5 men with him to Dr. Gunnell's house and captures BG Stoughton
- Upon capture, Mosby tells BG Stoughton that Jeb Stuart's cavalry has taken Fairfax and S. Jackson is in Centreville, leading BG Stoughton and other Union prisoners to think they are surrounded



# Mission Timeline & Events (cont)

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- BG Stoughton asks to be taken to Fitzhugh Lee, his West Point classmate
- On the way out of the town, a Union officer calls out from a window, and Mosby sends 2-3 men to capture him
  - When they entered the house they are assaulted by the officer's wife until her husband escapes; upon grabbing his uniform they realize the officer is a COL Johnstone, Wynham's 2<sup>nd</sup> in command
  - It is learned later that COL Johnstone hid under the privy next to the house in a semi-naked state for several hours; his wife would not touch him later until he had a bath.....
  - Following this event the COL becomes forever known as "Outhouse" Johnstone!
- Mosby moves southwest from Fairfax slipping back through [Union lines](#) before dawn
- The Rangers capture 1 B. General, 2 Captains, 30 Privates, and 58 horses
- Only one shot is fired, none killed or wounded on either side



# Analysis of Fairfax Raid

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- **Simplicity** - (1) Limited objectives (2) Good intelligence (3) Innovation  
*Mosby kept his objective simple; had good intell from a Union deserter (Ames) and info from local spies; and finally, some troopers wore Union overcoats and raingear to conceal their identities*
- **Security** – Prevent the enemy from gaining foreknowledge of your actions  
*Mosby only told Ames of his plan beforehand and then the rest of the unit only after entering enemy lines*
- **Repetition** – Performance of complex tasks and tactical skills as a matter of routine  
*Mosby's men were intimately familiar with the objective area; they had also conducted smaller, but very similar raids as a unit in the previous 3 months*
- **Surprise** – Catching the enemy off guard, even when he is expecting you  
*Mosby's security precautions, the use of a night raid, plus the inclement weather caught Union forces totally unawares*
- **Speed** – Getting to your objective as fast as possible  
*Mosby began and completed the operation in 1 night, and was back in friendly territory by sunrise*
- **Purpose** - (1) A clearly defined mission statement; and (2) Personal commitment  
*Mosby kept his objective simple and was able to adjust to the absence of COL Wynham by shifting the objective to a bigger prize (BG Stoughton)*



Achieved Relative Superiority? Yes



# Impact of Fairfax Raid

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- Created sensational headlines in both North and South, great embarrassment to Union forces around Washington, DC and northern VA
- Forced Union to move more units from the front line to the Washington, DC area to protect against a force which, at that time, was less than 100 total partisans
- For several months afterwards several bridges across the Potomac had their boards taken up at night for fear of Mosby crossing over into DC to kidnap a VIP or cause general “mischief”
- Provided a huge political and psychological boost to Confederate morale
- And, most “importantly”, it presented an opportunity for President Lincoln to provide one of his best known Civil War quotes:

*President Lincoln, on hearing of the capture, said "he did not so much mind the loss of a brigadier general, for he could make another in five minutes; but those horses cost \$125 apiece!"*

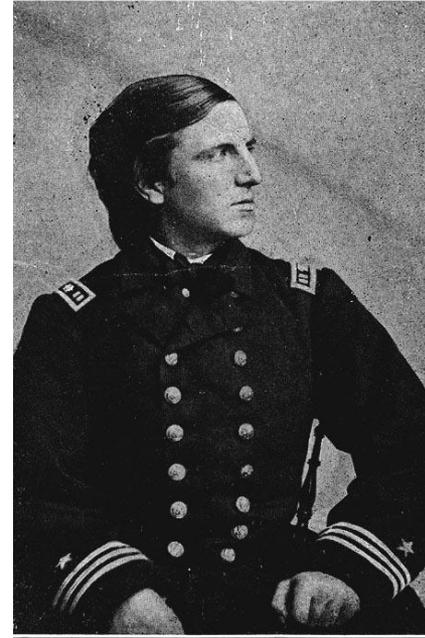


# Case Study 2: Cushing's Attack on the CSS Albermarle

*"Impossibilities Are For the Timid"*



Photo # NH 51748 Lt. William B. Cushing, 1864



LIEUTENANT CUSHING IN 1864

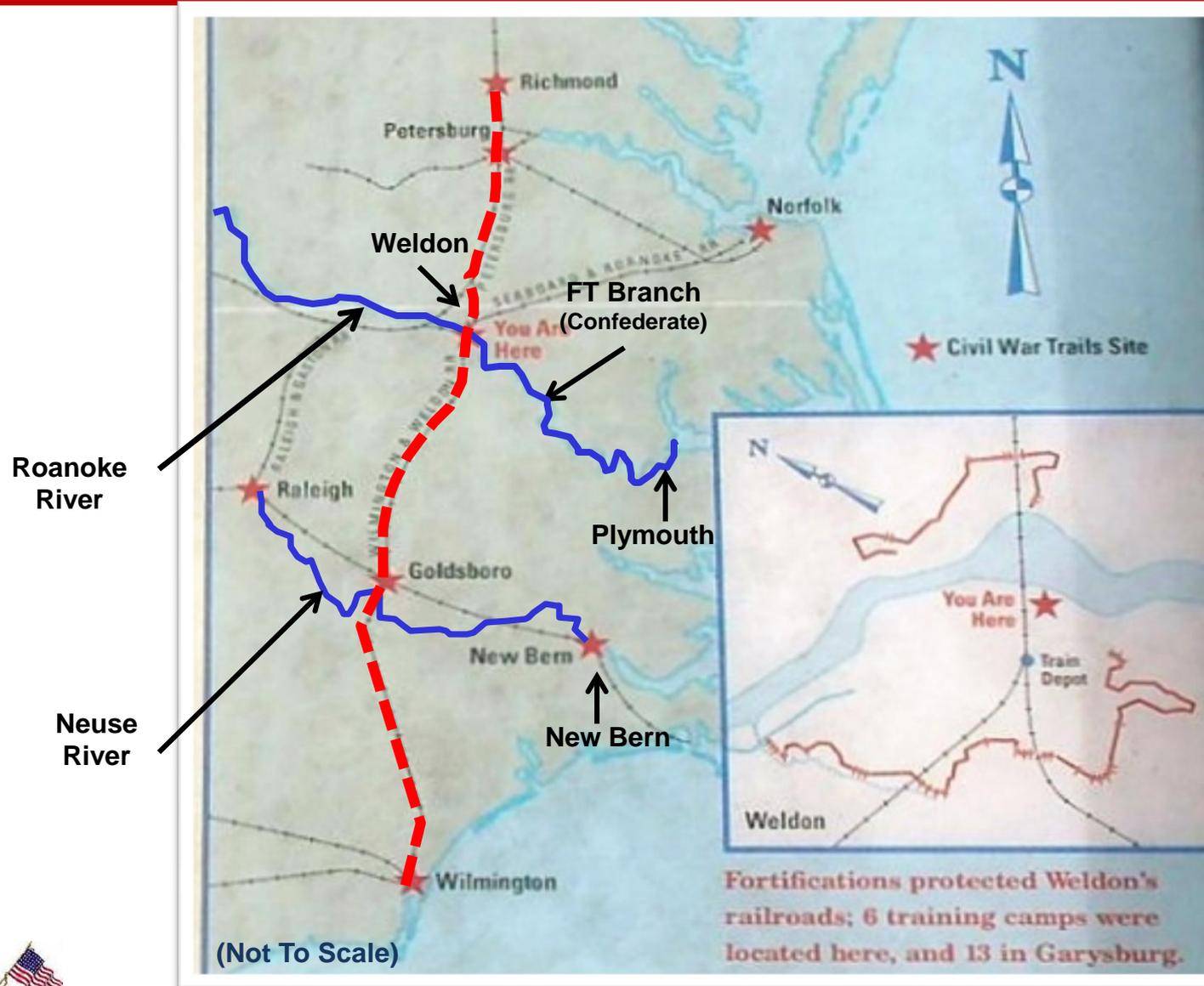
- Who: LT William B. Cushing
- What: Conduct Surprise night attack
- When: October 27-28, 1864
- Where: Plymouth, NC
- Why: To capture or sink the ironclad CSS Albemarle supporting Confederate forces at Plymouth, NC



# Background: Albemarle Sound



# Wilmington & Weldon Railroad



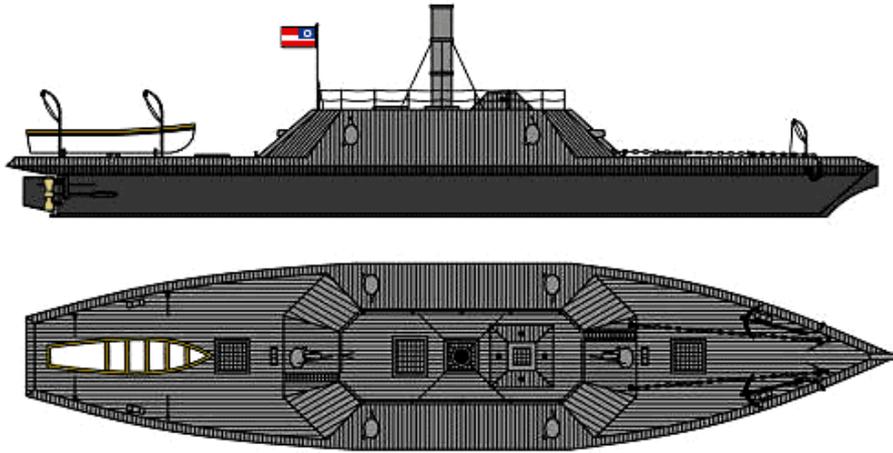
"A great point would be gained in any event by the effectual destruction of the Wilmington and Weldon Railroad."

United States Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, January 7, 1862

Lee's Lifeline to Petersburg- 1864



# Objective of Cushing's Attack-CSS Albemarle



**Albermarle**



- Built in a cornfield at Edwards Ferry, NC, by 19-year old engineer LT Gilbert Elliot
- Technical Specifications:
  - Length: 158 ft (48 m); Beam: 35.4 ft (10.8 m); Draught: 9 ft (2.7 m); steam propulsion of 4 knots with 2 three bladed screws and 2 engines
  - Complement: 150 officers and men
  - Armed with two 6.4 inch Brooke double-banded rifled cannons



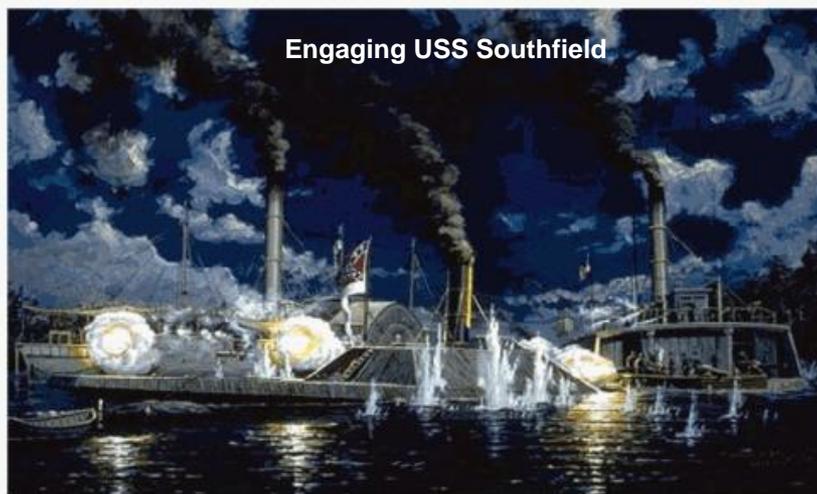
# CSS Albemarle

- Launches in April 1864 to support Confederate MG Robert Hoke's Division attack on Plymouth, NC
- Ship workers continue working on the ironclad as she floats downriver towards the Union fleet; have to navigate stern first for part of the way due to current and engine issues
- On 19 April 1864 engage steamers Southfield, Ceres, Miami and Whitehead at Plymouth; ram and sink USS Southfield, severely damaging the Miami
- Union flotilla commander Charles Flusser killed aboard Miami by shell which bounces off Albemarle then explodes back on the Miami; close friend and mentor to LT William Cushing at the Naval Academy and during the war
- Flotilla retreats; next day Union garrison of approx. 2800 soldiers surrenders to Gen Hoke; 2<sup>nd</sup> largest single surrender of Union troops since Harper's Ferry in September 1862
- Only truly successful Confederate Army-Navy "combined operation" of the Civil War

**USS Southfield Sinking:  
Albemarle engages USS Miami**



**Engaging USS Southfield**

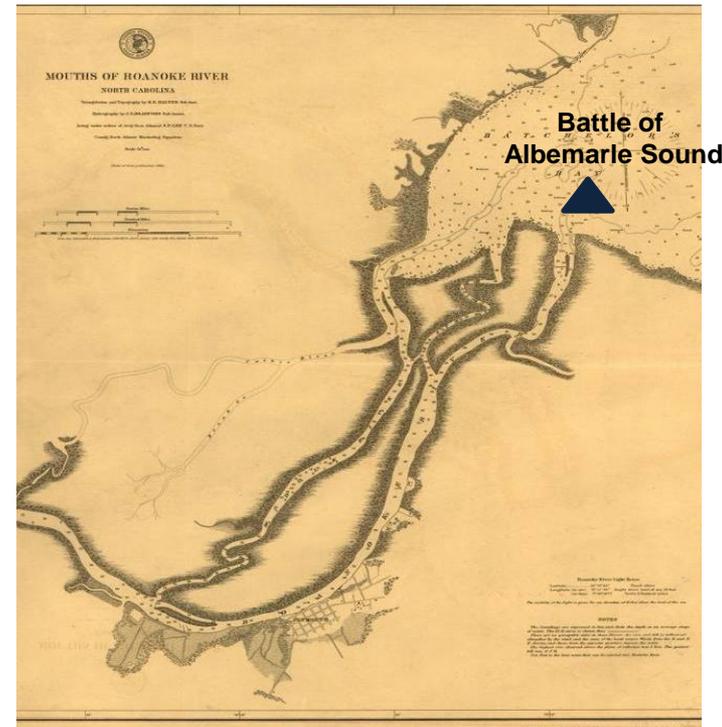


# CSS Albemarle (cont)

- With success at Plymouth, NC, MG Hoke attempts to take New Bern in early May 1864; Albemarle is to sail south to support Hoke's attack
- Union fleet of 8 ships meets CSS Albemarle at mouth of [Albemarle Sound](#)
- Battle fought to a draw; Albemarle receives damage from being rammed by steamer USS Sassacus, and withdraws to Plymouth for repair and defense of Plymouth
- MG Hoke calls off attack on New Bern, and soon after called back to northern VA to support Gen Lee



**USS Sassacus ramming CSS Albemarle,  
Battle of Albemarle Sound**



# William B. Cushing: Lincoln's Commando

- Born in Wisconsin, moves to New York with his family as a child
- Kicked out of the US Naval Academy for being a prankster his senior year
- Reinstated as an Ensign at beginning of war by G. Welles with support from Charles Flusser, his professor and mentor at USNA
- Fights at Battle of Hampton Roads on the USS Cambridge
- Conducts numerous behind enemy line raids and recons in and around the coastal waters of NC
- COL Charles Lamb, Confederate Commander at FT Fisher, places a bounty on Cushing
- Older Brother Alonzo Cushing killed at Battle of Gettysburg defending against Pickett's Charge; other brother LT Howard Cushing killed fighting Apaches in Arizona, May 1871
- Promoted to Commander after the Civil War; dies of dementia in 1872 at age 32 possibly from complications from injuries acquired during the CSS Albemarle attack

Photo # NH 51749 Lt. William B. Cushing, circa 1864



Photo # NH 51750 L.Cdr. William B. Cushing

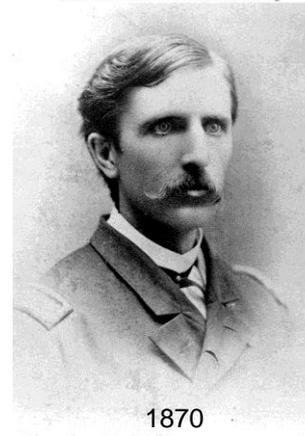


Photo # NH 85515-KN L.Cdr. William B. Cushing, by A. Bradish

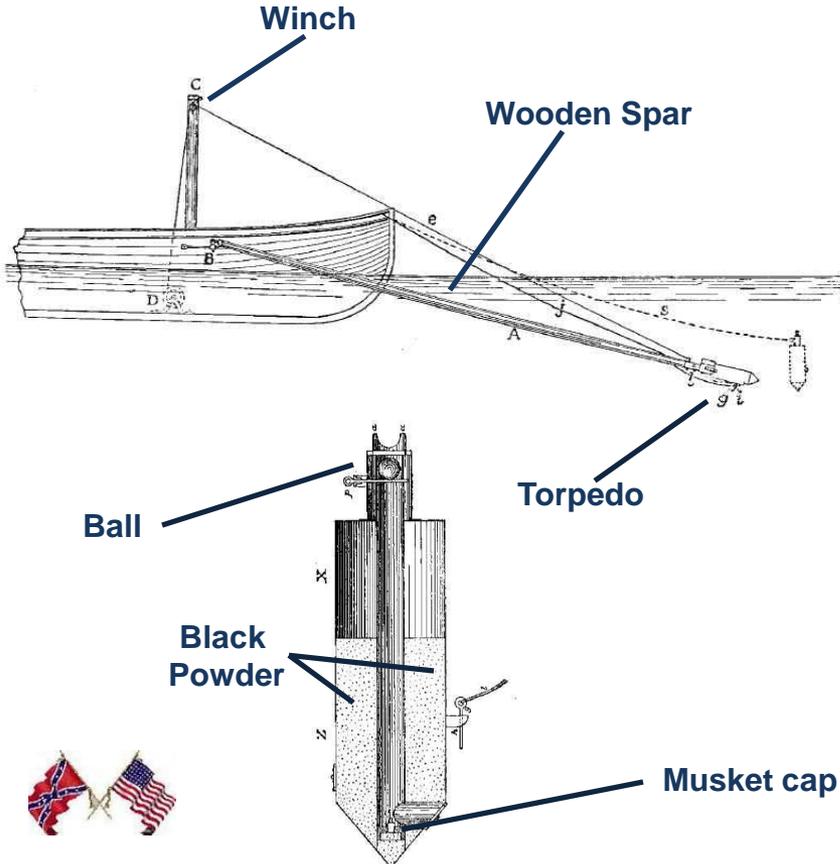
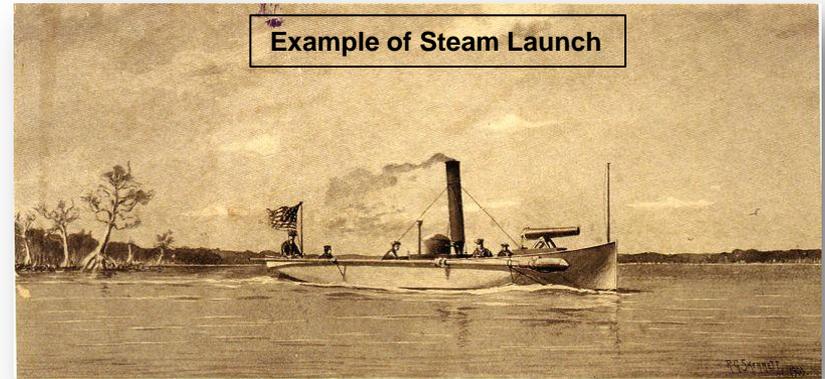


# Route of Picket Boats



# Cushing's Crew and Type 11 Spar Torpedo

- Cushing chooses top quality sailors selected for their expertise and knowledge (ad hoc)
- Never a shortage of volunteers for his missions

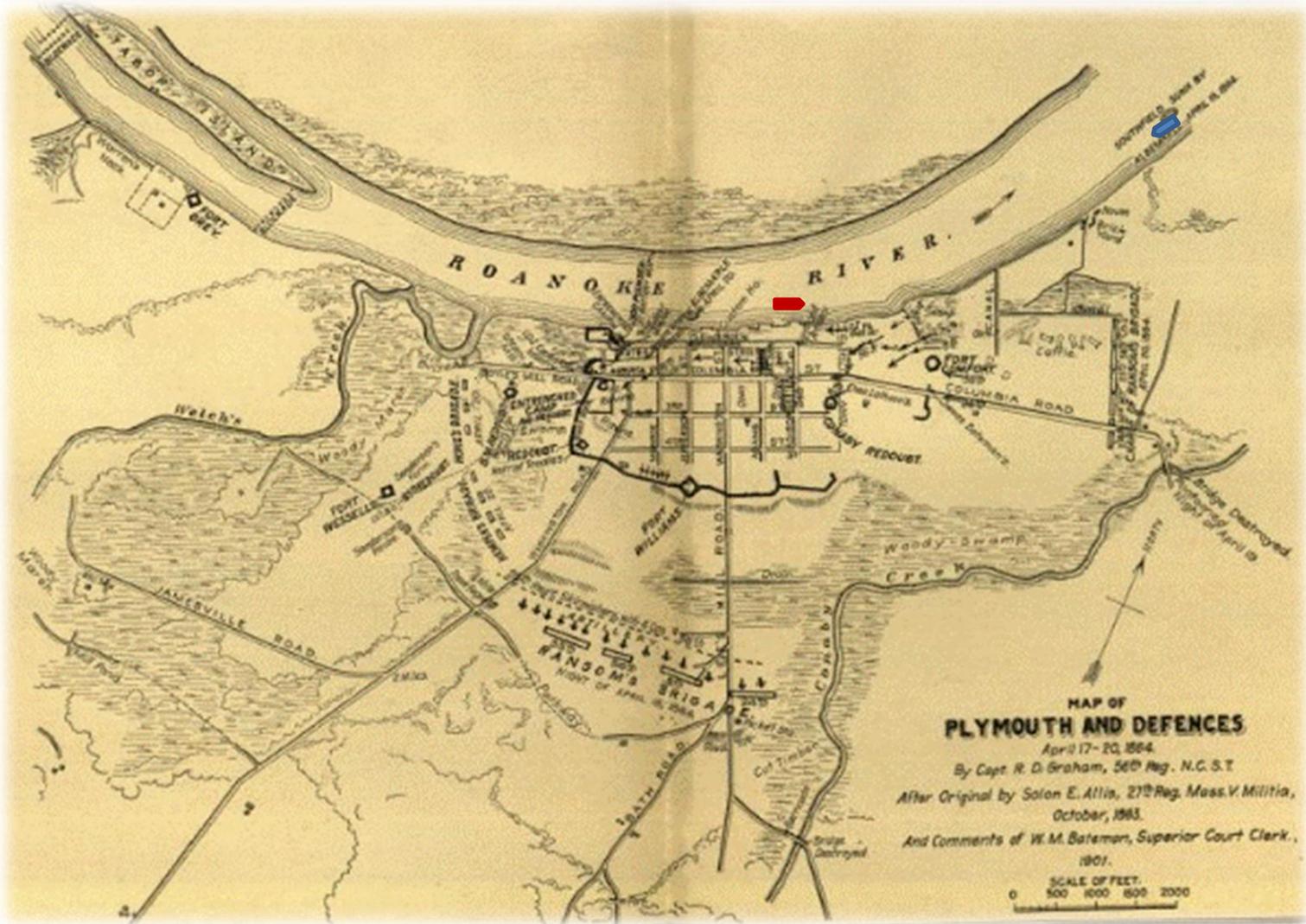


- Concept of torpedo copied from Confederates (sinking of USS Cairo in MS in 1863)
- Cushing likely copies portable torpedo idea from CSS David and Hunley attacks in Charleston
- Designed to be released under Albemarle's wooden hull by 1 lanyard, then detonated by pulling another lanyard, releasing a lead ball dropped on a musket cap, setting off 5 pounds of black powder





# Plymouth, NC

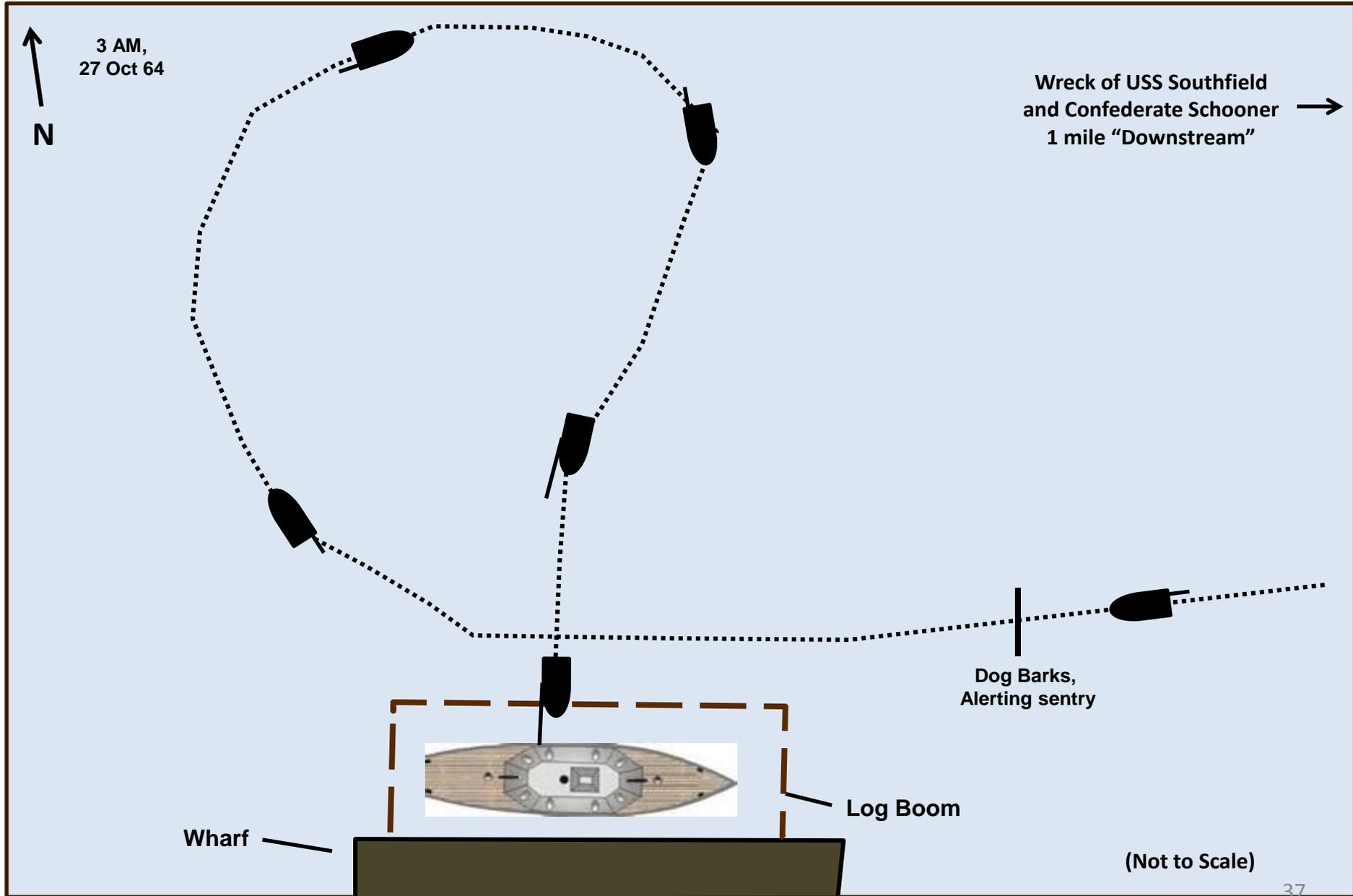


➡ - Location of sunken USS Southfield

➡ - CSS Albemarle Location



# Cushing's Attack On The CSS Albemarle



# Cushing's Attack On The CSS Albemarle



- Simultaneous explosion from the torpedo and cannon knocks Cushing and crew into the water
- Most of the Union sailors are captured or killed
- Only Cushing and 1 other sailor escape; they float downriver to Union fleet
- The next day Cushing finds he has sunk the Albemarle, told by a local slave who he meets while hiding from Confederate search parties along the river bank



# Analysis of Cushing's Attack

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- **Simplicity** - (1) Limited objectives (2) Good intelligence (3) Innovation  
*Simple, clear objective to capture or sink Albemarle; had good local intell and information from military recon and local slaves; developed unique solution of boat mounted Type 11 spar torpedo*
- **Security** – Prevent the enemy from gaining foreknowledge of your actions  
*Kept plans to immediate assault group and his chain of command; isolation on ships helped keep Cushing's where-about secret*
- **Repetition** – Performance of complex tasks and tactical skills as a matter of routine  
*Hand picked men were experts in their specialties; several men had worked other missions with him; rehearsed signals and communications with the men before mission*
- **Surprise** – Catching the enemy off guard, even when he is expecting you  
*Enemy knew Cushing was in area and he planned to attack Albemarle, but they did not know when and exactly how he would attack*
- **Speed** – Getting to your objective as fast as possible  
*Cushing launched after dark and went straight to the objective as quickly and quietly as possible.*
- **Purpose** - (1) A clearly defined mission statement; and (2) Personal commitment  
*Entire crew knew exactly what was to be done and were committed to mission completion at all costs*



Achieved Relative Superiority? Yes



# Impact of Cushing's Successful Attack

- Loss of Albemarle forces Confederates to abandon Plymouth 4 days later, again securing a large part of eastern NC and the coast for Union forces
- Places great pressure on Confederates to secure the Wilmington and Weldon railroad from Union forays and attacks, taking Confederate forces away from FT Fisher area
- Union forces attack and capture FT Fisher in January 1865, cutting Lee's last major supply line from NC
- Lee surrenders Army of northern VA in April 1865



Sunken Albemarle



Docked Albemarle, Norfolk, 1865



# Conclusion

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Today both of these missions would be considered successful Special Operations missions because:

1. Achieved relative superiority through interaction of the 6 criteria:

Simplicity, Security, Repetition, Surprise, Speed, and Purpose

2. Achieved with a small number of men
3. Had an impact on the conduct or outcome of the war



# Questions?



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# BACKUPS



# Personal Characteristics of Partisans

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Independent

Self-Motivated

Non-conformist

Disciplined

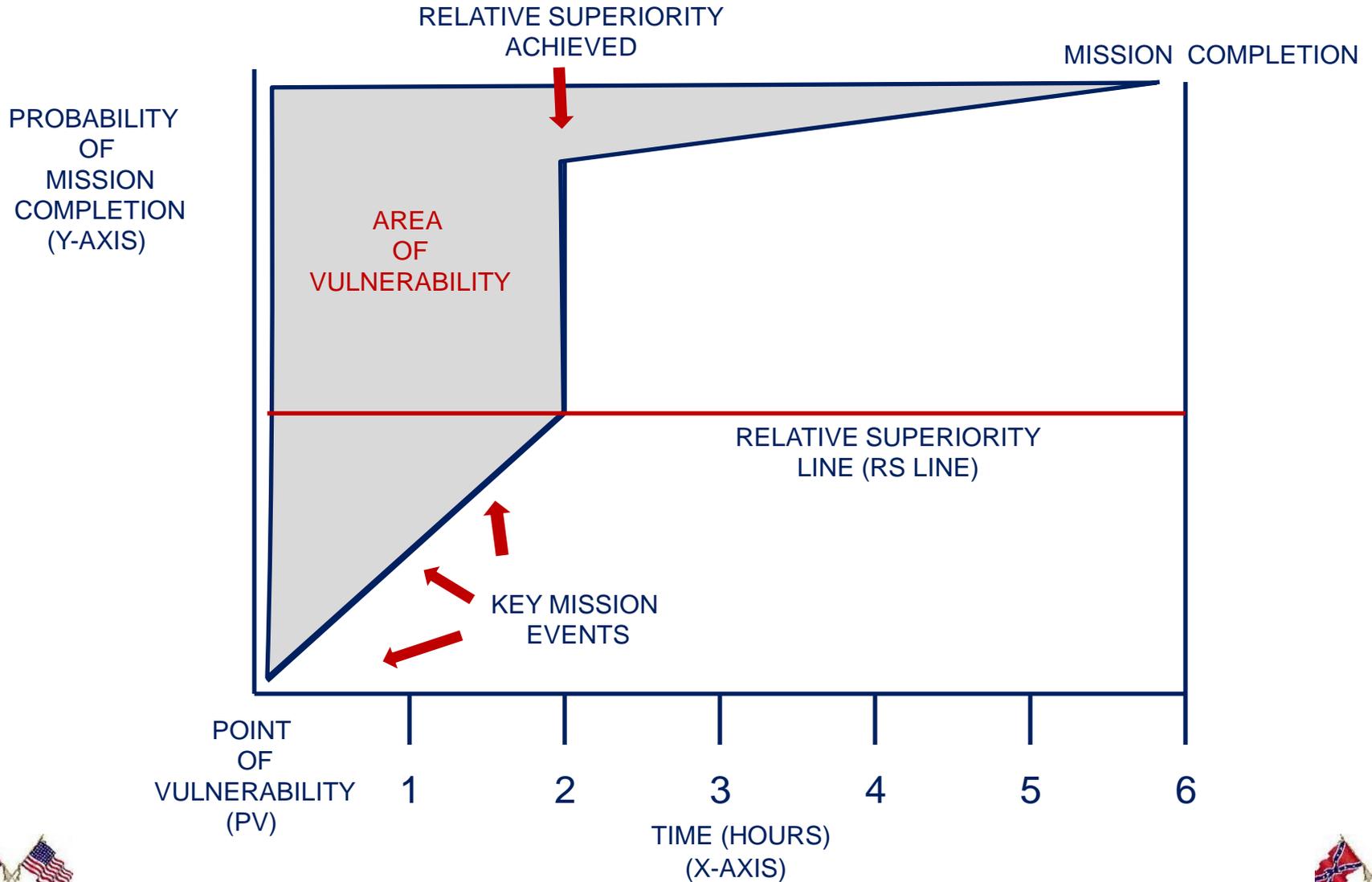
Takes Calculated Risks, but does not “Gamble”

Adaptive, Flexible

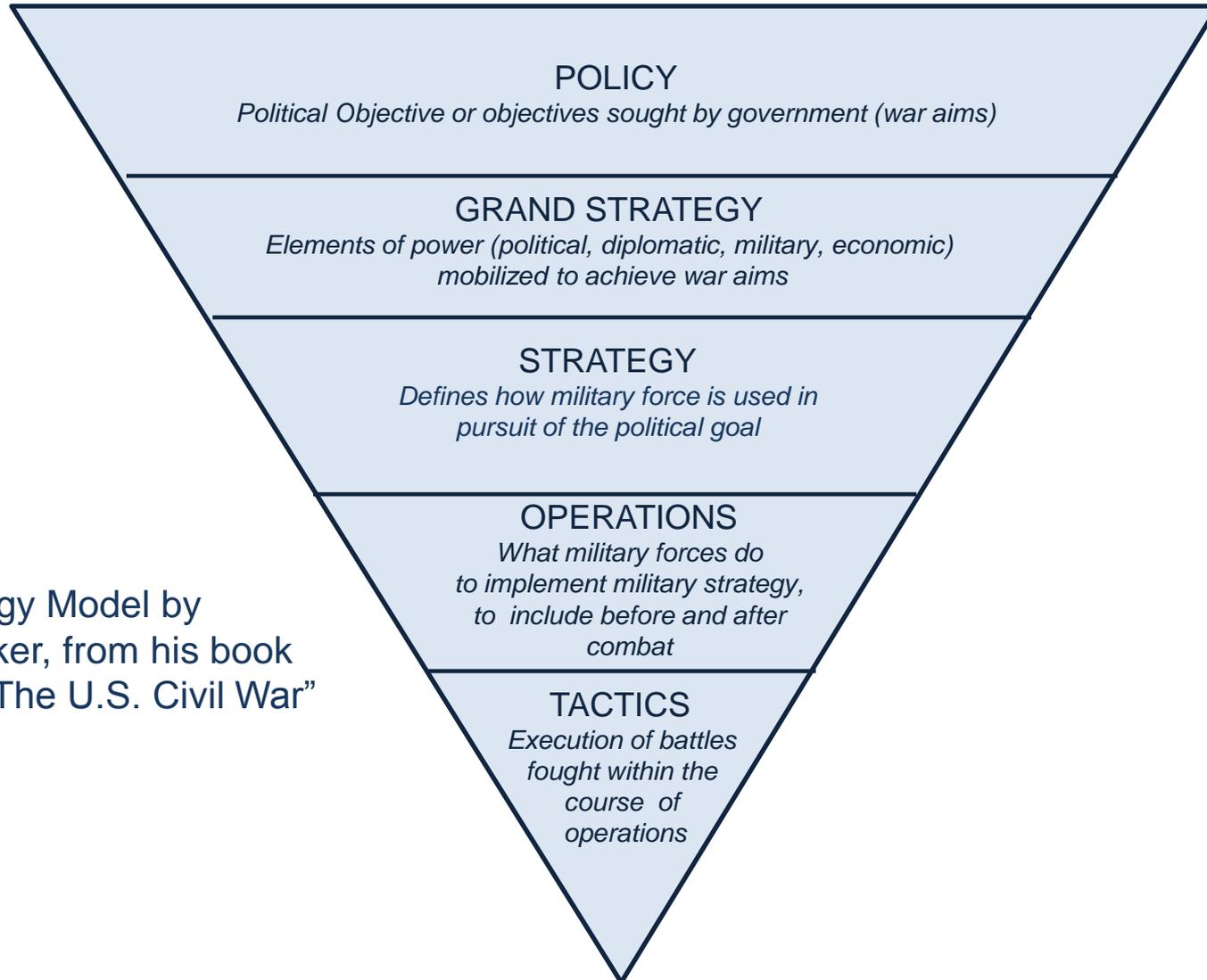
Perfectionist



# Relative Superiority Graph Sample



# Strategy Model



Strategy Model by  
Donald Stoker, from his book  
“Strategy & The U.S. Civil War”

