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**Emory “Mule Shoe” Upton and a Change in  
Tactics at Spotsylvania**

**Lead: Infantry tactics in the American Civil War were very slow to change in the face of improved killing technology. At Spotsylvania in May, 1864, Colonel Emory Upton tried something new.**

**Intro: *A Moment in Time* with Dan Roberts**

**Content: Despite the advent of rifled muskets which could accurately kill at 900 yards, artillery that was devastating to mass assaults and the liberal use of pic, spade and ax to quickly create breastworks to repel**

**attacks, infantry tactics in the American Civil War still mostly emulated those used by Napoleon Bonaparte earlier in the century. Both sides still used the tried and true horrific mass attack despite the enormous casualties and the effusion of blood that resulted from such tactics.**

**At Spotsylvania in May, 1864 a New York-raised, West-Point-trained officer Colonel Emory Upton tried out a new idea. He wanted to modify the mass attack scenario. Using speed and sheer weight of numbers he proposed to lead a new kind of attack against the hastily erected Confederate breastworks which had been constructed to conform to the terrain. The rebel lines were straight until suddenly they surged north in a rounded bulge, a half-mile wide and a half-mile deep. They called it the “mule-shoe.” Upton saw that one section of the mule-shoe was lightly defended and that**

weakness could be exploited to break the Confederate line and if continued could split Robert E. Lee's forces and hasten the collapse of his army.

Upton proposed to fashion his attack after one used during the Chancellorsville campaign the year before to break rebel resistance at Marye's Heights in Fredericksburg. His idea was to modify the mass attack. All of the Union troops would have loaded rifles but only those leading the attack would actually fire. The rest would keep their loaded weapons ready to use when the Confederate lines were breached. Nothing would be allowed to stop the forward movement of the attack. No stopping to load or fire or pausing to help other wounded soldiers. The sheer weight of numbers were to carry the day. And it worked at least at first, but, there were two problems. The attackers were forced to

**endure horrific casualties and in order for this tactic to succeed it had to be supported by units following up the attack. The problem proved to be one of communication and coordination.**

**In the early evening of May 10<sup>th</sup> Upton's regiments through sheer brutal force broke into the Mule-Shoe. The fox was in the hen-house. The Confederate line was broken, but, because of poor communication and coordination, the troops designated to follow-up and support his attack did not materialize and he was forced to fall back to Union lines. Despite this failure, his initiative and initially successful attack earned him commission as a Brigadier General.**

**Two days later after nearly twenty hours of horrible fighting at the so-called "bloody angle" Lee was forced to abandon the Mule-Shoe and regroup at a more defensible position. In the Overland Campaign, Lee at**

last had met his match in Ulysses S. Grant. Instead of retreating and licking his wounds, when blocked, Grant continued to move to Lee's right in a series of attempted flanking maneuvers one of which was at Spotsylvania at the Mule-Shoe. Lee then countered by rushing his forces to block Grants vastly larger army, until, after the Cold Harbor bloodbath, Lee had no more room to counter and with his back to the defenses of Richmond, was surrounded and forced to into what he hated most and which he knew was the beginning of the end: siege warfare, the collapse of his lines around Petersburg the following Spring, the fall of Richmond, and the end of the Confederacy.

Upton stayed with the army after the Civil War and began his own form of warfare, trying to get the Army to modernize its tactics. He compiled his ideas into a book, *The Military Policy of the United States* which

**he submitted to the Commandant of the Army. Disillusioned by the Army's lack of appreciation of his ideas, suffering from a painful brain tumor and depressed, Emory Upton resigned from the Army and committed suicide. In 1904 the Army adopted his text. His ideas influenced the service he loved long after the memory of the Mule-Shoe and his heroic and innovative tactics have faded.**

**Research assistance by Angelene Pell. At the University of Richmond's School of Professional and Continuing Studies, I'm Dan Roberts.**

## Resources

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