Robert E. Lee Essay, Research Paper

Introduction

Few episodes in history are more painful to Americans than the Civil

War, fought between the North and the South. This biography, Great

American Generals – Robert E. Lee, by Ian Hogg, takes the reader through

the life of one of the greatest heroes of that war, Robert E. Lee. It is a

thorough, in depth record of the life of Lee and begins with a detailed account

of his family history and his birth, through his college years, military

experience and his work in later life to his death on October 12, 1870. The

first few pages set the scene by listing a substantial amount of facts about the

names and backgrounds of his parents Harry and Ann and Lee’s wife, Mary

Custis, with some reference to his father’s army career and political life.

After Lee’s early years, the reader will learn of his schooling at the Military

Academy, West Point, followed by his life in the Army before and after the

Civil War. The biography ends in the latter pages with an account of his

work after his military career came to an end, and finally, with his death after

a prolonged period of ill-health, thought to be stress induced.

Author Ian Hogg is a prolific writer in the field of defense and military

technology. He is a weapons expert, having written many books on all types

of rifles, shotguns and small arms, such as Modern Rifles, Shotguns and

Pistols, and Modern Small Arms. He is an acknowledged expert on infantry

weapons and is thought to be the world’s leading expert on this and artillery

strategies. He is a well known author of military history, and works as a

weapons evaluator in addition to his writing.

Robert E. Lee was born in Stratford, Virginia on January 19, 1807.

His father, Henry Lee, had achieved fame with Washington’s army as

“Lighthorse Harry,”and it was a fame that rested not only on his cavalry

exploits but upon sound strategic and tactical ability. A significant portion of

his fame was credited to him for beating off a surprise British attack at Spread

Eagle Tavern in January, 1778. Unfortunately Harry was egotistical

and had a high opinion of his own abilities. Although he achieved the rank of

lieutenant-colonel, he felt that he deserved more. When the war ended and he

had not advanced in rank he resigned from the army to pursue a career in

politics. Henry decided to run for the position of governor. He was elected

Governor of Virginia for three terms. Retiring, as was then customary in

Virginia, on the expiration of his third term, Henry Lee was enough in the

public eye to be considered as a possible successor to Washington. He was,

however, a poor manager of his affairs, and was constantly dodging his

creditors, providing very little of substance for his family. He was a waster,

with no thought for their welfare. A man with no sense of responsibility to

his affairs, Henry Lee eventually ended up in jail for a year for non-payment

of his debts. Upon his release, he spent every waking moment writing his

memoirs, with no regard for his family at all.

Lee’s mother was Ann Carter Lee, daughter of Charles Carter. She was

an invalid, but possessed a strong and beautiful character, and Robert grew

up with a keen sense of honor and responsibility. Robert was named after his

mother’s brothers, Edward and Robert Carter.

Lee’s father, Henry, was separated from the family when Robert was

only four years old. Lee’s mother left Henry due to his lack of provision for

them, and Lee assumed the responsibility of the household at a very early age.

Henry subsequently died when Lee was only eleven, but Lee’s struggle to

maintain the household without the presence of a father, and with little

money, taught him valuable lessons in self-discipline, lessons which

supported him well in his military career.

Since there was no money for college, Robert entered the U.S. Military

Academy in 1825 to pursue a career in the military. He was fortunate in

becoming a Cadet at the Institution at a time when the Superintendent was

Major Sylvanus Thayer, the man who started West Point on its way to fame

as a military training school. He was the second to graduate in a class of 46.

Upon graduation, he was commissioned as a second lieutenant in the

Engineering Corps, a division of the Army which at that time received only

the best Cadets. Unfortunately his pleasure and success diminished when he

returned home to Arlington to find his mother in the last stages of her illness,

and he diligently nursed her there until she died in July of 1829.

Soon after Lee received orders saying that he was to report to

Cockspur Island to help with the construction of Fort Pulaski. While there he

corresponded with Mary Custis, the daughter of Martha Washington’s

grandson. She was also daughter of the wealthy George Washington Parke

Custus, who upon his death left her two beautiful Virginia estates, Arlington

and Whitehouse. In 1831, although against Mr. Custis’s wishes, he married

Mary Custus.

The first place the Lees went after their marriage was Fort Monroe.

Mary Custis despised Fort Monroe. During a Christmas visit back to

Arlington, she made the decision to remain there. In the Spring, Robert rode

back to ask her to return, which she did. By this time she was pregnant and

gave birth to their first child, George Washington Parke Custis Lee. The Lees

had four daughters and three sons. All three of their sons served in the

Confederate Army. Lee’s wife never adjusted to the rigors of army posts and

she and the children lived at Arlington until the war between the states, when

their home fell into the hands of federal forces. Arlington was taken by the

U.S. Government and was never restored to the Lee family, although one time

the family had sued to get it back and was granted an indemnity.

On the outbreak of the Mexican War, in 1846, Lee was appointed to

General Winfield Scott’s personal staff. He proceeded to Brazos on January

16, 1847. The General was deep in preparations for the battle at Vera Cruz.

This was to be Lee’s first experience under actual fire. Because of his

brilliant leadership and skill in strategy, he won the praise of General Scott.

Scott called Lee “the greatest military genius in America”, and “the best

soldier I ever saw in the field.” Lee was there to see the surrender of the

Mexicans on March 29th. He survived many more encounters with the

enemy in the war with Mexico. He arrived back in Washington on June 29,

1848, having been away for one year and ten months.

When Lee entered the war, he was a captain. He emerged with the

rank of Colonel. His next duty was in Baltimore where he supervised the

construction of Fort Carroll. This was to be his last engineering project

because his next stop, in August 1852, was The United States Military

Academy. He became Superintendent at West Point in 1852. In his three

years of service there, Lee established some highly successful procedures

which contributed to the reputation of the Academy.

On April 12, 1855, Lee was sent to Louisville, Kentucky to take

command of the 2nd. Cavalry. As Colonel of Cavalry, Lee spent most of the

next six years in Texas. In 1859, while visiting Arlington, he received a note

from Colonel Drinkard ordering him to report to the Secretary of War

immediately. At Harper’s Ferry trains had been stopped; firing had been

heard; rumor had it that many strangers had arrived and were inciting slaves

to rioting. It was reported to Lee that the leader of the gang was called John

Brown, a notorious antislavery fanatic from Kansas, who had been unable to

rally the slaves to rebellion and was finally besieged in a fire-house. Lee was

to lead the United States Marines, to suppress John Brown’s Raid at Harper’s

Ferry. He asked Brown for his surrender, anticipating that this would not

happen. When Brown refused to surrender, Lee ordered the door of the

firehouse, in which Brown’s band had taken refuge, to be battered down. The

troops had strict orders to attack only with bayonets, not to fire a single shot,

in case any of the hostages would be wounded. The whole operation was

over in three minutes.

In the beginning of the war between the states, Lee found himself

facing the most difficult decision of his life. He believed in the abolition of

slavery, but not by force. He believed in a united nation, but not one that

could be maintained only by swords and bayonets. When President Lincoln

asked him to take command of the Federal troops in the field, Lee replied that

he could not take part in an invasion of his native state. He offered his

resignation and within a few days, he was commissioned to General in the

Confederate Army. He served as military advisor to Jefferson Davis, as

Commander of the Army of Northern Virginia and then as General-in-chief of

all Confederate Armies.

The history of Lee’s conduct in the Confederate campaign is a story of

a heroic struggle against overwhelming odds. In the first two years of the

war, the South made considerable headway, successfully resisting General

McClellan’s attempt to take Richmond. But there were never enough men,

food, or guns. The transportation problem became progressively worse, and

the Armies were continually at the mercy of political plunderers. Against the

superior forces of the Union, Lee pitted all the strategy of a master soldier

and he was able to deliver shattering blows at Bull Run, Fredericksburg, and

Chancellorville. All of this was to come to an end with the arrival of the

battle at Gettysburg. This was to be the turning point of the whole war. On

July 1st, Lee rode towards Gettysburg, hearing the sound of gunfire in the

distance. A few days later, having sustained tremendous casualties, Lee was

planning his retreat.

With the defeat of Lee’s army at Gettysburg, however, in July, 1863,

the tide turned against the south. That was the last time Lee was able to gain

an offensive position. On April 9, 1865, realizing that further resistance was

a waste of time, he surrendered his near starving, depleted army to General

Ulysses S. Grant, the Union commander in chief, at Appomattox Court

House, Virginia. He penned a farewell address to his men and set off the next

day to Richmond, where his family had been living since they had abandoned

Arlington.

His home confiscated, his family impoverished, and his heart heavy,

with the burden of defeated South, Lee turned to the task of reconciliation.

He applied immediately for pardon and restoration to citizenship, feeling that

this example might lead other Confederates to do the same. He tried every

way to heal the breach between the North and the South.

Positions of great honor and remuneration were offered to Lee, both in

his own country and abroad, but he had no desire to enter into politically

controversial activities. In the Summer of 1865 he was offered the

Presidency of Washington College (renamed Washington & Lee University

after his death), in Lexington, VA. The college was virtually in ruins, but Lee

accepted the position after he was ensured his connection with the college

would not injure it in any way. Lee’s friends and relatives were shocked at

the idea that Lee would accept a position at such a small school. He had

received offers from many bigger and wealthier places. Lee, on the other

hand, saw far beyond the title and looked on this as an opportunity to help

rebuild the South by educating it’s youth. Lee truly felt his great purpose in

life was to help make a united country and to this end he set about to educate

Southern youth into a renewed spirit of loyalty. Lee accepted the post and

headed for the college campus in Lexington. Once there, Lee found that as

well as being President of the college, he was also Dean, Bursar, Registrar,

Head Gardener, and general factotum. His salary was $125 per month, and

he had one secretary to assist him. Nonetheless, Lee set to his task and began

writing to other institutions begging for money.

Once the President’s house was ready, Lee’s wife and daughters joined

him there. Lee’s sons were busy attempting to salvage the family estates,

although Arlington was gone forever, forfeited for nonpayment of taxes

during the war, when Union authorities insisted that delinquent taxpayers

had to make payment in person, and it was by this time surrounded by a

military cemetery – as it still is (pg. 75).

Under Lee’s guidance, Washington College prospered. The student

body increased to four-hundred. The curriculum was widened, new buildings

were gradually added, and as the fame of the college spread, students came

from all over the United States.

As the months went by, Lee’s health began to fail. He was treated fro

rheumatism, lumbago, and other complaints, but the plain fact was his heart

was wearing out. In the Spring of 1869, Lee visited Baltimore in an effort to

raise money for a railroad project. From there he went on to Washington,

where he visited his old friend, General Grant, who was now President of the

United States.

When Lee returned from Washington, he began to doubt his ability to

continue as President of the college. He stated that the job needed a fitter

man than he. His talk of resignation was dismissed, and the faculty, early in

1870, suggested that he should go south for a vacation to help regain his

health. In the Summer of 1870, it was unusually hot, and Lee tired easily. He

was no longer able to ride horse. On September 28, it rained and Lee had to

attend a church vestryman’s meeting, where he sat in his wet clothes and

listened to the minister complain about his wages. When Lee finally returned

home, he entered his house, stood silent, and then collapsed in a chair. His

wife promptly sent for a doctor.

The doctors conferred and sent Lee to bed. For the next two days Lee

slept most of the time. After that, he seemed to improve and began to eat.

But when he was offered medicine, he refused saying “it was no use”. For the

next two weeks he stayed in bed. On October 10, Lee’s pulse and breathing

sped up and he suffered shivering spells. On the following day, Lee became

delirious, and his mind wandered to the past. He occasionally called out some

long forgotten names. “Tell Hill he must come up,” he cried. His wife sat

holding his hand the whole night, until just after 9:00 am of October 12, 1870,

Lee sat up, cried out “strike the tent”, fell back in bed and died. He was

buried beneath the college chapel, and the entire nation mourned his passing.

By his courage in war and dignity in defeat, he had won the admiration and

esteem of Northerners and Southerners alike.

Summary

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Lee’s mother was Ann Carter Lee, daughter of Charles Carter. She left

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great-grandaughter. The first place the Lees went after their marriage was

Fort Monroe. They were there for three years, moving on to Arlington in

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to the rigors of army posts and she and the children lived at Arlington until

the war between the states, when their home fell into the hands of federal

forces.

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Lee resigned from the Army a few days later. He was commissioned to

General in the Confederate Army. He served as military advisor to Jefferson

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College in Lexington, VA. The college was virtually in ruins, but Lee

accepted the position after he was ensured his connection with the college

would not injure it in any way. Lee accepted the post and headed for the

college campus in Lexington. The strain of putting the poverty stricken

college back on its feet and the problems of reconstruction took its toll, and

Lee’s health began to fail. He died on October 12, 1870, and was buried

beneath the college chapel.

Analysis

Great American Generals – Robert E. Lee, by Ian Hogg, is an in-depth

recounting of the life and death of Robert E. Lee, one of America’s great

heroes. It begins with an account of Lee’s family history, that of his parents,

and the circumstances into which he was born on January 19, 1807, and ends

with his death on October 12, 1870.

Hogg relates the intervening years in an extremely interesting fashion,

providing many fascinating and detailed pieces of information. The story is

presented in a way that keeps the interest of the reader, and is not boring,

even when giving statistics of the various campaigns that Lee undertook. The

book appeals not just to Lee fans, but to all history students.

The pages are filled with numerous detailed maps, and colorful pictures

that enhance the view of Lee and his life. Military students will delight in the

descriptions of the war, while students of Lee’s character are rewarded by

fascinating facts of his and his parent’s lives.

Hogg presents this painful episode in America’s history in a balanced,

non-judgemental way. He portrays Lee as a man of great integrity and honor,

a true Southern gentleman, and casts no slurs concerning the fact that Lee

was on the losing side of a war in which there were no winners.

This is an exciting and informative book and is one of the more

enjoyable books which are required reading for this course.