

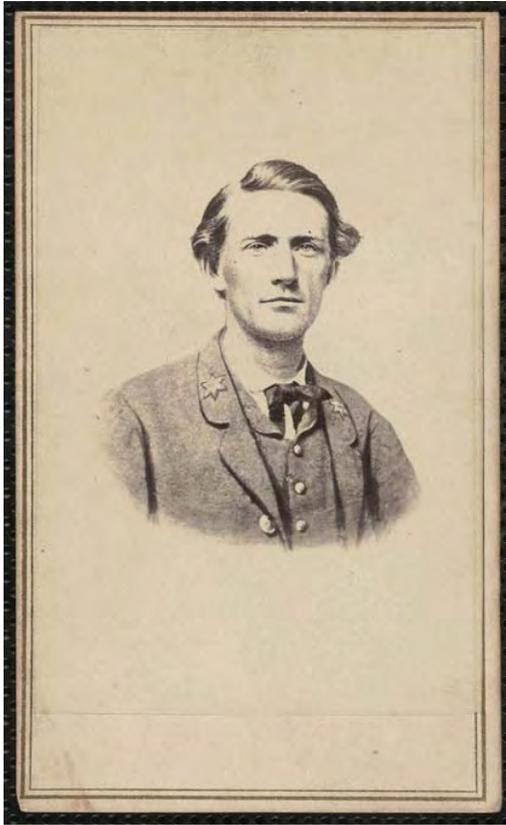
Mosby: A Master at the Use of Fear and Deception

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John S. Mosby and Some of His Men, 1863

Confederate Col. John Mosby and his men wore their Confederate uniforms on missions so that they could claim their rights as prisoners of war if captured. However, they always were accused of masquerading as the enemy. Why? Perhaps because during cold weather, they wore dark overcoats, and when they had Union prisoners, they would place them in front to create the appearance of Union cavalry. They usually marched in a leisurely style, like friends out for a ride, but for disguise they would form column of fours and appear to be well-drilled blueclads. Furthermore, when it rained, they wore dark rubber ponchos, which were standard issue for both North and South, convenient for approaching the enemy with revolvers drawn, concealed under the rain garments.



John S. Mosby,
1861-1865 | Medford Collection

Mosby achieved the objective of using fear as a force multiplier, diverting many times his own number from the Union army and creating disruptions and false alarms. He seemed to possess a sixth sense enabling him to anticipate enemy weaknesses. Like an entrepreneur forecasting the business cycle, he had a tremendous instinct to select targets at the opportune time and place for maximum impact. Part of it was vigilance and alert scouting, but Mosby's record of locating and attacking weaknesses in enemy defenses was almost uncanny. A Union cavalry officer in the Army of the Potomac recognized it when he wrote, "Even now,

from the tops of the neighboring mountains, his hungry followers are looking down upon our weak points."

Time and again, Mosby danced on the nerves of opponents where they were most vulnerable. Union Gen. Philip Sheridan had great personal pride in his ability as a cavalry and supply officer, and one of the last things he wanted was to have some of his wagons captured by guerrillas. Gen. Henry W. Halleck feared that Mosby would make headlines on his watch defending Washington City and stain his reputation. Elizabeth Custer worried that Mosby might capture her beloved new husband, George Armstrong. Mosby's psychological war even went to the extent of sending a lock of his hair to President Abraham Lincoln; even though it was only a joke, it reminded Lincoln that outside the Washington City defense perimeter, Mosby reigned.

Mosby realized that making his name feared would give his warfare greater emotional impact. He insisted that his men make it clear when they attacked that they were “Mosby’s Men.” Rangers learned that the word Mosby was so powerful that it was useful in subduing a guard and preventing him from yelling or shooting. “I am Mosby,” a Ranger would whisper, and sometimes the captive would go into a daze, bowing his head and trembling in fear. When ordered to walk, prisoners staggered as if drunk, some became nauseated and vomited, and others fell on their knees and raised their hands, pleading for their lives.

When a Union soldier disappeared, his friends would say that “Mosby had gobbled him up.”



John S. Mosby,
Richmond 1865 | LOC

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