

they did this, it probably wasn't in their interests to do so. But I believed that this was somehow important and so I kept on digging.

## **The importance of maps in military history**

It was about this time that I read the story of Ball's Bluff. It is not commonly cited as one of the major engagements of the American Civil War but it was not only one of the largest in 1861, it involved the utter rout of Union forces. Most saliently Ball's Bluff is an abject lesson in the importance of maps and situational awareness. Through misinformation and miscalculation, 1,700 Union troops were caught in disadvantageous terrain and in effect slaughtered (with an 8 to 1 kill ratio) by Confederates. A thousand men were lost because the Union Generals had no awareness of the landscape and marched soldiers blindly to their deaths on vague ideas of "because the Confederates are somewhere over there".

The more I read into history, the clearer it became that understanding and exploiting the landscape had been vital in battle. Probably the most famously cited example is the ancient battle of the pass of Thermopylae. In 480 BC, the Athenian general Themistocles faced a significant foe in Xerxes and the Persian army. He had choices; he could defend around Thebes or Athens itself. However, Themistocles understood the environment and decided to block off the straits of Artemisium forcing the Persian army along the coastal road into the narrow pass of Thermopylae known as the "Hot Gates". In this terrain 4,000 odd Greeks would be able to hold back a Persian Army of 170,000 for many days enabling time for the rest of Greek city states to