

Battle of the Wilderness

The beginning of the year 1864 saw the Army of Northern Virginia and Army of the Potomac glaring at each other from opposite sides of the Rapidan River. The Army of Northern Virginia was still smarting from their huge defeat at Gettysburg and their smaller, yet still costly, defeat at Bristoe Station. Meanwhile, the Army of the Potomac was on the north side of the Rapidan awaiting the inevitable spring campaign that would be launched. In November of 1863, the Army of the Potomac had crossed the Rapidan east of Lee's resting army in a fall offensive. But soon the Confederates retreated behind extremely strong earthworks at Mine Run. The Federals, with Meade commanding, halted in front of these menacing-looking defenses, where Meade contemplated assailing the enemy. But, after closer inspection, the cautious Meade saw the Southern works as too strong to be broken by assault. With that, the Army of the Potomac retired across the Rapidan, having seen very little action on the south side of it.

In March 1864 a new Western general arrived in the East—U.S. Grant. He was the victor of Fort Donelson, Vicksburg, and Chattanooga, yet many of the veteran Federals of the Army of the Potomac found nothing about him to instill confidence in them. He wore a plain private's overcoat, and obviously took no concern in his appearance. When he arrived at a hotel, with his son, in Washington D.C. where he was to stay, the desk clerk did not even realize who it was. Grant simply signed the guest book and walked up the stairs to his room. The clerk took a peek at the guest book and saw the signature "U.S. Grant and son", now realizing he had seen "Unconditional Surrender" Grant. Grant soon went to visit the president, and, upon entering the White House, was swamped with admirers and curious visitors.

Grant had been assigned the role of commander of all Union field forces, taking over from Halleck, and decided to make his headquarters with the Army of the Potomac. He knew the Army of the Potomac was the most important Federal army, and also believed that William T. Sherman would make a good commander of the Western armies. He also did not want to sit behind a desk in Washington, like Halleck had done. He also decided to attach Burnside's 9th Corps, on garrison duty, to the Army of the Potomac. This created a huge problem. Burnside was senior to Meade, which made it inappropriate for Burnside to take orders from Meade. To resolve this problem, Burnside, although attached to the Army of the Potomac, would only take orders from Grant, but not Meade. Later on, this would create an entanglement of problems.

Robert E. Lee was now in his second year of commanding the Army of Northern Virginia, with victories in the Seven Days Campaign, Second Manassas, Fredericksburg, and Chancellorsville. To say it mildly, his troops still held the undying devotion and confidence they held when he won major victories at Second Manassas and Fredericksburg. At the moment, his army was camped in the rolling foothills west of the tangled Wilderness. Lee placed his headquarters on Clark's Mountain, where an observation post constantly kept an eye on the Army of the Potomac, across the river. He and his 60,000 men were prepared for the Union offensive.

General Grant had a simple plan: cross the Rapidan River, march through the Wilderness, and get in between Lee and Richmond, thereby obliging Lee to attack the Army of the Potomac on ground favorable to the Federals. Following the 118,000-man Army of the Potomac across the Rapidan was 4,300 Federal wagons. Key to Grant's plan was getting through the tangled thickets of the area popularly known as the Wilderness. If caught in the Wilderness, the terrain would nullify Grant's almost overwhelming numbers in men and artillery. Joseph Hooker and the Army of the Potomac had been caught in this area a year earlier and badly mauled. Grant, as well as most other Federal commanders, no doubt, didn't want to be assaulted by the tenacious Lee in the Wilderness.

On May 4th, Union cavalry splashed across the Rapidan River and seized two fords—Germanna and Ely's Fords. Immediately, Federal engineers began constructing pontoon bridges spanning the river. Soon, three Union corps were streaming across the Rapidan: the 5th Corps, commanded by Gouverneur K. Warren at Germanna Ford; the 6th Corps, commanded by John Sedgwick at Germanna Ford; and the 2nd Corps, commanded by Winfield Scott Hancock at Ely's Ford. Their movements had earlier been spotted by Confederate lookouts on Clark's Mountain, and Lee ordered his men east at noon to confront the Federals in the Wilderness. By this time, the Union army had a good head start on Confederates, but here in the Wilderness, Grant decided to stop and camp for the night. Why did he do this? First of all, he didn't believe the Army of Northern Virginia could reach the Wilderness by the morning of the 5th. Also, he wanted to give time for his cumbersome wagon train, and the 9th Corps guarding it, to catch up to the army. Nonetheless, by halting in the Wilderness on the 4th, Grant had committed his first great blunder of the campaign.

Lee meant to take full advantage of Grant's halt in the Wilderness. He ordered Ewell's 2nd Corps troops east via the Orange Turnpike, while Hill's 3rd Corps approached the Wilderness along the Orange Plank Road. Lee was hoping that he could strike the unsuspecting and open Federal flank in the morning with an overwhelming force, thereby forcing Grant back across the Rapidan as quickly as he had come, or possibly destroying the Army of the Potomac. Temporarily, Lee would be fighting without Longstreet's Corps—1/3 of his army. Longstreet's men had been encamped around Gordonsville, a good distance farther away from the Wilderness than the rest of the Army of Northern Virginia. Lee knew it was likely that if he assailed the Federals on the morning of the 5th, he would have to fight without Longstreet, leaving him with around 40,000 men to combat 100,000 Federals. This movement would be as risky as any Lee had ever made, but he decided to attack on the 5th. Only time would tell whether Lee's newest gamble would succeed or fail, with possibly fatal results for his army.

As the morning of My 5th opened, Federal 5th Corps pickets posted on Orange Turnpike were startled to find a mass of Confederates advancing against them. Along the Orange Plank Road, Hill's troops slowly pushed aside a stubborn Union cavalry regiment. These reports startled Federal headquarters perhaps even more than the pickets themselves. Meade's orders for Warren were to move west along the Orange Turnpike and attack what they believed to be a small enemy force. Upon reaching the eastern edge of a clearing known as Saunder's Field, Warren noticed Southern troops constructing

earthworks on the other side. When he reported this to Meade, the Federal army commander's orders were to attack immediately. But Warren insisted that the Southern line outflanked him on either side, and so he was, understandably, reluctant to assault.

On the Orange Plank Road, Hill's 3rd Corps was making great progress toward capturing the crossroads where the Orange Plank Road and Brock Road met. Hancock was, by this time, well to the south of the rest of the Army of the Potomac, at Todd's Tavern. If this intersection that Hill's Corps was aimed at was captured, Hancock's entire 2nd Corps—the best corps in the Army of the Potomac—would be cut off from the rest of the Federal army and ripe for destruction. Union headquarters saw the peril the Army of the Potomac would be put in if Confederates seized the Brock Road intersection. Meade ordered three Federal brigades under George Getty to the crossroads. The troops arrived at their destination just in time to halt the lead Confederates, a mere 50 or so yards away. Immediately after reaching the intersection, men of Getty's division began constructing earthworks in anticipation of a Confederate assault. Meade, believing Getty couldn't hold long without support, ordered Hancock and his 2nd Corps to the crossroads to help in its defense. Around 4 p.m., Hancock's Corps began arriving at the intersection, and all Union troops, including Getty's, were under orders from Meade to assail the Southerners.

Hill had, after being rebuffed by Getty's troops, withdrew his corps several hundred yards west of the Brock Road intersection and set up a defensive line on a gentle ridge parallel to Orange Plank Road. From here he prepared to receive the enemy attack of a size he had no idea. Hancock attacked viciously, feeding arriving troops into the fight as soon as they arrived. Night fell with neither Hill's or Hancock's troops having won any advantage.

As all this transpired on the southern part of the battlefield, a fierce fight raged around Saunder's Field. By 1 p.m., Meade's patience had disappeared. He had grown tired of Warren's continual delays, and so ordered him to attack without Sedgwick's support. Warren, though reluctant, ordered the attack. Across Saunder's Field his troops went, into a wall of flames from the Confederate breastworks. All along the line, Federal troops advanced and fled, with the famed Iron Brigade breaking for the first time in its illustrious history. Late in the day, Sedgwick's newly arrived corps launched a flank attack on Ewell's left flank, but it failed horribly. The day's fight on the northern part of the battlefield, like that on the southern part, ended with the cries of the wounded.

As night fell, both armies were missing a corps—Longstreet's for the Confederates and Burnside's for the Federals. Lee still had a huge gap in between Ewell's Corps to the north and Hill's Corps to the south. If the Federals discovered and exploited this gap, Lee's army might well be destroyed. Also, Hill's Corps, although holding its ground, had been terribly beaten up by the day's fighting, and it was questionable that they could hold against a determined Union attack on May 6th. Lee was beginning to get worried, having not heard a thing from Longstreet for many hours.

The Federal command had developed a plan for the destruction of Lee's army. They knew how terribly depleted Hill's ranks were, and planned to use that to their advantage.

Hancock's Corps and Getty's Division were to attack Hill from the east, while Wadsworth's Division turned Hill's left flank, and Burnside's Corps delved into the gap between Hill's and Ewell's Corps. Burnside troops would then slice into Hill's rear, completing his destruction. After Hill's demise, the Federals were to turn on Ewell's lone corps and destroy it in turn. This plan certainly held great promise if carried out well. Meanwhile, neither Lee nor Hill directed their disorganized lines, which they would soon wish they had done.

At 5 a.m., the Union assault opened, with the exception of Burnside's absent corps. Hill's heavily outnumbered corps made a desperate, brave stand, but it was futile. Soon, Hill's whole corps was streaming westward in disorder. Lee ordered William T. Poague's artillery to slow down the Union advance at Widow Tapp's Field, to give Longstreet more time to appear. As all seemed lost for the Army of Northern Virginia, a column of Confederate troops was seen marching toward Lee and his entourage. Lee asked who these troops were, and it was announced that they were Texans. Longstreet had arrived.

Initially, Lee began marching forward with the Texans, intending to lead the attack. But the Texans would have none of that. Many grabbed Traveller's bridle and pointed him rearward, while they refused to move forward until Lee went back. At this moment, an aide approached Lee and told him that Longstreet had arrived, so Lee moved rearward to speak with him. The Texans charged full-force into Federals in Widow Tapp Field. Along both sides of the Orange Plank Road, men of Longstreet's Corps repulsed the disorganized Union advance. Wadsworth's division became embroiled in a heated fight in the thickets north of the Orange Plank Road, with Wadsworth being mortally wounded in the fight. The Union troops retreated back to Brock Road, where they began digging a defensive line.

But there was one terrain feature both sides had forgotten about—the unfinished railroad bed south of the Orange Plank Road and Hancock's left flank. When that place was inspected, it was found to be a wonderful staging area for a Confederate flank attack. The Southern troops could assemble in the railroad cut invisible to Hancock's troops. Then they could launch a surprise attack on the open flank of the 2nd Corps. Four Confederate brigades were sent to the railroad bed, and were to be commanded by Longstreet's aide G. Moxley Sorrel, who had never before commanded troops in battle. His men launched their attack and rolled up the Union line “like a wet blanket”, in Hancock's words. But, as the Southern attack seemed to be achieving the rout of the Union army, Longstreet was badly, although not mortally wounded. He had been traveling with this staff when a group of Confederate troops, mistaking the mounted Southerners for Federals, opened fire, shooting Longstreet in the throat and killing one of his great brigade commanders, Micah Jenkins. The confusion ensuing Longstreet's wounding brought the Confederate assault to an end. The Federals now restored their lines and prepared for any further Southern attacks.

Lee decided to make one more desperate frontal attack against the Union earthworks at the vital intersection. As Lee's troops emerged from woods opposite the Federal lines, the wooden breastworks caught fire from artillery and musketry fire. In the ensuing

confusion, Southern troops broke the Union line, but only temporarily. Soon, Federal reinforcements were being rushed to the breakthrough, sealing the breach. Lee decided to make no more attacks in this sector.

On the morning of the 7th on the northern section of the battlefield, the audacious John Gordon, commanding a division on the Confederate left opposite Sedgwick, found an opening for an attack. He saw that his left overlapped Sedgwick's right, making the Union flank vulnerable to assault. All through the morning and afternoon, Gordon begged his corps commander, Richard Ewell, for permission to make this attack. He did not get the permission to attack until late in the afternoon, but decided to make the assault nonetheless. As a couple of his brigades made a frontal attack, one other rolled into the Federal flank, scattering the unsuspecting Union troops. But soon, the lack of daylight and disorganization caused by their success stopped their advance. They were ordered to retire to their entrenchments.

On the night of May 7th, the Army of the Potomac slid southward to Spotsylvania Courthouse, hoping to get there before the Confederates. But after stubborn Southern cavalry resistance and a bold stand on a hill north of the courthouse hamlet, the Army of Northern Virginia reached first. Lee had, in the Wilderness, suffered anywhere from 8,000 to 11,000 casualties, while Grant had lost around 18,000. Lee had also lost his most trusted and experienced subordinate, James Longstreet. The Overland Campaign, as it would come to be known, would continue for another month, until Grant crossed the James River in early June. Thousands and thousands of more men would be lost. Lee and Grant would become familiar with each other and earn great respect from each other.