

# **A Tempest of Iron and Lead**

Spotsylvania Court House,  
May 8–21, 1864

Chris Mackowski



Savas Beatie  
California

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For John Hennessy



*The Bloody Angle* by N. C. Wyeth, from Mary Johnston's novel  
*The Long Roll*. *Author's Collection*

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## A Note About the Language

**S**oldier spelling was wildly inconsistent when it came to locations. The correct spelling of “Spotsylvania” has only one “t,” but soldiers frequently used two: “Spottsylvania.” I have left spellings as they originally appeared. Similarly, soldiers wrote “Court House,” “Court-house,” and “Courthouse.” If referring to the county seat, the correct spelling is “Court House” (the village that houses the court), although soldiers hyphenated the spelling, as well, which I have left uncorrected. “Courthouse,” as one word, refers to the building where court is held.

In a few instances, I have directly quoted language from soldiers that may sound offensive to modern ears. I have tried to convey these men as they spoke, thought, and acted in and of their time.

Dialogue that appears in quotation marks has been quoted directly from a source. On occasion, where a source indirectly quotes a person’s speech, I have opted to put that dialogue in *italics* rather than in quotation marks. That has allowed me to convey the sense of what a person said without misrepresenting their words as exact quotations.

This report, written in the midst of active operations, is scarcely more than a general sketch, and must necessarily be very defective from the absence of so many sub-reports and the loss of so many commanders whose information would have served as a guide in awarding credit by special mention to many gallant officers and men, both of those who fell and those who have survived through this eventful and unexampled campaign.

— John Gibbon, official report  
*O.R.* Vol. 36, Pt. 1, Pg. 452

I never expect to be fully believed when I tell what I saw of the horrors of Spottsylvania, because I should be loth to believe it myself, were the case reversed.

— Thomas Worcester Hyde  
*Following the Greek Cross*

# Foreword

*Gordon C. Rhea*

**B**y the spring of 1864, Federal forces had won a string of victories in the Civil War's Western Theater. In the East, however, Maj. Gen. George G. Meade's Army of the Potomac had achieved little since defeating Gen. Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at Gettysburg in July 1863. Desperate for military success in the East, President Abraham Lincoln placed newly promoted Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant, architect of the Union's western triumphs, in charge of the nation's military.

The new general in chief planned for Federal forces in both theaters to move in tandem, fighting without quarter to destroy the Rebel armies. Grant determined to defeat Lee in Virginia by employing the same principles that governed his national strategy. Meade's army, marshalling some 119,000 soldiers against Lee's 66,000, was to cross the Rapidan River and attack Lee; the Army of the James, commanded by Maj. Gen. Benjamin F. Butler, was to advance up the James River, capture the Confederate capital of Richmond, and continue into Lee's rear; and a third Federal body, under Maj. Gen. Franz Sigel, was to threaten Lee's left flank and disrupt his supply lines by marching south through the Shenandoah Valley. In sum, Grant meant to crush Lee in a three-pronged vice.

The campaign opened the night of May 3 as the Potomac army moved across the Rapidan downriver from Lee, circumventing strong Confederate defenses. Meade intended to swing below the river toward Lee, passing through a forbidding forest of tangled second growth known as the Wilderness. However, he chose to halt for a day in the Wilderness to enable his supply wagons to catch up, a grave mistake that afforded Lee an opportunity to seize the initiative.



An 1887 illustration by Thure De Thulstrup, widely reproduced as a chromolithograph by Boston publisher L. Prang & Co., stands as the most famous depiction of the battle of Spotsylvania Court House. *Library of Congress*

Lee recognized the Army of the Potomac as his chief threat but was uncertain when and where it would cross the Rapidan. He also worried that he might have to dispatch part of his army to help protect Richmond. Accordingly, he posted cavalry along the Rapidan past each end of his fortified river line and awaited Grant's advance, keeping almost a third of his infantry several miles in the rear where it could rush to Richmond by rail if necessary. Above all, Lee determined to hold his position below the Rapidan. "If I am obliged to retire from this line," he cautioned the Richmond authorities, "either by flank movement of the enemy or want of supplies, great injury will befall us."

The resulting campaign involved 43 days of constant fighting and maneuvering that took the armies from the Rapidan to the James. Dubbed the Overland Campaign, the battles generated some 90,000 casualties and rank among the Civil War's bloodiest six consecutive weeks. Almost a third of the casualties occurred during the fighting near Spotsylvania Court House, one of the campaign's major battles and the topic of this book.

In the late 1970s, I became interested in the Overland Campaign and began visiting the battlefields. To my disappointment, I could find only one book-length treatment of the campaign's opening confrontation in the Wilderness and nothing at all covering in detail the subsequent fighting at Spotsylvania Court House, the North Anna River, Cold Harbor, or the maneuvers to Petersburg. Since then, several historians have labored to fill that void. The first book dedicated to Spotsylvania Court House was William D. Matter's *If It Takes All Summer: The Battle of Spotsylvania*, published in 1988. My *Battles of Spotsylvania Court House and the Road to Yellow Tavern, May 7–12, 1864* appeared in 1997, and Chris Mackowski and Kristopher D. White's *A Season of Slaughter: The Battle of Spotsylvania Court House, May 8–22, 1864* appeared in 2013. Jeffery D. Wert's *The Heart of Hell: The Soldiers' Struggle for Spotsylvania's Bloody Angle* came out in 2022.

Chris Mackowski's *A Tempest of Iron and Lead: Spotsylvania Court House, May 8–21, 1864* is the latest book to grapple with the horror and complexity of the fighting around Spotsylvania Court House. He brings fresh insight to the topic, having conducted numerous tours of the pertinent sites, written scores of articles and a previous book about the battle, and delivered a multitude of talks interpreting the campaign. He has not only uncovered new sources, but his sparkling prose brings the participants to life, be they generals or the commonest of soldiers. He also introduces us to local residents, such as Sarah Spindle and her family, who found themselves caught in an open field between the two contending armies and fled for their lives as their home burst into flames.

*A Tempest of Iron and Lead* is an engaging and entertaining read that adds to our knowledge of this fascinating battle.



# Prologue

John D. Starbird stood with his face to the provost guard, his back to his grave. His yet-empty coffin sat next to the yet-empty hole in the earth. Several yards in front of him, a captain was passing out rifles—seven loaded with ball cartridges and one with just a flash of gunpowder. Each man in the firing squad could ease his conscience, if he needed to, by telling himself that *his* was rifle loaded with the blank. *He* had not gunned down a fellow soldier in cold blood, even as an act of duty, even if the man was guilty.

But deception was perhaps the order of the day. The men of the 19th Massachusetts Infantry's Company K knew the man standing in front of his own grave as John D. Starbird, but he'd gone by Lawrence J. Hoyt, too. A Boston native, he was only 21 when he enlisted in the regiment back in September 1861. Sometime in the spring of 1862, he had slipped away and later joined another regiment, getting a bounty for doing so—and “in a short time joined still another getting another bounty.” Someone finally rounded him up, though. A court-martial tried and sentenced him, but “upon the urgent solicitation of his mother, he was pardoned by the President.” In the years ahead, as the story of his death was told and retold, that detail always survived the telling, even if other details went missing or changed: John D. Starbird was pardoned by President Lincoln. And Starbird squandered it.<sup>1</sup>

1 Gordon Rhea, *The Battles for Spotsylvania Court House and the Road to Yellow Tavern, May 7–12, 1864* (Baton Rouge, LA: LSU Press, 1997), 421n65. Rhea credits work done by National Park Service historian Eric Mink; Earnest Linden Waitt, *History of the Nineteenth Regiment, Massachusetts Volunteer Infantry, 1861–1865* (Salem, MA: Salem Press, 1906), 316; John Day Smith, *The History of the Nineteenth Regiment of Maine Volunteer Infantry, 1862–1865* (Minneapolis, Great Western printing company, 1909), 172.

In February and March 1864, the 19th Massachusetts returned to its native Salem for a 30-day furlough. During the regiment's time home, Starbird and two other deserters were reunited with their original unit and shipped with them back to the front. "The charges against him had been placed on file on condition that he serve faithfully to the end of the war," regimental historian John Adams later noted.<sup>2</sup>

Starbird's faithful service lasted until the battle of the Wilderness. There, on May 7, in the heat of the battle and the burning forest, Starbird "desert[ed] his post and the colors of his regiment while engaged with the enemy."<sup>3</sup>

He slunk his way back, though, and was with his regiment as it marched to Spotsylvania Court House on May 8, as it crossed the Po River on May 9, and it faced enemy fire on May 10—and Starbird fled again. "[T]he soldier's courage failed him and . . . he did not advance with his regiment," one witness said.<sup>4</sup>

Another court-martial. No intervention from mother this time. No presidential pardon. Instead, on May 17, General Order 127 from Army of the Potomac headquarters: "Corps and division commanders will bring to immediate trial the deserters from the battle-field now being returned to the army. . . ." Commanders were to forward trial results, without delay, for the commanding general's endorsement so that "no time may be lost in inflicting summary punishment for this disgraceful crime."<sup>5</sup>

The hunt was on for "skulks and stragglers."<sup>6</sup>

"At that time," said a man from Starbird's regiment, "there were in the ranks of every regiment, men who had no interest in the cause. They had enlisted for the bounty, and did not intend to render any service. They not only shirked duty, but their acts and conversation were demoralizing good men."

The problem had become "so serious an evil as to excite the attention of everyone," said II Corps division commander Brig. Gen. John Gibbon. The problem, as Gibbon saw it, was that no one did anything about it, and so "the evil continued and even increased." He painted a picture of the "more faithful" men

2 John Gregory Bishop Adams, *Reminiscences of the Nineteenth Massachusetts Regiment* (Boston, Wright & Potter printing company, 1899), 94.

3 Charles H. Banes, *History of the Philadelphia Brigade: Sixty-Ninth, Seventy-First, Seventy-Second, and One Hundred and Sixth Pennsylvania Volunteers* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott & Co., 1876), 258.

4 Smith, 172.

5 General Orders No. 127, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, Robert N. Scott, ed. (Wilmington, NC: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1985), Vol. 36, Pt. 2, 843. Hereafter, the *Official Records* shall be abbreviated as *O.R.*, with volume, part, and page listed thus: *O.R.*, 36:2:843.

6 Birney, circular, *O.R.*, 36:2:912.



doing the hard work in combat while shirkers, slinking away from battle, “literally filled” the roads behind the lines.<sup>7</sup>

Major General David Bell Birney, another II Corps division commander, agreed with Gibbon. “Summary punishment should at once be inflicted on all such men,” he ordered. A “pale, Puritanical figure, with a demeanor of unmoveable coldness,” Birney predicted “a beneficial effect” from such punishments, carried out in front of each guilty man’s regiment to make an example of him. In addition to a loss of month’s pay, Birney suggested other “punishments sanctioned by usage, such as tying up, placarding, riding wooden horses, &c. . . .”<sup>8</sup>

Starbird served in Gibbon’s division, and he was being served up as just such an example as Birney had suggested—although Gibbon, for his part, had an even harsher example in mind: he recommended that courts-martial “inflict in every clear case the penalty of death, in order to save life and maintain the efficiency of the army.” Gibbon saw Starbird’s case as especially flagrant, all the more so because Starbird came from “one of the best regiments in my division.”<sup>9</sup>

Starbird’s court convened on May 19 on the edge of the woods near division headquarters. Proceedings were of “the most summary character, the main point being to establish the guilt of the accused.” Gibbon, of grizzled face and long moustache, reminded the court: “The fact that a man is sent back under guard to his regiment after a battle, and is unable to show any authority for his absence, ought to be sufficient for his conviction.”<sup>10</sup>

Witnesses swore in. The court took testimony, though kept no record. It reached a verdict and handed down a sentence. Everything was duly noted and signed.

The court acquitted Starbird of the charge of cowardice in the Wilderness, but found him guilty of the charge on the Po River. “[T]he man was *in the habit of running away* every time the regiment went into action,” wrote an incredulous Gibbon.<sup>11</sup>

Army of the Potomac commander George Gordon Meade returned his approval. “The major-general commanding is determined to exercise the utmost rigor of the law in punishing those cowards who disgrace their colors by basely deserting them in the presence of the enemy,” his adjutant wrote.<sup>12</sup>

7 John Gibbon, *Recollections of the Civil War* (New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1928), 223.

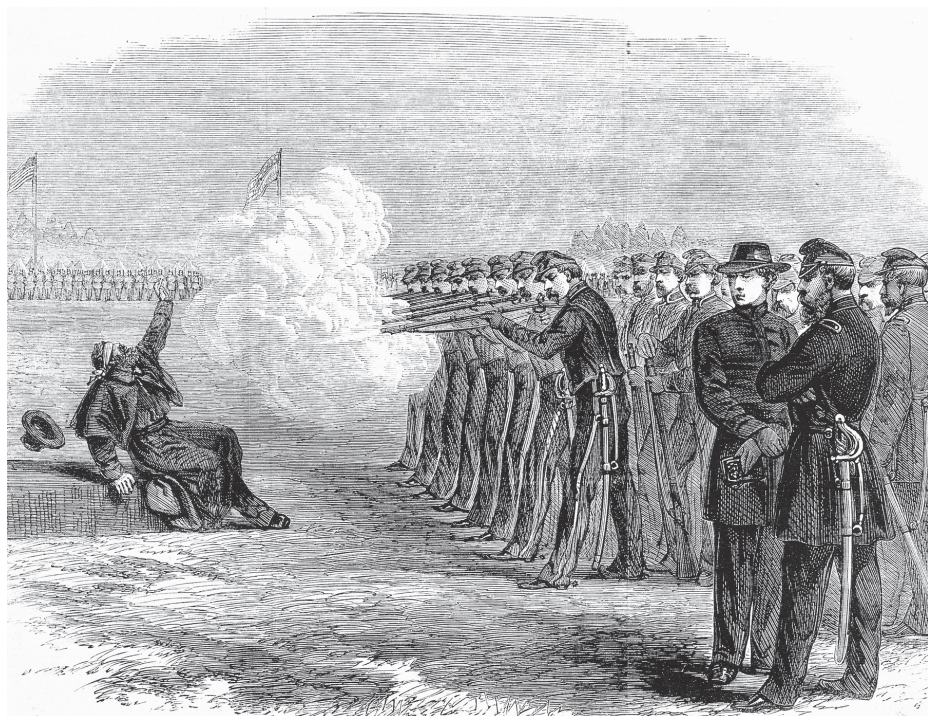
8 Theodore Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters, 1863–1865: Letters of Colonel Theodore Lyman from the Wilderness to Appomattox*, George R. Agassiz, ed. (Freeport, NY: Books for Libraries Press, 1922), 266.

9 Banes, 257; Gibbon, 223.

10 Banes, 256–7.

11 Gibbon, 224.

12 Banes, 258.



The execution of John Starbird would have looked much like the depiction of this execution in January 1862 in Alexandria, Virginia. Starbird's was particularly remarkable in that it took place during active field operations—an unprecedented event. *The Illustrated London News*

At 7:00 a.m. on May 20, a provost guard marched the blindfolded Starbird to his waiting grave. Starbird appeared stoic. “The behavior of this prisoner at his death-scene seemed to give a denial to the specifications against him,” noted Col. Charles H. Banes, assistant adjutant-general of the brigade. “He walked unsupported in front of the firing party to the place appointed for the execution.”

The entire brigade assembled in formation to watch the example being made on their behalf. Eight men from the 19th Massachusetts comprised the firing squad. Captain Dudley C. Mumford loaded their rifles and distributed them.

*Sit*, someone told Starbird. He lowered himself onto the edge of his coffin, next to the open grave.

Mumford readied his men. Then “Aim!” Then “Fire!”

“Oh, my poor mother!” Starbird cried.

Six shots struck him near the heart; the seventh musket “hung fire,” and the ball entered his leg. The eighth musket eased consciences.

Starbird died at once.

“May 20th, 7:08 a.m.,” Gibbon noted in his journal. “He is just shot.”<sup>13</sup>

Colonel Banes described the execution as “an example of military severity”—but one that achieved its desired effect. “Men who had straggled and kept out of battle now were in the ranks,” said a man from the brigade, “and the result to our corps alone was as good as if we had been re-enforced by a full regiment.”<sup>14</sup>

“[T]hose who witnessed it,” he added, “will never forget.”<sup>15</sup>

\* \* \*

By the morning of Starbird’s execution, May 20, the Federal II Corps had reported 12,839 casualties in the spring campaign thus far—and that number may have been underreported. Another of the army’s commanders, Maj. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren of the V Corps, had fudged casualty reports just two weeks earlier in the Wilderness, worried that no one would be able to handle the truth. “It will never do . . .” Warren said, “to make a showing of such heavy losses.” Under a similar shroud, it’s possible the II Corps may have lost as many as 16,000 men. The entire Army of the Potomac had, by that point, lost as many as 36,065 men.<sup>16</sup>

In the statistical context of such calamity, what was one more man?

Instead, perhaps better to ask: *Why* one more man?

The Army of the Potomac had undergone metamorphosis during the previous winter. Where seven army corps had combined for victory at Gettysburg in July 1863, four began the 1864 spring campaign—and one of those corps didn’t even belong to the army. Commanded by Maj. Gen. Ambrose Burnside, the IX Corps formally operated as an independent force working in conjunction with, but not subservient to, the Army of the Potomac. Of the corps from Gettysburg, two had been reassigned to the Western Theater and two, chewed up by casualties, had to be consolidated into the remaining three as part of an army reorganization in late winter. Only two of the victorious corps commanders still retained their positions.

On the regimental level, Pvt. Wilbur Fisk of the 2nd Vermont noted the changing character of the army. “We have five distinct classes of recruits,” he wrote. Historian Carol Reardon summarized them: “the initial volunteers of 1861; new recruits in the spring of 1862; additional men from Lincoln’s call for 300,000 more volunteers in the late summer of 1862; drafted men and substitutes of late

13 Gibbon, 224.

14 Adams, 94.

15 Smith, 172.

16 Morris Schaff, *The Battle of the Wilderness* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1910), 210.

1863; and newly arrived recruits for the 1864 campaign.” That last class, noted Fisk, “are those that have come here under the last call of the President.”<sup>17</sup>

The enlistments of the army’s initial recruits—by now battle-wizened veterans—would expire over the coming summer, draining much-needed experience from the army. The newer men, by contrast—often drafted against their will—represented a less-reliable class of soldier, both in experience and in willingness to be there at all. On paper, Federal forces would begin the spring campaign with 119,000 men, but the quality of those men varied wildly.

Confederates, on the other hand, would begin the campaign with 66,000 men, nearly all of them hardened by battle and the Confederacy’s chronic lack of food and clothing. The Army of Northern Virginia needed every single one of those veterans. “I hope that few of the soldiers of this army will find it necessary at any time in the coming campaign to surrender themselves prisoners of war. We cannot spare brave men to fill Federal prisons,” army commander Gen. Robert E. Lee told his men in an April circular.<sup>18</sup>

Like the North, the South had resorted to a draft to fill depleted ranks. A February 1864 Conscription Act made any male aged 17–50 eligible to serve through the end of the war—an age range widened from an earlier conscription window of 18–35, reflecting the Confederacy’s growing desperation for men. Lee also tried to help the numbers crunch by offering a furlough to any soldier who could get a man to enlist.

To keep veterans in the ranks when their enlistments expired, the Confederate government offered a mix of carrots and sticks—sometimes successful, often coercive. A surgeon with the 19th Mississippi, Robert H. Peel, watched “whole Brigades” step forward to reenlist: “Men who have undergone all the hardships of a three years war, many of whom have wives and children at home and have not seen them since they enlisted, barefooted while the snow covers the earth, and with just sufficient food to keep them from actual starvation.”<sup>19</sup>

Lee had focused much of his attention over the winter on supply issues. In his genteel but firm way, he worked the political levers of the Confederate president, the secretary of war, and the War Department, urging them to shake loose whatever

17 Wilbur Fisk, *Hard Marching Every Day: The Civil War Letters of Private Wilbur Fisk, 1861–1865*, Emil and Ruth Rosenblatt, eds. (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1992), 209; Carol Reardon, “A Hard Road to Travel: The Impact of Continuous Operations on the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia in May 1864,” *The Spotsylvania Campaign*, Gary W. Gallagher, ed. (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 175.

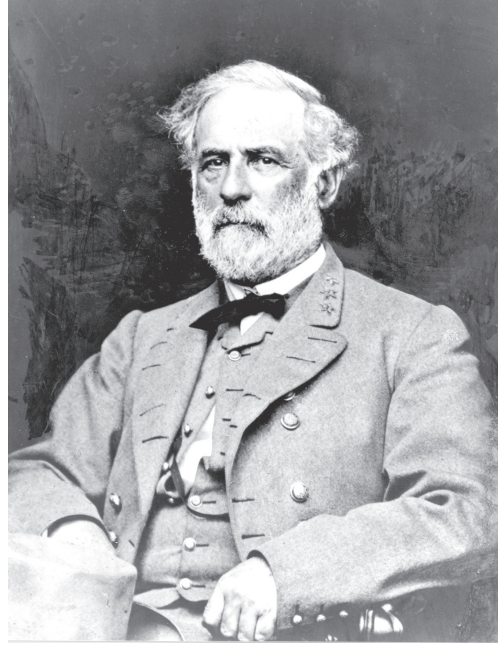
18 Robert E. Lee, circular, *The Wartime Papers of Robert E. Lee*, Clifford Dowdey and Louis H. Manarin, eds. (New York: Da Capo, 1961), 693.

19 Robert H. Peel, letter, 17 February 1864; FSNMP BV.

they could from the Confederacy's dwindling stockpiles. "If I am obliged to retire from this line, either by a flank movement of the enemy or the want of supplies, great injury will befall us," he warned in mid-April.<sup>20</sup>

Lee even turned to his wife, in ill health, for assistance, urging her and her acquaintances to knit socks for the troops. "I am anxious to get as many socks now as possible, before active operations commence," he told her on April 9, 1864, at the tail end of a winter-long series of footwear-focused letters. That the commander of the South's most important army had to employ his sick wife to make socks for the troops suggests a remarkable if pitiful state of affairs for the Confederacy.<sup>21</sup>

Hopes across the South began to turn toward the fall election in the North. "Every bullet we can send against the Yankees is the best ballot that can be deposited against Abraham Lincoln's reelection," the *Augusta Constitutionalist* declared in January 1864, framing an intertwined political/military strategy for the coming year. "The battlefields of 1864 will hold the polls of the momentous decision." Southern leaders reasoned that if Lee and other army commanders could just hold on through the spring and summer, Northerners, stuck in stalemate and tired of war, would turn Lincoln out of office and elect a new president willing to sue for peace on the basis of Southern independence.<sup>22</sup>



This 1865 portrait of Gen. Robert E. Lee invites examination. Is that determination in his eyes? A subtle challenge? Danger? Crankiness? Sorrow? Known as "the Marble Man," Lee's eyes are as expressive as they are inscrutable. All these things tugged within him as the spring 1864 campaign built to its open. *Library of Congress*

20 Lee to Jefferson Davis, letter, 15 April 1864, *Wartime Papers of Robert E. Lee*, 700.

21 One year later to the day, he would be asking for surrender terms rather than socks.

22 *Augusta Constitutionalist*, 22 January 1864.



Lee's army hunkered down on the southern bank of the Rapidan River near Orange Court House, blocking a Federal advance along the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, which Federals depended on for their supplies. Lee had three army corps at his disposal, including the recently returned First Corps under Lt. Gen. James Longstreet, which had spent the winter on detached duty in East Tennessee. Lee was relieved to have his "Old Warhorse" back with him, particularly since his other two commanders, Lt. Gens. Richard Ewell and A. P. Hill, had proved lackluster.

North of the Rapidan, the Federal army occupied camps around Culpeper and Brandy Station. Meade's Army of the Potomac shook off its winter dust on May 3, but instead of going straight at Lee along the axis of the railroad, the Federals swung around the Confederate right. Their path took them into a 70-square-mile area of second-growth forest known as the Wilderness. Meade was under orders to be alert and be aggressive: "If any opportunity presents itself to pitching into a part of Lee's army, do so without giving time for dispositions."<sup>23</sup>

Opportunity presented itself on the morning of May 5. An advantageous lookout station atop Clark's Mountain allowed Lee to spot the Federal move and respond almost immediately. As Meade's army advanced into the Wilderness, lead elements of Lee's army materialized near the head of their column. As ordered—albeit with some delay—the Federals pitched in. Lee, not fully ready for the fight, held on while the rest of his army rushed to the battlefield.

Fighting raged through the Wilderness on May 5, intensified on May 6, and devolved into skirmishes and potshots on May 7. "And who can describe the fighting that was done there . . ." asked the regimental historian of the 150th Pennsylvania volunteers.

[N]ot on the open field, face to face with the enemy . . . but amid the densely tangled brushwood and in the ravines and glens of the Wilderness the conflict raged, and the thunders of the artillery, the fierce shrieking of the shells, and the sharp rattle of musketry, all combined, echoed and re-echoed, making the scene one horrid saturnalia of sound, that might well have been copied from Dante's Inferno; while the smoke of battle, unlimned by one ray of sunlight, settled down like a dark funereal pall upon the scene, and all through this horrid, ensanguined ground the dead and dying lay. . . . Like the leaves of autumn they covered the crimsoned ground. . . .<sup>24</sup>

23 Grant to Meade, 5 May 1864, *O.R.* 36:2:403.

24 Kate M. Scott, *History of the One Hundred and Fifth Regiment of Pennsylvania Volunteers: A Complete History of the Organization, Marches, Battles, Toils, and Dangers participated in by the regiment from the beginning to the close of the war, 1861–1865* (Philadelphia: NewWorld Publishing Company, 1877).

Men stacked the bodies of dead comrades around them as makeshift fortifications to protect themselves as they blazed away at each other through the foliage and powder smoke. Wounded men, roused by the “hot breath” of forest fires, “dragged themselves along, with their torn and mangled limbs, in the mad energy of despair, to escape the ravages of the flames . . .” said one Federal officer. “Christian men had turned to fiends, and hell itself had usurped the place of earth.”<sup>25</sup>

During three days of fighting in the Wilderness, Federal forces lost 17,666 men. Confederates lost 11,033. In terms of percentages, that was nearly 15 percent for Federals and nearly 17 percent for Confederates.<sup>26</sup>

In the wake of such a bloodletting, the armies typically disengaged and fell back to lick their wounds. They took time to reinforce, reequip, and reload. But for the Army of the Potomac, there would be no turning back. The Wilderness would become one of the turning points of the Civil War because the very nature of the war, and how the armies fought it, was about to change significantly. There would be no pause.

In the midst of this unfolding catastrophe, it bears asking why Private Starbird would run from the battlefield, not once but twice in a four-day span, knowing he was on probation. Starbird had a history of jumping, so perhaps we need look no further than that for an explanation. But the nature of the fighting, once it erupted, was unlike anything men in either army had experienced before. Yes, they had seen brutal combat and dense, dark woods and raging forest fires and nighttime fighting and field fortifications, but they had never seen all of it together, sustained for days and days that would blur into exhausted weeks.

In that sense, Starbird’s tendency to slip away from the fight when he could no longer hold up did not fit, metaphorically speaking, with the Army of the Potomac’s new way of operating.

This campaign was turning into something else entirely.

25 Horace Porter, *Campaigning with Grant* (New York: Mallard Press, 1991), 73.

26 Thomas L. Livermore, *Numbers and Losses in the Civil War in America, 1861–1865* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, and Company, 1900), 110–11.





May 4  
May 5  
May 6  
May 7  
May 8

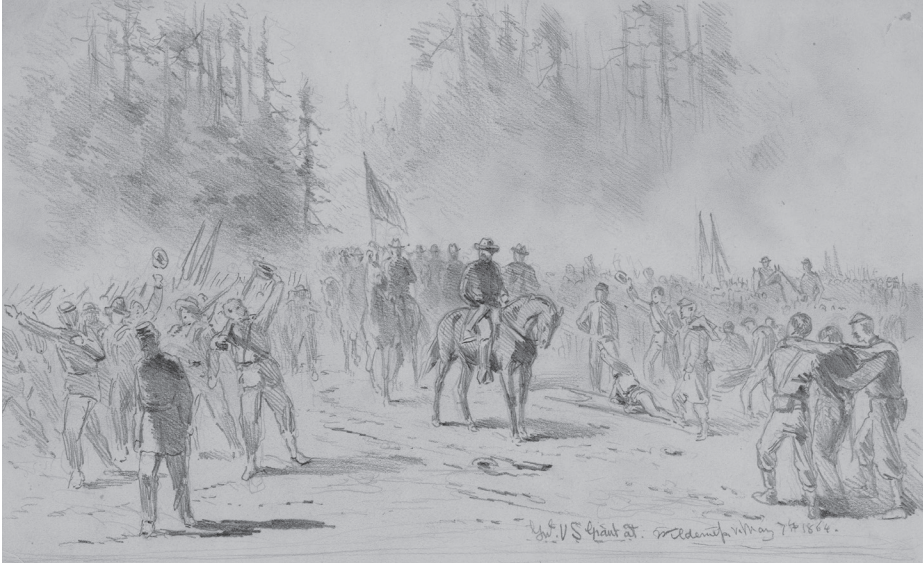
**A**s the late-night hours of May 7, 1864, ticked past midnight into the early hours of May 8, Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade headed into new territory. For three days, his Federal Army of the Potomac had grappled with the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia in the dense tangle of second-growth brush known as the Wilderness. “Forbidding,” “simply infernal,” “a region of gloom and a shadow of death,” “one of the waste places of nature”—such were the descriptions soldiers gave to “the dark, close wood.”<sup>1</sup>

Meade’s infantry had struggled to move with alacrity through the thick foliage. His artillery had few open platforms to effectively deploy. His cavalry had limited roads on which to maneuver. “It is impossible to conceive a field worse adapted to the movements of a grand army,” wrote a Federal officer.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, the wily Gen. Robert E. Lee had utilized the terrain to his advantage, nullifying the superior numbers of the Federals. Thus unable leverage any advantage against them, Meade’s army disengaged. But instead of withdrawing to resupply and reinforce—a process that often led to months of delay before another engagement—the Federal army did something it had never done before: it marched around the Confederates, intent on outflanking them to draw them out of the protection of the Wilderness.

1 For these and additional descriptions of the Wilderness, see chapter two of Chris Mackowski, *Hell Itself: The Battle of the Wilderness, May 5-7, 1864* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2016).

2 William Swinton, *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac; a critical history of operations in Virginia, Maryland and Pennsylvania, from the commencement to the close of the war, 1861-5* (New York: C. B. Richardson, 1882), 428.



The Brock Road/Plank Road intersection in the Wilderness became the site of one of the Civil War's major turning points on the evening of May 7, 1864. Rather than disengage to end the battle, the Army of the Potomac would shift positions and continue fighting. Artist Edwin Forbes captured the scene. *Library of Congress*

With swaths of the forest ablaze around them, Meade rode among a small gaggle of officers and staffers to the Brock Road/Plank Road intersection, the scene of the Wilderness's most intense combat. A turn northeast up the Plank Road meant a retreat to the safety of Fredericksburg or, perhaps, a return to Culpeper on the far side of the Rapidan River. Instead, the group pointed southeast, down the Brock Road.

The Federal Army was not ending its offensive: it was continuing to take the fight to the enemy.

"Soldiers weary and sleepy after their long battle, with stiffened limbs and smarting wounds, now sprang to their feet, forgetful of their pains, and rushed forward to the roadside," recalled Horace Porter, a Federal staff officer. "Wild cheers echoed through the forest, and glad shouts of triumph rent the air." Men swung their hats, tossed up their arms, and clapped their hands.<sup>3</sup> No matter how brutal the fight had been, there was no turning back.

Speed and secrecy were the keys to the next stage of the offensive. The Brock Road ran roughly north/south, and the Federal II Corps manned the earthworks

3 Porter, 79.

that lined the road. Behind their protective screen, the V Corps marched southward along the road. Once the column passed beyond the end of the works, the V Corps threw out flankers to protect its Confederate-facing right flank. "Plunging into the mysterious gloom of a deep cut and washed out road, men occasionally tumbled into rocky furrows, or stumbled over carcasses," wrote a Marylander. "At intervals, darkness would be made visible on the right by blazing brands dropping from some distant tree trunk, still aglow in the depth of the Wilderness, like a signal-light of goblins. The low, damp air, reeked with the pungent, acrid snuff of horse and human slaughter."<sup>4</sup>

The Brock Road twisted through the dark countryside toward the heart of Spotsylvania County. "[T]he road was narrow, and the trees made it very dark," wrote Maj. Abner Small of the 16th Maine. "[I]t was a desolate and dismal track." From the head of the column, men whispered down the line to "jump the run" and "look out for the log," recalled Charles Davis of the 13th Massachusetts, noting they had cautionary orders not to lose connection with each other, or to step out of the path. The men looked like shadows walking through deeper shadows, Davis wrote, with "every lighted pipe being distinctly seen in the darkness."<sup>5</sup>

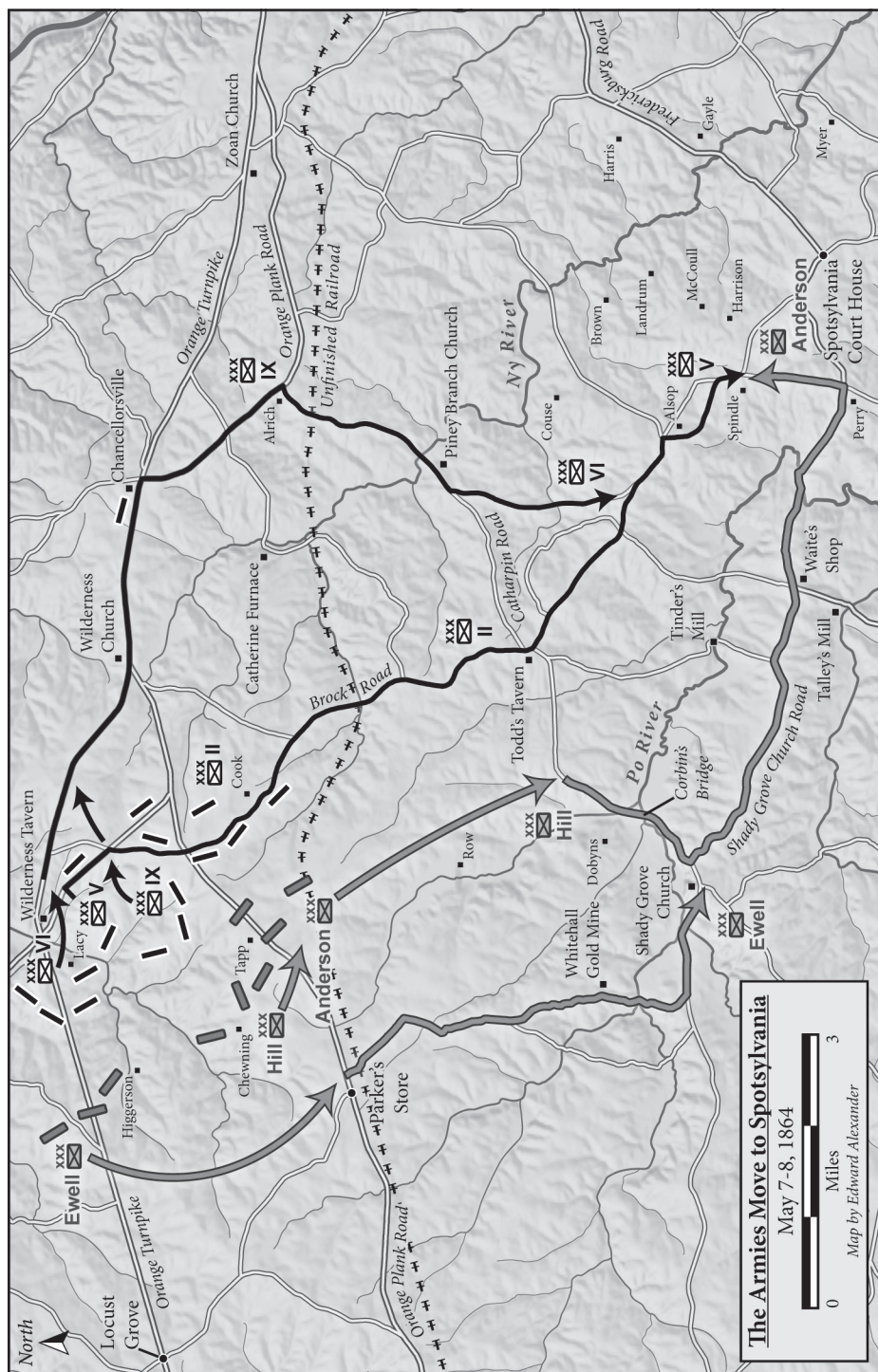
As the column marched away from the Wilderness, the country became more open, but Porter noticed "it still presented obstacles of a most formidable nature. . . . The country was undulating, and was at that time broken by alternations of cleared spaces and dense forests."<sup>6</sup>

Twelve miles away waited Spotsylvania Court House, the quiet county seat. "The village itself consisted of perhaps a dozen buildings, partially concealed behind a grove of pine woods," wrote Col. Byron Cutcheon of the 20th Michigan. "A weather-beaten court house, a typical Virginia country tavern, a couple of small churches, and a few weather-stained dwellings made up this world-famous hamlet." Near the courthouse building itself, the Brock Road intersected with the Fredericksburg Road before meandering past Sanford's Hotel on its way south toward the Confederate capital. Meade intended to be in the village by 8:00 a.m. to capture control of the road network that flowed in and out, thus giving him the

4 L. A. Wolmer, *History and Roster of Maryland Volunteers, War 1861-1865* (Baltimore: Guggenheimer, Weil and Col, 1880), 269-270.

5 Abner Small, *The Road to Richmond: The Civil War Letters of Major Abner Small of the 16th Maine Volunteers*, Harold Adams Small, ed. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2000), 135; Charles Davis, *Three years in the army. The story of the Thirteenth Massachusetts Volunteers from July 16, 1861, to August 1, 1864* (Boston: Estes and Lauriat, 1894), 332; Charles Wainwright, *A Diary of Battle*, Allan Nevins, ed. (New York: Da Capo, 1998), 355.

6 Porter, 88.



**THE ARMIES MOVE TO SPOTSYLVANIA**—On the night of May 7–8, 1864, the Army of Northern Virginia had twice as far to march as the Army of the Potomac, in some cases along roads the Confederates had to create from scratch. Effective delaying tactics by the Confederate cavalry bought the necessary time for their infantry to make the march in time, blocking the Federal advance into Spotsylvania Court House.

inside track to Richmond and a number of options for prosecuting the next phase of the campaign against the Confederate army.<sup>7</sup>

To ensure swift passage, Meade had sent his cavalry—under the command of Maj. Gen. Phillip Sheridan—to clear the Brock Road in advance of the infantry column now coming down the road with Meade. Sheridan sent back a rosy update. “I have the honor to report that I attacked the rebel cavalry at Todd’s Tavern . . .” he gloated, “[and] drove them in confusion toward Spotsylvania Court-House.” Todd’s Tavern, a one-and-a-half story wayside inn, sat at the Brock Road’s intersection with Catharpin Road, which ran along a northeast/southwest axis. The roads met on the southeast fringe of the Wilderness about halfway between the Brock Road/Plank Road intersection and the county seat.<sup>8</sup>

Events at Todd’s Tavern had not gone smoothly for the Federal cavalry, and Sheridan either intentionally misled Meade or possessed little grasp of the tactical situation. Hours of fighting had failed to dislodge their Confederate counterparts from the road. Instead, Confederate merely fell back along the Catharpin Road and blocked the road near Corbin’s Bridge over the Po River. A push by Federals in that direction would have taken them to the right flank of the Confederate army. Unbeknownst to Sheridan, Lee had ordered a road cut south from the Wilderness to the vicinity of Corbin’s Bridge as a makeshift escape hatch.

Another portion of the Confederate cavalry fell back along Brock Road, blocking it roughly one mile south of Todd’s Tavern, some four miles north of the courthouse intersection. “Our Brigade dismounted and went in on Foot . . .” recalled John Inglis of the 9th New York Cavalry. “[Q]uite a number of dead Rebs lying along the road [and] a good many of our officers wounded.” A Pennsylvania trooper declared the day was filled with “[v]ery heavy skirmishing.”<sup>9</sup>

7 Byron M. Cutcheon, *The Story of the Twentieth Michigan infantry, July 15th, 1862, to May 30th, 1865* (Lansing, MI: R. Smith Printing Co., 1904). According to the 1860 census, the county had a population of 16,076: 8,290 free residents and 7,786 enslaved.

8 Philip H. Sheridan to George G. Meade, *O.R.* 36:2:515.

9 Inglis, diary, 7 May 1864, Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park Bound Manuscript Volume 394. Hereafter, the park’s collection will be abbreviated as FSNMP BV394; Capt. Isaac H. Ressler, diary, FSNMP BV 42.



Sheridan's exhausted troopers gave up the fight as darkness set in, consolidating defensive positions at or near Todd's Tavern. Sheridan, apparently content with their work, rode off.

The way to Spotsylvania remained closed.

\* \* \*

Meade rode into the Todd's Tavern intersection around midnight. Theodore Lyman, one of the general's staff members, made note of the tavern, which sat amid a complex of other, smaller structures. "It is an ordinary old building, of moderate size," he noted. One of Sheridan's division commanders, Brig. Gen. David McMurtrie Gregg, came out to meet his boss's boss. Gregg was one of the finest cavalry officers in Meade's army, but the clear-eyed appraisal he shared with the "very crabbed and crusty old customer" was anything but positive.<sup>10</sup>

Time was of the essence. The Army of the Potomac had the jump on the Army of Northern Virginia, but Meade had no idea how long he might retain the advantage. For all he knew, Lee had already mobilized his men, doing just as Meade feared. Meade needed to get Spotsylvania first.

Sheridan, as head of the cavalry, should have been present to snap his troopers into line, but Meade could not find him anywhere. Under such pressure as he was, the army commander instead issued orders directly to Sheridan's division commanders. "I find General Gregg and Torbert without orders," Meade wrote to Sheridan after the fact. "They are in the way of the infantry and there is no time to refer to you." Meade invited his cavalry chief to modify the orders "after the infantry corps are in position."<sup>11</sup>

The troopers scrambled into formation and soon pushed southward down the Brock Road to face whatever resistance waited in the wee-hour darkness and clear the way as Meade had intended. The army commander, meanwhile, fumed. At times a genial man, and always the consummate professional soldier, Meade possessed a legendary temper. His men had taken to calling him "a goddamn goggle-eyed snapping turtle," and even the sympathetic Lyman referred to him as "Old Peppery."

Meade had reason to be concerned. For three days, the Army of the Potomac had been brutalized in the Wilderness in a way it had not suffered since the three-day clash at Gettysburg some 10 months earlier. "[I]n fact the sudden transition from a long winter's rest to hard marching, sleepless nights, and protracted fighting,

10 Lyman, *Meade's Army*, 143; Charles Henry Veil, "An Old Boy's Personal Recollections and Reminiscences of the Civil War," FSNMP BV 43.

11 Meade to Sheridan, *O.R.* 36:2:551.

with no prospect of cessation, produced a powerful effect on the nervous system of the whole army,” warned Lyman.<sup>12</sup>

Now, exhausted and strung out for miles along Brock Road, the Army of the Potomac held the initiative but also found itself vulnerable.

\* \* \*

Another reason Meade was so acutely aware of the high stakes was that his boss was traveling with him. Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, commander of all U. S. forces, had chosen to accompany Meade’s army in the field.

Meade stood tall and courtly, said one observer, and “his trim gray hair, and neat regulation cap, gave him a martial look.” In contrast, the shorter, slighter Grant dressed plainly. If not for the shoulder straps with his three stars, nothing would have distinguished him as an officer of note. He looked “clear and steady, calm and confident” with a closely cropped beard, square chin, and firm mouth, often with a cigar clamped between his teeth.<sup>13</sup>

Not all impressions were favorable. One Rhode Islander described Grant as “a short thick set man [who] rode his horse like a bag of meal,” while a Pennsylvanian likened him to “small potatoes.” “There is no enthusiasm in the army for Gen. Grant,” said a colonel from Maine; “and, on the other hand, there is no prejudice against him. We are prepared to throw up our hats for him when he shows himself the great soldier here in Virginia against Lee and the best troops of the rebels.”<sup>14</sup>

Such was the yardstick by which they all measured him: “Well, Grant has never met Bobby Lee yet.”<sup>15</sup>

Grant had come to the east after a string of victories in the war’s Western Theater: Forts Henry and Donelson, on the banks of the Tennessee and Cumberland Rivers, in February, 1862; Shiloh, Tennessee, in April of that same year; Vicksburg, Mississippi, on July 4, 1863; and Chattanooga, Tennessee in November, 1863.

Those months between July and November had proven an interesting study in contrast between Meade and Grant. Meade had been appointed to command of the Army of the Potomac on June 28, 1863, and just three days later found himself embroiled in what would be the war’s bloodiest battle, Gettysburg. Meade scored a

12 Lyman, *Meade’s Army*, 145.

13 George F. Williams, *Bullet and Shell* (New York: Forbes, Howard & Hulbert, 1884), 328; *Ibid.*

14 Elisha H. Rhodes, *All for the Union* (New York: Orion Books, 1985), 142; Elisha Bracken, letter, 17 April 1864, FSNMP BV 322; Selden Connor, letter, 16 May 1864, FSNMP BV 54.

15 Ulysses S. Grant, *The Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, Vol. 2 (Hartford, CT: Charles Webster & Co., 1885), 292. Hereafter, cited as *Memoirs* with volume and page listed thus: *Memoirs*, 2:292.



LEFT: “[M]y Chief . . . is a thorough soldier, and a mighty clear-headed man,” Theodore Lyman said of Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade. “I never saw a man in my life who was so characterized by straightforward truthfulness as he is.” *Library of Congress*

RIGHT: A West Point classmate remembered Ulysses S. Grant as “a plain, commonsense, straightforward youth; quiet, rather of the old-head-on-the-young-shoulder order; shunning notoriety; quite contented while others were grumbling; taking to his military duties in a very business-like manner; not a prominent man in the corps, but respected by all and very popular with his friends.” *Library of Congress*

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much-needed victory there on July 3—a day before Grant’s victory at Vicksburg—but afterwards, his battered army could not prevent Confederates from slipping away to safety south of the Potomac River. Lincoln wrote a scolding missive to his new army commander, which he ultimately did not send, but the writing for Meade was already on the wall—or at least tucked into Lincoln’s writing desk. Meade’s first operation as commander of the Army of the Potomac had unfairly pigeonholed him as too cautious.

Meade followed up in the fall with a series of back-and-forth maneuvers along the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, largely dictated by Lee’s attempts to regain the initiative. Outmaneuvered and outgeneraled by his Confederate counterpart,



Meade nonetheless scored small victories at Bristoe and Rappahannock stations—enough to keep him in the game but never enough to score the knockout punch Lincoln needed. Expecting a hero's welcome in the capital after his victory at Rappahannock Station, Meade was instead rebuffed by Lincoln and Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton.<sup>16</sup>

Meade's final nail came in the days after Thanksgiving. An aggressive stab at Lee's army went awry because of poor communications and lackluster leadership from his corps commanders. Tipped off, Lee went to ground on the west side of Mine Run, a small tributary of the Rapidan River, and constructed the most formidable defensive position yet created in the war. Seeing the strength of the works, Meade refused to throw away the lives of his men, and despite immense political pressure for a big win, he called off his attack. "I would rather be ignominiously dismissed, and suffer anything, than knowingly and wilfully [sic] have thousands of brave men slaughtered for nothing," he told his wife. Incessant rain forced the army back into camp 25 miles to the north around Brandy Station and Culpeper, where they remained for the winter.<sup>17</sup>

While Meade was reeling from Stanton's rebuff and then the rebuff in front of Mine Run, 520 miles to the southwest, Grant was rescuing the beleaguered Army of the Cumberland, trapped in Chattanooga since its drubbing at the battle of Chickamauga in mid-September.

Grant's knack for finding a way to win even in the worst circumstances made him the ideal candidate for Lincoln. "I need this man," Lincoln had reportedly once said of him. "He fights."<sup>18</sup> With the 1864 presidential election now only a year away and the Army of the Potomac languishing under Meade—and perhaps the entire Northern war effort languishing all across the map—Lincoln turned to Grant to shake things up. In March 1864, with congressional approval, Lincoln promoted Grant to lieutenant general, a permanent rank that had only ever been held before by George Washington, and placed him in overall command of all U.S. forces. "I wish to express, in this way, my entire satisfaction with what you have done up to this time . . ." Lincoln had told him. "You are vigilant and self-

16 The Bristoe and Rappahannock Station Campaigns played out in October and November of 1863 respectively.

17 George Gordon Meade, *The Life and Letters of George Gordon Meade*, vol. 2 (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1913), 158.

18 The widely quoted comment "He fights" is actually suspect and may be apocryphal. Historian Brooks Simpson, who has done excellent detective work on this, contends that "Lincoln probably never uttered the phrase. . . ." Brooks Simpson, "Lincoln and Grant," *Abraham Lincoln: His Speeches and Writings*, Roy Basler and Carl Sandburg, eds., (New York: Da Capo Press, 2008), 149

reliant; and, pleased with this, I wish not to obtrude any constraints or restraints upon you.”<sup>19</sup>

Upon assuming command, Grant changed the war at once. As he later wrote:

From the first I was in the conviction that no peace could be had . . . until the military power of the rebellion was entirely broken. I therefore determined, first, to use the greatest number of troops practicable against the armed force of the enemy, preventing him from using the same force at different seasons against first one and then another of our armies, and . . . second, to hammer continuously against the armed force of the enemy and his resources until, by mere attrition, if in no other way, there should be nothing left to him. . . .<sup>20</sup>

This reflected a significant shift in strategy. Formerly, Federal armies had tried to capture Richmond and force the Southern government to capitulate. Grant now wanted to use the Northern army’s numerical superiority to tie down Confederate forces and then hammer them into submission. At the same time, Federal armies across the South would destroy the Confederacy’s socioeconomic base through the destruction of crops and factories and the emancipation of the enslaved population. Grant would, in short, take the fight to the Confederacy’s armies even as he undercut the South’s ability to wage war—a strategy of both annihilation and exhaustion.

Attrition and exhaustion might take more time than Grant had, though. A presidential election loomed in the fall of 1864. If Federal armies could not somehow break the stalemate, Lincoln’s prospects seemed dim. An election loss would open the door to a Democratic president apt to sue for peace predicated on the recognition of Southern independence. Lincoln needed Grant to somehow engineer a knock-out blow. This injected the spring campaign with an urgency the Army of the Potomac had not yet felt.

Rather than oversee his strategy from Washington, D.C., Grant chose to make his headquarters in the field. Confident that his Western protégé, Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman, could successfully manage events in the military theater between the Appalachian Mountains and the Mississippi River, Grant decided to travel with the Army of the Potomac. His presence, he reasoned, might motivate it as it had not been motivated in the past. He also hoped to act as a shield between

19 Lincoln to Grant, 30 April 1864, *Collected Works of Abraham Lincoln, Volume 7* [Nov. 5, 1863–Sept. 12, 1864] (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1953), 234.

20 Grant, “Report of Lieut. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant,” 22 July 1865, *O.R.*, 36:1:12–3.

the political machinations of Washington and the headquarters of the Army of the Potomac, situated less than 50 miles from the nation's capital.

Meade fully expected the new general in chief to replace him. "You might want an officer who had served with you in the west," he conceded in a private meeting on March 10 during Grant's first visit to the army. "Do not hesitate about making the change. The work before us is of such vast importance to the whole nation that the feeling or wishes of no one person should stand in the way of selecting the right men for all positions." Meade then offered his resignation, for the good of the service.

"This incident gave me even a more favorable opinion of Meade than did his great victory at Gettysburg the July before," Grant later admitted. "I assured him that I had no thought of substituting any one for him."<sup>21</sup>

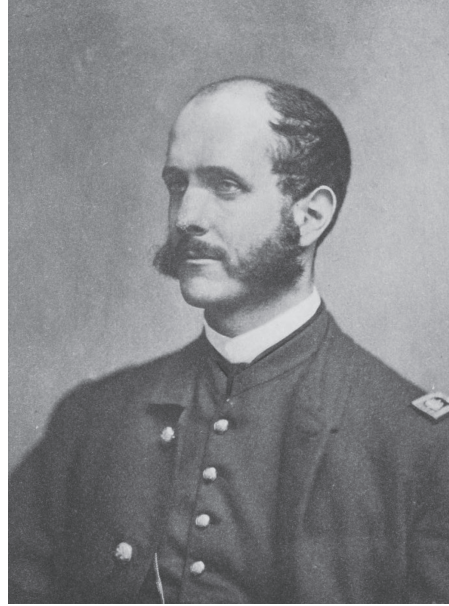
Ironically, some in Washington had thought of substituting Grant for Meade the previous summer. Frustrated by Lee's post-Gettysburg escape, politicians began privately floating Grant's name as a possible commander for the Army of the Potomac. Grant demurred, saying such an assignment would bring him "more sadness than satisfaction." Among the reasons he cited were army politics: "more or less dissatisfaction would necessarily be produced by importing a General to command an Army already well supplied with those who have grown up, and been promoted, with it."<sup>22</sup>

Those politics still held true and served as another reason for keeping Meade in his post. As a "western" general, Grant knew he wouldn't be any better received now than he would have been the previous summer, even if he was now in his more elevated position as general in chief. Should he relieve one of only two generals who had managed to best Robert E. Lee, animosity would soar. Grant also needed to look no further than the example Lincoln set the previous year with Maj. Gen. John Pope. A westerner, Pope replaced the other general who had bested Lee, Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan. During the disastrous Second Manassas campaign that followed, Pope managed to alienate everyone from the common soldier to Lincoln to Lee himself.

Grant and Meade seemed quite different if not opposite. Meade, the older of the two, was born on December 31, 1815, in Cadiz, Spain, while his father—a well-connected Philadelphia merchant—served there as an agent for the United State Navy. Grant was born seven years later on April 27, 1822, in Point Pleasant,

21 Grant, *Memoirs*, 2:117.

22 Ulysses S. Grant to Charles Dana, letter, 5 August 1863, *The Papers of Ulysses S. Grant, Volume 09: July 7, December 31, 1863*, John Y. Simon, ed. (Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1982), 146.



Horace Porter (left) and Theodore Lyman (right) serve as literary alter egos for their bosses, Ulysses S. Grant and George Gordon Meade, respectively. Lyman's journals, written contemporaneously, show a bulldog-tough loyalty to Meade. Porter's memoir, published in 1897, paints a respectful but adoring picture of Grant. Together, Porter and Lyman offer a valuable look into the Federal army command during the 1864 Overland Campaign. *Library of Congress/National Park Service*

Ohio, the son of a tanner. Both men attended the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, Meade graduating in 1835, ranking 19th out of 56, and Grant in 1843, ranking 21st out of 39. Both served in 1846–48 during the war with Mexico, where they each earned brevet promotions for battlefield bravery.

When civil war erupted in 1861, both worked their way up to army command through excellent service at the brigade and division levels, earning the respect of their peers and subordinates, if not always their superiors.

"[Grant] is so much more active than his predecessor, and agrees so well with me in his views, I cannot but be rejoiced at his arrival, because I believe success to be the more probable," Meade later wrote to his wife. "My duty is plain, to continue quietly to discharge my duties, heartily co-operating with him and under him."<sup>23</sup>

Initially, Grant intended to give Meade a free hand commanding the army while Grant would stick to larger overall strategic issues. "My instructions for that

23 Meade, *Life and Letters*, 189.

army were all through him [Meade], and were all general in their nature, leaving all the details and the execution to him,” Grant later explained. He gave Meade one mission: “Lee’s army is your objective point. Wherever Lee goes, there you will go also.” Richmond, in other words, would no longer be the strategic objective—although by moving against the capital, the Federals could force Confederates out into the open for battle.<sup>24</sup>

That’s why Spotsylvania Court House became so important to Meade on the night of May 7–8: The roads there offered him the inside track to Richmond. Lee, forced to protect the capital, would have to withdraw from the safety of the Wilderness and try to stop him. If Lee abandoned the defense of Richmond, Federal cavalry could swoop in and capture the prize, depriving the Rebels of the political and economic engine of the Confederacy.

It was a lose-lose situation for Lee and a pivotal moment for Meade.

During the battle in the Wilderness, Grant had begun to take a heavier hand commanding the army than he had originally suggested. If Meade were to regain some of that operational control, he needed to seize Spotsylvania Court House and the road network of opportunity and initiative it offered.

Unfortunately, before he could direct his push in that direction, Meade faced an obstacle more explosive than the Confederates.

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In the midst of the spring-green forest, Piney Branch Church stood out for its yellow exterior. Known as “the little yellow church,” the Episcopal congregation dated to 1768. But on May 8, 1864, few seemed to recall it was the sabbath as Meade and Grant established their headquarters there. “[T]he overrunning of the country by the contending armies had scattered the little church’s congregation,” noted Horace Porter. “The temple of prayer was voiceless, the tolling of its peaceful bell had given place to the echo of hostile guns. . . .”<sup>25</sup>

Shortly before noon, Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan rode into headquarters. He was, by his own admission, “very much irritated.” Meade had bypassed the chain of command and given orders directly to Sheridan’s division commanders, throwing Sheridan’s planned cavalry dispositions into disorder. It didn’t matter to Sheridan that his horsemen hadn’t cleared the Brock Road as ordered. Nor did it matter that Sheridan hadn’t been on hand so Meade could have directed orders through him.

24 Grant, report, *O.R.*, 36:1:18; Grant to Meade, 9 April 1864, *O.R.*, 36:1:828.

25 “History of Piney Branch Baptist Church.” <https://pineybranchbc.org/about/> (accessed 12 November 2023); Porter, 83.



“Little Phil” Sheridan was “a small, broad-shouldered, squat man, with black hair and a square head,” said Theodore Lyman, who added, “Sheridan makes everywhere a favorable impression.” *Library of Congress*

It didn't even matter to Sheridan that Meade was his superior officer.

Standing only 5-foot-5, “Little Phil” cut a queer figure that drew attention wherever he went. President Lincoln had once described him as a “brown, chunky little chap, with a long body, short legs, not enough neck to hang him, and such long arms that if his ankles itch he can scratch them without stooping.”<sup>26</sup>

Only 33 years old, Sheridan had enjoyed a meteoric if surprising ascent. He had graduated in the bottom third of his West Point Class of 1853. When civil war broke out, he started as a quartermaster on the staff of Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck, but he eventually worked his way up to division command where he served ably if obscurely, said one historian. That all changed during the battle of Missionary Ridge at Chattanooga in November 1863, where Ulysses S.

Grant watched Sheridan lead his division up the sheer mountainside and drive the ensconced Confederates from the crest. Grant liked Sheridan's spunk and tapped him for greater responsibilities.<sup>27</sup>

When Grant came east, he brought Sheridan with him and placed him in command of the Army of the Potomac's cavalry. Sheridan saw the cavalry as a mobile strike force: give troopers repeating rifles, get them to a far-off spot quickly, and let them shoot it out with their superior firepower. This stood in contract to Meade's traditional view of cavalry as a force to screen movements, gather intelligence, and protect flanks and supplies. Sheridan wanted to unleash the

26 Roy Morris Jr. *Sheridan: The Life and Wars of General Phil Sheridan* (New York: Crown Publishing, 1992), 1.

27 Sheridan's tutor at West Point was future Maj. Gen. Henry W. Slocum. Sheridan was to graduate with the class of 1852, but he was expelled for one year after he assaulted future Union general William Terrill with a bayonet.



cavalry's offensive potential and this, unsurprisingly, put him on a collision course with his direct superior.

Whether Meade harbored an inner "I told you so," he did not record, but he had every right to throw one in Sheridan's face: The cavalry's offensive potential had gone unrealized along the Brock Road on May 7. Sheridan, meanwhile, blamed Maj. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren's V Corps for the army's difficult advance. The "behavior of the infantry was disgraceful," he grouched, taking no responsibility for failing to clear the road to the court house or for failing to make that failure clear to army headquarters. Meade, for his part, "had worked himself into a towering passion regarding the delays encountered in the forward movement," said Horace Porter, a member of Grant's staff.

Arriving at headquarters, all thunder and hooves, Sheridan was "plainly full of suppressed anger," said another witness. Meade was, too, and when Sheridan appeared, the army commander "went at him hammer and tongs." Sheridan had blundered. He was absent from the battlefield when his commander had needed him. His men had failed to do the one thing Meade had ordered them to accomplish.

Sheridan, "equally fiery," felt unjustly treated. "[A]ll the hotspur in his nature was aroused," Porter wrote. "His language throughout was highly spiced and conspicuously italicized with expletives."

"I will not command the cavalry any longer under such conditions!" Sheridan protested. "If I could have it my way, I would concentrate all the cavalry, move out in force against Stuart's command, and whip it!"

Meade, for all his volcanic temper, tried to deescalate the argument. *I didn't mean that*, he told Sheridan, placing his hand on Sherman's arm. *I didn't mean that*.

Sheridan, who believed Meade's "peppery temper had got the better of his good judgement," didn't want to hear it and stormed off. It was, Porter summarized, "a very acrimonious dispute. . . ."

It was insubordination, is what it was. But Sheridan was Grant's hand-picked cavalryman, so there wasn't much Meade could do. Disgusted, Meade stalked over to Grant's nearby command tent to recount the conversation. When Meade got to the part of Sheridan riding off to whip Stuart, Grant interrupted him. "Did Sheridan say that?" he asked. "Well, he generally knows what he is talking about. Let him start right out and do it."<sup>28</sup>

28 Accounts from the dispute come from Lyman, *Meade's Army*, 144; Porter, 83–4; Sheridan, 368, 370. Sheridan boldly claimed on pg. 153 in his own memoir that "Had Gregg and Merritt been permitted to proceed as they were originally instructed, it is doubtful whether the battles fought at Spottsylvania [sic] would have occurred. . . ." Had Sheridan cleared the road as ordered on May 7, it is just as doubtful that the battle of Spottsylvania would have occurred!

Imagine Meade's reaction in this moment. His immediate superior, who had already been undercutting Meade's authority by taking a more direct hand in the army's operations, just undercut him further. Grant had supported his crony instead of his army commander. That Sheridan had blown up about a breach in the chain of command—and now benefitted from that very same kind of breach—must have seemed bitterly sardonic.

Imagine Grant's rationale, which he did not record for posterity. He knew first-hand from experiences inflicted on him by Nathan Bedford Forrest and Earl Van Dorn in December 1862 how disruptive enemy cavalry could be in an army's rear. He had encouraged Col. Benjamin Grierson, in April 1863, to inflict that same kind of disruption through Mississippi's interior. Now here was Sheridan, thinking disruptively and aggressively—in an army that did not, in Grant's mind, think aggressively enough.<sup>29</sup>

By 1:00 p.m., army Chief of Staff Andrew Humphreys cut the orders to cut Sheridan loose. The bandy-legged little Irishman was delighted.<sup>30</sup> "We are going out to fight Stuart's cavalry in consequence of a suggestion from me," he crowed; "we will give him a fair, square fight. . . ."

On the morning of May 10, Sheridan galloped off at the head of a column of 11,000 troopers with a plan to draw out the Confederate cavalry and engage with them in open battle. The result would be the May 11 battle of Yellow Tavern on the northern outskirts of Richmond where a Federal cavalryman would shoot Maj. Gen. James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart in the gut, mortally wounding him. Stuart would die the next day, even as Sheridan and his men found themselves in deepening jeopardy that would take days to escape from.

Had cooler heads prevailed, Sheridan would not have been allowed to ride off into the distance with nearly all the Federal cavalry. He left behind only one of his regiments, plus one regiment and one squadron of the provost guard, and four regiments of the IX Corps cavalry that fell outside his sphere of command. This left Meade's entire army with little better than six regiments of cavalry—roughly a brigade—to scout, act as flank guards, protect the supply train, and

29 Forrest hit Grant's supply line in Jackson, Tennessee, on December 19, 1862, and Van Dorn hit Grant's forward supply base in Holly Springs, Mississippi, on December 20, 1862. The raids forced Grant to abandon his first overland attempt on Vicksburg.

30 One of my favorite Shelby Foote-isms—so good that the term gets used widely now without attribution. See *The Civil War: A Narrative, Vol. 1: Fort Sumter to Perryville*, 732 (where Foote also says Sheridan has "a head as round as a pot").



guard prisoners—nearly the identical situation the army found itself in 53 weeks earlier during the 1863 Chancellorsville Campaign.<sup>31</sup>

Sheridan essentially left the Army of the Potomac with no eyes and ears. Leaving the army blind and deaf would cost thousands of lives.

In retrospect, authorizing the raid was one of Grant's worst decisions of the war.

## END OF PARTIAL CHAPTER 1 EXCERPT

31 The 5th New York Cavalry was detached from Sheridan's corps. This assessment does not include the handful of cavalry companies and couriers scattered through the army and attached to various corps and divisional headquarters.

32 Veil, 55; Porter, 83.