ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Bristoe Station Campaign

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At the beginning of October 1863, the principle Union and Confederate armies in Virginia — the Army of the Potomac, commanded by Major General George Gordon Meade, and the Army of Northern Virginia, led by General Robert E. Lee — found themselves positioned almost exactly where they had been at the start of the Gettysburg campaign. Both had quickly recovered from the rigors of their efforts in Pennsylvania and had regained pre-battle strength by the end of August. But in September, Lee and Meade had been compelled to ship substantial portions of their armies to the Western Theater to take part in the battles around Chattanooga, Tennessee. The Confederates had dispatched the entire First Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia, commanded by Lieutenant General James Longstreet, whereas the Federals had sent the XI and XII Corps to Tennessee. These detachments left Lee with 55,000 men to oppose Meade's 80,000.

The Union army was arrayed around Culpeper Courthouse, in the middle of a giant sideways riverine "V" which opened to the west from the point where the Rappahannock and Rapidan watercourses meet at the southeastern tip of Culpeper County. The Rappahannock River formed the upper arm of the "V", which stretched out in a northeasterly direction. The generally straight east-west line of the Rapidan River formed the other arm of the "V" to its south. Slicing through the middle of this geographic feature was the single-track Orange & Alexandria Railroad which ran northeast from Culpeper toward Washington, D.C. and southeast from Culpeper toward the upper end of the Shenandoah Valley. The O&A was Meade's sole line of supply to the North.

Lee's army was stationed behind the Rapidan, spread out in a long line centered on Orange Courthouse. The Confederates guarded strong fortifications at the many fords spaced at intervals astride the river, with the Second Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Richard Stoddert Ewell holding the right of Lee's line, while the Third Corps, commanded by Lieutenant General Ambrose Powell Hill, held the left. The flanks of Lee's army were guarded by the two divisions of Major General James Ewell Brown Stuart's recently created Cavalry Corps, with Major General Fitzhugh Lee's division on the right and Major General Wade Hampton's division on the left. Since Hampton was still recuperating from wounds received in June, Stuart personally supervised the movements of that division.

Although the transfer of two of his seven corps convinced Meade that he was too weak to undertake an offensive across the Rapidan, Lee was not deterred by the loss of Longstreet's command. Determined to make the most of Meade's relative weakness, Lee decided to launch an offensive against the Union army. The primary goals of this movement were to prevent Meade from dispatching more troops to Tennessee and spoil whatever offensive designs the Federals might be contemplating. If possible, Lee wished to maneuver his opponent into exposing some part of his army which might then be destroyed. Whether he provoked his foe to retreat toward Washington or inflicted a defeat on him, Lee hoped his actions would encourage anti-war Northerners and impact congressional elections being held in the United States even as his campaign took place.

On October 8, leaving Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry division, supported by a brigade of infantry, to man the Rapidan defenses, Lee concentrated his army in jump off positions around Orange Courthouse. Union Signal Corps stations in southern Culpeper County spotted the Rebel movement and informed Meade's headquarters. These reports were important, but not necessarily illuminating as they only proved that Lee was up to something — whether that was a strategic withdrawal or the start of an offensive campaign Meade could not tell.

Since the greatest danger was a Rebel turning movement designed to place Lee's force between the Army of the Potomac and Washington, Meade deployed Brigadier General Hugh Judson Kilpatrick's 3rd Cavalry division, supported by Brigadier General Henry Prince's 3rd Infantry Division, to western Culpeper County to keep an eye on the fords along Robertson's River and the roads running from Madison County to Culpeper. The rest of the Union army would maintain its current position: the 2nd Cavalry Division concentrated at Culpeper Courthouse, the Federal I Corps picketing the Rapidan, and the II, III and VI Corps encamped around Culpeper and Stevensburg. Without firmer knowledge of Lee's intentions, this was the most Meade felt he could do.

The Confederate offensive began before dawn on October 9, when Hampton's cavalry division, under Stuart's personal direction, crossed the western Rapidan into Madison County. A.P. Hill's corps followed, with Ewell's bringing up the rear. The Confederates took a circuitous route in hopes of thwarting enemy observation. Prominent hills were avoided, as were dusty spots in the road which marching feet might stir into telltale pillars of dust easily visible to Union observers. In places were nature afforded no protection against enemy scouts, Southern pioneers built walls of pine brush to screen the army's route. These efforts at stealth were essential to Lee's plan. If Meade got wind of what was happening he would either prepare for a fight around Culpeper or decline a battle and withdraw north of the Rappahannock.

Unfortunately for Lee, these efforts were not wholly effective. Pickets along the Rapidan reported the unusual absence of enemy drum and bugle calls, as well as the disappearance of camps and smoke from cook fires on the morning of the ninth. Major General John Newton, commanding the I Corps, sent word to army headquarters that the Southerners seemed to be evacuating the river line in a rolling fashion from east to west.

Besides further putting Meade on edge, however, this information did nothing to clarify the situation.

The Federal commander was in a quandary. Well aware the Lincoln administration was less than enthused with his conduct of operations post Gettysburg, he felt great pressure to act correctly. Lee might be trying to turn his flank, but it was also possible the Confederates were pulling back to a new defensive line closer to Richmond while sending still more troops to Chattanooga. If Meade allowed Lee to slip away without a battle or vigorous pursuit the howls of protest and disappointment sure to rise up from the capital might cost the general his job. Complicating his decision making was his (incorrect) belief Lee's army was equal in strength to his own.

Throughout October 9, Meade waited for some indication that the Rebels were launching an offensive. Should this be the case, his cavalry along Robertson's River would be the first to find out; but Kilpatrick's troopers reported nothing. Gripped with uncertainty, Meade decided to take proactive measures to find out what the Rebels were doing. At 6:30 in the evening of October 9, he ordered the commander of his Cavalry Corps, Major General Alfred Pleasonton, to send Brigadier General John Buford's 1st Cavalry Division across the Rapidan at Germanna Ford. Once over the river Buford was to move upstream (westward) toward Morton's Ford. If the enemy was withdrawing southward this movement ought to uncover the fact.

Should this be the case, Buford's reconnaissance would be converted into the initial step of a Federal offensive. Once the Yankee cavalry was in possession of Morton's Ford, the Union I Corps would cross the river, followed by Major General John Sedgwick's VI Corps and Major General George Sykes' V Corps. While Buford launched a pursuit of Lee's retreating army, the infantry would secure Rapidan Station, where the O&A crossed the river, and thus open the way for Meade's railroad supply line to follow his army south of the Rapidan.

Meade's directive gave no specific time for the start of Buford's movement, nor did the orders issued from Pleasonton's headquarters. Meade assumed Buford would move to the river during the night and cross before, or at, dawn. Intelligence from his thrust should, therefore, arrive at army headquarters by noon on the tenth.

But Buford's orders went astray during the night and he did not receive Pleasonton's instructions until dawn on October 10. Although all his wagons were at the depot in Culpeper awaiting resupply and his division was without feed for its horses, Buford departed for the Rapidan at once. It was not until 11:00 a.m., however, that he reached the river and noon before he crossed it against negligible opposition. The sun had set before he neared Morton's Ford and its Confederate defenders. Meade did not hear a word from Buford until the next day.

As the 1st Cavalry Division launched its belated foray across the Rapidan, Jeb Stuart led Confederate cavalry over Robertson's River at dawn on a mission to screen the advance of Lee's infantry by engaging Kilpatrick's cavalry.

At Culpeper Courthouse, meanwhile, Meade became increasingly concerned that Lee was undertaking an offensive rather than abandoning his Rapidan defenses by 4:00 p.m., Meade was convinced Lee was attacking and ordered the army's supply trains and depots withdrawn north of the Rappahannock. The movement over the Rapidan was cancelled and the three infantry corps waiting to cross to its south bank were told to pull back close to Culpeper as soon as it was dark. Couriers were dispatched to find Buford, from who no word had yet been received, and order him back across the Rapidan.

During the night of October 10/11, Meade concluded that a possible battle in the constricting Culpeper position was too dangerous to contemplate. Ordering his entire army to retreat across the Rappahannock, he directed his corps commanders to take up a defensive line along the river between Sulphur Springs to the west and Kelly's Ford to the east. The movement began at 3:00 a.m., much to the surprise of Union troops who anticipated a battle and could not understand why Meade was leaving a previously selected position without a fight.

The withdrawal of the Union infantry would be covered by Kilpatrick's cavalry as well as Buford's, assuming the latter had not run into disaster south of the Rapidan the day before. Thankfully, the 1st Cavalry Division had met no such fate on October 10. But the retrograde movement of Meade's infantry almost led to its destruction the next morning.

After bivouacking south of the Rapidan the previous night, Buford's troopers seized Morton's Ford at dawn on October 11 and waited for the preplanned advance of the I Corps. Instead, Buford was surprised to receive word that Meade's infantry had retreated northward and he was to withdraw to Culpeper Courthouse. These were wise precautions. During the previous night Fitzhugh Lee had advanced his cavalry to confront Buford's cavalry. Fitz Lee intended to strike Buford from both sides of the Rapidan simultaneously, cut off his division and destroy it.

Federal and Confederate cavalry fought throughout October 11. Once Buford escaped Fitzhugh on the Rapidan, he fell back to Brandy Station. Kilpatrick had withdrawn to the same point, followed by Stuart. As the four columns came together a major clash occurred as the Rebels tried to cut the Union cavalry off and destroy it. The Yankees managed to avoid encirclement and withdraw across the Rappahannock just before nightfall.

Although the Federal cavalry had foiled Confederate efforts to destroy Kilpatrick's or Buford's division, the day belonged to the Rebels. Not only did they hold the field – the traditional measure of victory – Stuart had succeeded in his strategic mission by so absorbing the attention of two-thirds of Meade's cavalry the Yankee horsemen were unable to make even an attempt to discover the whereabouts and activities of Robert E. Lee's infantry.

Having withdrawn his army to the north bank of the Rappahannock, Meade made careful preparations to resist an attack across the river, even though he knew the odds of

Lee making such a desperate effort were remote. In fact, Meade had no idea where Lee's army was or what it might be doing. Stuart had screened the Rebel infantry so effectively no reports of its location had been received for more than 24 hours. At the start of the campaign Meade had assumed Lee was endeavoring to get between the Army of the Potomac and Washington. But as of the morning of October 12 there was no evidence to prove this supposition and Meade began to worry that he might have guessed incorrectly.

If Lee was moving to interpose between Meade and the Union capital he would have to cross the upper Rappahannock. Therefore Meade had posted Brigadier General David McMurtrie Gregg's cavalry division along the upper reaches of the river with strict orders to report any sign of Southern infantry. But as of mid-morning on October 12, Gregg's men had seen nothing. Pleasonton, on the other hand, told Meade he had spotted enemy foot soldiers near Brandy Station at the end of yesterday's fight. If this was correct, the Rebel army might have concentrated at Culpeper – meaning Lee had been trying to bring on a battle around the courthouse rather than undertaking a strategic turning movement. If that was the case, the Federal army had scurried to the north side of the Rappahannock needlessly — a fact that would not play well in the Northern press or the White House. But without knowledge of the Lee's movements, Meade was frozen in place until the situation became clearer.

As Meade worried, Lee continued to hold the initiative. His infantry had bivouacked near Culpeper late in the day on October 11. Disappointed that his opponent had declined to fight between the Rapidan and Rappahannock, Lee paused to bring up rations and contemplate his next move. It did not take the aggressive general long to order a continuation of his offensive by a wider movement designed to turn Meade's western flank. At the very least this would drive his opponent back on Washington. At most, it might present the Army of Northern Virginia with an opportunity to catch Meade on the move and wreck some part of his army.

On the morning of October 12, Lee put his army on the road leaving a small force near Culpepper. The army would concentrate at Warrenton on the thirteenth.

As the Rebel army began its movement around Meade's right flank, the commander of the Army of the Potomac finally grew tired of waiting for word of Lee's infantry. Absent any news from Gregg to show Lee was attempting a wider flanking movement, Meade concluded his enemy had probably massed around Culpeper. Although this had been true the evening of October 11, it was no longer true by October 12. But Meade operated on the only solid intelligence he had, which was Pleasonton's report of Rebel infantry at Brandy Station on the afternoon of October 11. Of course the cavalryman had caught a glimpse of the infantry supporting Fitz Lee and not Lee's main body, but there was no way for Meade to know that.

Meade determined to find out if Lee really was at Culpeper Courthouse and willing to fight. At 10:00 a.m., he ordered the VI, V and II Corps, along with Buford's cavalry division, to cross the Rappahannock and advance on Culpeper. Major General John Sedgwick, commanding the VI Corps, would be in charge of the movement. If he

found Lee, he was to report the fact to army headquarters and pitch into the Rebels. Meade would then hurry the rest of the army south to support Sedgwick, who would direct reinforcements into line as they came up.

About noon, Buford's skirmishers struck the small force left by Lee near Culpepper. With a total of 680 men, supported by five pieces of artillery, the Confederates made a stand. Vastly outnumbered by Buford's 2,000 troopers, and the three infantry corps behind them, Rebel cavalrymen engaged in every imaginable subterfuge to fool the enemy into believing there were more Southerners on hand than there really were. To their surprise and vast relief these antics seemed to work and the Yankee advance ground to a halt at dusk just outside Culpeper Courthouse.

But the Federal commanders were not fooled. By sunset, Buford and Sedgwick informed Meade that Lee's infantry was nowhere near Culpeper Courthouse. This, of course, did nothing to tell Meade where Ewell and A.P. Hill had gone. As night fell, the Union army went into camp on both sides of the Rappahannock – Buford, the II, V and VI Corps, south of the river, the I and III Corps along with Kilpatrick and Gregg's cavalry north of it. Come morning, Meade would have to decide what to do next in the face of the perplexing disappearance of the Army of Northern Virginia.

While Meade was shoving half his army back into Culpeper County, Lee's troops had been moving steadily north. Gregg's cavalry division was the trip wire strung out along the upper Rappahannock to provide Meade early warning of the very movement the Rebels were making. The first inkling Gregg had of the presence of enemy troops came around 9:00 a.m. when the leading Confederate cavalry regiment clashed with Federal pickets near Jeffersonton.

After a lull of several hours, a brigade of Confederate cavalry struck at Jeffersonton around 3 p.m., but was repulsed. Ewell's infantry and artillery came up in time to take part in a second attack that drove two regiments of Yankee cavalry out of the town and back to Sulphur Springs, where a bridge spanned the Rappahannock. In a daring assault, Stuart's horsemen forded the river and captured the bridge, driving away one of Gregg's brigades and allowing part of Ewell's infantry to reach the north shore before nightfall.

The Rebels were now over the Rappahannock and well on their way into Meade's rear. Incredibly the commander of the Army of the Potomac remained ignorant of that fact until 9:00 p.m. — 11 hours after the fighting at Jeffersonton had begun and four hours after the Confederates had taken Sulphur Springs. The reason for this dangerous oversight was the suddenness of the Rebel assault that afternoon. A courier sent to warn Gregg that Rebel infantry was approaching the Rappahannock had been wounded and taken prisoner before he could carry out his mission. Therefore it was not until the Confederates were storming Sulphur Springs that General Gregg received word that Ewell's corps was on the scene. By the time Gregg's message conveying this fact reached Meade it was already late at night. Suddenly alert to the danger threatening his command, Meade immediately sent word for Sedgwick to pull his wing of the army back

across the Rappahannock as rapidly as possible. French's III Corps was swung westward to face a possible attack from Sulphur Springs, while Newton's I Corps was ordered from Kelly's Ford to Warrenton Junction on the O&A.

It was midnight before all the Union troops south of the Rappahannock were on the road and dawn before the last of them crossed the river, allowing the engineers to take up the pontoons and set fire to the railroad bridge at Rappahannock Station. Meade had ordered a full retreat all the way to Centerville at 1:00 a.m. and kept his men on the move throughout the night and into the next day. On the morning of October 13, Lee concentrated his force at Warrenton, where he was again compelled to pause while his supply trains caught up and rations were issued. That afternoon, the general ordered Stuart to conduct a reconnaissance from Warrenton to Catlett's Station, some eight miles distant on the line of the Orange & Alexandria. Delayed longer than anticipated, Stuart did not reach Auburn until nearly 4:00 p.m. Leaving part of his force to hold the village and investigate the report of Yankees to the south, Stuart took his other two brigades toward Catlett's. Nearing the railroad, the Rebel cavalry happened upon the remarkable sight of Meade's principal wagon train massed in a single 300-acre clearing. Stuart was tempted to attack the 2,000 wagons, but thought a greater result might be obtained if Lee could come forward quickly with the infantry. Keeping his men out of view, the general sent a staff officer to carry word of this extraordinary opportunity to army headquarters.

Behind Stuart, events had taken a turn against the Confederates as the head of the Federal III Corps approached Auburn from the south. That part of Stuart's force left at Auburn clashed with the leading elements of III Corps before withdrawing from the field when it became apparent that there were more Yankees on hand than they could deal with.

Having brushed aside the Confederate Cavalry at Auburn, the III Corps continued its movement north. As a result, when Stuart's staff officer neared Auburn he found it filled with enemy troops. After sending word of this disturbing development to Stuart, the officer rode north in hopes of finding a way around the Union column to Robert E. Lee's headquarters.

Upon receiving the unwelcome news of an enemy force to his rear, Stuart snuck away from the railroad and rode back toward Auburn. Finding the roads still clogged with blue infantry, he hid his two brigades, their accompanying artillery and wagons, in a small valley screened by a thin stand of woods. Then he sent a series of messages to Lee suggesting that Rebel infantry assail the Union column from the west come morning, while Stuart's troopers attacked it from the east. Hoping that at least one of his couriers would get through to the main army, Stuart and his men spent a long night in utter silence, hoping to avoid detection and destruction before dawn brought Rebel infantry to their aid or provided some avenue of escape.

In the early hours of the morning on October 14, one of Stuart's couriers reached Robert E. Lee. Informed of his chief cavalier's predicament, Lee ordered Ewell to move

to the cavalry's assistance as soon as possible. Roughly about the same time, Major General Warren, whose II Corps had followed III Corps northward on October 13, received an order from Meade, directing him to alter his route of march in the morning by turning east at Auburn and moving to Catlett's Station on the railroad. Warren's troops, along with Gregg's cavalrymen, had bivouacked just south of Auburn the previous evening without knowing that the bulk of Lee's army lay just to the west or that two brigades of Stuart's cavalry sat astride the very road Warren's new orders directed him to take.

At dawn, Federal troops began crossing the bridge over Cedar Run into Auburn. Brigadier General John Caldwell's 1st Division moved onto the hill just behind the village, stacked arms and began preparing its breakfast. With the sun just starting to rise, firing broke out south of the creek as the leading elements of Rodes' Division struck the pickets of the 10th New York Cavalry deployed west of Warren's column. At the same moment, dismounted cavalrymen from Lomax's Brigade opened fire on Gregg's outpost.

The sudden burst of firing to the west indicated to Stuart that his messengers had gotten through to Lee and that his plan to hit Warren from two sides simultaneously was being put in motion. Confident that Rebel infantry was storming down on the Federal left, Stuart wheeled his six guns out from cover and opened a sudden barrage against Caldwell's division. To Stuart's consternation, the firing to the west ended at almost the same moment his guns opened — largely because both Lomax's and Rodes' troops recoiled from meeting stiff resistance and backed up to reorganize before moving forward again. Whatever the reason, Stuart's circumstances were dire and he knew he would have to find a way out of his predicament or be destroyed.

If the Rebel cavalryman was concerned about his situation, the same could be said for Warren. Worried that the enemy was trying to cut the balance of his corps off from Auburn, he ordered Gregg's cavalrymen and the infantry skirmishers from Caldwell's division protecting the bridge over Cedar Run, to hold at all costs. Next Warren directed Brigadier General Alexander Hays, commanding his 3rd Division, to knock whatever Rebels lay to the east away from the road to Catlett's Station. Then he told Brigadier General Alexander Webb to hurry his 2nd Division past the corps' wagon train to support Hays and help hold the bridge.

Stuart had no intention of staying around to fight an entire division of Union infantry. Ordering his command out of its hiding place, he sent it eastward with instructions to find an escape route southward across Cedar Run. After a brief rearguard skirmish Stuart successfully extracted his command and withdrew to the south, leaving the road eastward to Catlett's Station open for Warren's troops.

This last was no small achievement for the Federals, because no sooner did the rearguard fight with Stuart die out, than Ewell's infantry to the west began to press forward. Judging an assault across Cedar Run a discouraging prospect, Ewell sent Jubal Early's division to cross the creek a little to the west, after which he was to move around the high ground at Auburn — already nicknamed Coffee Hill by Caldwell's men — and

seek to circle behind the Yankees so as to strike Warren's rear and cut the road to Catlett's. Meanwhile Rodes' Division would maneuver to the east to find a suitable position from which Carter's Battalion of artillery could support Early, while Johnston's Division deployed to Rodes' left on a ridge running parallel to the creek. Unfortunately for the Confederates it was 10 a.m. before all this pressure could be brought to bear, and Warren had managed to extract all but his rearmost division —Caldwell's — and Gregg's cavalry from the area. As the Rebels tightened their noose, Southern infantry swarmed across Cedar Run as Early's troops advanced southward to cut the road to Catlett's Station. Amid an increasingly chaotic situation, the final Union formations pulled out with great difficulty, the tail most units of Caldwell's column being cut off temporarily and a good many Federals falling into Confederate hands. For the most part, however, the jaws of the Rebel movement snapped shut on empty space.

After following the rear of Warren's column a short distance, Ewell ended the pursuit. The Southern general was more interested in continuing his northward march to intersect Meade's retreat somewhere near Bristoe Station than tangling with his rearguard in the inhospitable terrain around Auburn. A grateful Warren, happy to see the Rebels leave him alone, continued his trek to Catlett's Station and the O&A.

Meade was anxious to keep his army moving toward Manassas Junction and Bull Run on the morning of October 14. Now fully aware that Lee was on his flank and moving to intercept the Federal retreat, the Pennsylvania general was doing everything he could to avoid that outcome and get his army into the stout fortifications around Centerville. Fortunately, the line of withdrawal was largely unobstructed. Nonetheless there were many streams to cross and a long distance to go before the army could really consider itself safe.

The Confederates were moving on a converging course toward the long blue columns. A.P. Hill's corps had passed through Warrenton on the morning of October 14 heading for New Baltimore where it would turn east toward Bristoe Station. Ewell, after disengaging from Warren's rearguard, took a shallower arc toward the O&A, moving by narrow byroads to hit the railroad near Kettle Run, just a few miles south of Bristoe Station.

The Rebels were in a jubilant mood. They were aware Lee had Meade on the run and evidence of the Yankee plight was abundant in the form of cast off equipment, camp fires still burning and Union stragglers swept up and made prisoner. Memories of the victory won by Lee and Stonewall Jackson in the Second Manassas Campaign easily came to mind as the Southerners moved over the same roads that had carried them to that storied triumph just 14 months ago.

Fortunately for the Army of the Potomac, George Meade was no John Pope — the general Lee had bested at 2nd Manassas — and although his retreat was not going as smoothly as he would have liked, it was going very well. Even Meade's own troops were impressed with how the withdrawal was being handled. Understanding the strategic

situation and the intent of their enemy, they were confident Meade would evade Lee's trap and there would be no repeat of Pope's disastrous defeat in August, 1862.

In fact, Meade was winning the race. Even before the Rebel columns turned east toward the railroad the I, III and VI Corps were north of Bristoe Station and well on their way to safety. Knowing that Warren's rearguard was most vulnerable to being cut off by the advancing Confederates, Meade instructed Major General George Sykes to keep his V Corps at Bristoe Station until the head of the II Corps arrived.

Sykes, however, evinced much concern about delaying his northward march any longer than absolutely necessary. Apparently worried that the enemy would slip into the lengthening gap between the V and III Corps, he urged Warren to hurry and as soon as a forward patrol from the II Corps was visible south of Bristoe Station, Sykes put his command on the road. The head of Warren's column was still more than a mile away, however, and the V Corps was leaving too soon.

Around 2:00 p.m., the lead element of A.P. Hill's corps reached the hills overlooking the valley of Broad Run and Bristoe Station. Riding ahead of his column, Hill saw the bulk of the Union V Corps resting north of the creek, while a multitude of Federal stragglers could be seen crossing the stream or milling about south of it. After chasing the Army of the Potomac for nearly a week, Hill believed he had finally caught up to Meade's rearguard and felt this would be his last chance to strike a blow before the Yankees were out of reach.

But there was no time to waste. Already the mass of V Corps was beginning to march north toward Centerville and safety. Sensing the need for haste, Hill hurriedly deployed his forces at hand, not waiting for the rest of his corps to come up.

The opening barrage of Confederate guns surprised the Federal troops who hurried away in a disorderly fashion. Confederate infantry advanced immediately. But the situation was not as the Confederates supposed. The actual rearguard of Meade's army — the II Corps — was nearing Bristoe Station from the south. After escaping encirclement at Auburn earlier that morning Warren's weary men had steadily marched along the railroad until they were surprised to hear firing at Bristoe Station. Rushing northward, the lead elements of II Corps encountered and opened fire on Hill's Confederates.

Concerned by the appearance of Union skirmishers on his right, for 10 minutes Hill pondered what to do. Still feeling the urgent need to attack the retreating V Corps and learning that other elements of his corps was nearing the field, Hill decided to continue to attack the V Corps assuming his arriving troops would soon be on hand to protect the Confederate flank.

The Rebel pause proved fatal. During that time, Union artillery began to deploy on the hills east of the railroad and north of Broad Run. Warren personally arrived on the scene and more of II Corps troops arrived on the field as well.

Hill sent three brigades forward with orders to cross Broad Run and pursue the V Corps. As these units moved, Webb's division of the II Corps took position on the eastern side of a railroad embankment just south of the creek. Unable to see Webb's troops, but taking fire from his skirmishers, two of Hill's brigades, wheeled left and advanced on the railroad embankment. At the same time Hay's Division reached the field and rushed into position next to Webb. Union artillery firing from hills east of the railroad and infantry shooting from the protection of the embankment repulsed the Rebel attack with heavy losses. Artillery duels and skirmishing continued until nightfall as more Confederate troops reached the field, but both sides declined to escalate the action.

The II Corps had held its own, but now faced the daunting reality that 55,000 Confederates were massed within striking distance of Warren's 11,000 Union troops. Using darkness and bad weather as a shield, Warren's command managed to sneak off during the night, as Gregg and Buford shepherded the Federal supply and pontoon train off to the northeast. By dawn the II Corps had safely united with the rest of Meade's army around Centerville and Lee had lost his opportunity to strike a blow.

On October 15, Stuart's cavalry advanced to Bull Run, while the rest of the Confederate army paused around Bristoe Station. Probing the Federal position along that historic stream, the Rebels provoked severe skirmishing at McLean's, Mitchell's and Blackburn's fords. Late in the afternoon, the Rebels learned that part of Meade's supply train had yet to cross Bull Run. Hoping to capture this prize, Stuart immediately moved in that direction but Buford's rearguard managed to hold the Confederates at bay until the wagons were safe. An effort by Stuart to outflank the Yankee defenders and overrun the supply column ran out of time with nightfall.

Although Meade was concerned by these Rebel probes, he was more worried about the fact that once again he had lost sight of Lee's infantry. Believing that Stuart's harassment along Bull Run was merely a demonstration to cover another movement by the Confederates, Meade did not know what the enemy might do. His greatest fear was that Lee would turn his right flank and drive into Maryland, at which point the Army of the Potomac would be compelled to fall back into the defenses of Washington. This assessment of the situation was not shared by Lincoln's administration or General-in-Chief Henry Halleck, who badgered Meade to attack Lee and refuted Meade's claim that the Rebel army was as strong as his own.

Halleck's evaluation of circumstances, it turned out, was far more accurate than Meade's. Despite the fact that he would have liked to hover near the Potomac for an extended period, Lee decided it was time to retreat. His men lacked the winter clothing necessary for a prolonged campaign so far north, and the destitute nature of Northern Virginia precluded living off the country throughout the winter. The only choice was to shorten his supply line by pulling back to the upper Rappahannock.

The Confederate retreat began on October 16. A drenching, day-long rain made the movement miserable, but also aided the Southerners by flooding Bull Run and preventing any kind of Federal advance. As the Rebels withdrew they thoroughly

destroyed the Orange & Alexandria Railroad by tearing up the track, burning cross ties, warping the rails, torching bridges, wrecking culverts and even chopping down the telegraph poles along the line. The demolition was so complete even the Federals were impressed with its scope. Lee knew that Meade could not advance without a railroad supply line and calculated that eliminating the O&A would not only forestall an enemy pursuit, it might even thwart another Union offensive before the onset of winter.

It was October 18 before Meade put his army in motion to follow the Rebels. Lee completed his retreat to the Rappahannock that same day. On October 19, the last major action of the campaign occurred near Buckland Mills. Still fearful that Lee might try to turn his position at Centerville, Meade assigned Buford's and Gregg's cavalry divisions to guard his army's flank and rear. This left only Kilpatrick's division and Brigadier General Wesley Merritt's Reserve Cavalry Brigade to pursue Stuart's troopers protecting Lee's retreat.

Merritt's command advanced down the line of the O&A where it ran into Fitz Lee's division near Bristoe Station on the afternoon of October 18. Kilpatrick's division moved on a parallel axis to the west, bearing down on Haymarket that same afternoon. Feeling the pressure of Kilpatrick's advance, Stuart ordered Fitz Lee to move west the next day and unite with his command on the Warrenton Pike.

On the morning of October 19, Stuart slowly withdrew in front of Kilpatrick to the village of Buckland Mills, which sat just south of Broad Run. A stone bridge spanned the creek and the Rebels took up a strong defensive position to deny the Federals its use. Kilpatrick attacked and a spirited fight was soon underway.

When, Fitz Lee (who was bringing his division west from Bristoe Station) learned of the engagement he communicated to Stuart by signal flag a daring stratagem for destroying Kilpatrick's division. Lee proposed for Stuart to gradually retire from Buckland down the Warrenton Pike, putting up little resistance as he did so in order to draw the Yankee cavalry after him. Once the Federals were well south of Broad Run, Lee's division would slip between them and the creek before launching an assault on Kilpatrick's rear. When Stuart heard the sound of Lee's guns, he would face about and strike the enemy from the front. Caught between the two Rebel divisions, Kilpatrick's command would be wrecked if not wiped out.

Stuart liked the idea and put the plan in motion. Delighted that the Confederates had abandoned their defense of Broad Run, Kilpatrick ordered Davies' brigade to pursue the retreating Rebel horsemen. But when the division commander told Custer to join the chase, the Michigan brigadier refused, demanding that his troopers be allowed to rest and eat breakfast before going further south. Kilpatrick relented, but ordered Custer's wagons to follow Davies' so as not to further slow the pursuit.

Stuart retired several miles to Chestnut Hill and then turned to await the sound of Fitz Lee's attack. Fortunately for Kilpatrick, Custer's brigade was still near Broad Run when Lee approached the pike. Instead of interposing between the Yankee cavalry and

the stream, Lee's leading brigades ran into a tough fight with Custer's men. Hearing the opening of this engagement, Stuart attacked. Davies' column had halted its advance when it heard the noise of combat to its rear, and one of his regiments had already been sent back to check on Custer when Stuart's counterattack was unleashed.

The Confederate attack steadily drove Davies' column toward Custer. Rebel pressure was unrelenting on both Union brigades and eventually some of Fitz Lee's troopers got between Custer and Davies. About the same time Custer realized he could not hold back Lee any longer and gave the order for his men to retreat across the bridge at Buckland Mills. This withdrawal left Davies cut off from the town and forced him to lead his men in a desperate cross-country race to ford Broad Run wherever they could manage to do so.

Custer managed to pull back in good order all the way to the outposts of the Federal VI Corps, despite repeated attacks by Fitz Lee. Davies brigade, which had put up a good fight until isolated, was virtually routed once it was driven off the road. Stuart's men chased Davies all the way back to the picket line of the Union I Corps, and even engaged in a twilight skirmish with Federal infantry that lasted well into the night before Stuart broke contact.

The Confederates were jubilant at the outcome of the battle and promptly named the fight the "Buckland Races" in reference to the high-speed, five mile-long chase which ensued once Davies was forced to flee the field. After the fight at Buckland Mills, Stuart's cavalry was allowed to pull back to the Rappahannock without further molestation. Meade's army would spend the next several weeks creeping south at the pace of railroad repairs which actually proceeded fairly quickly. Within three weeks the rival armies would again confront each other along the upper Rappahannock.

Although the Bristoe Station campaign produced no large scale battle, it had cost a significant number of men their lives, their health or their freedom. Meade reported total losses of 2,292 officers and men. Of this number, 1,385 were recorded as captured or missing. The count of Union dead was 136, while 733 Northern soldiers were wounded. The bulk of the Federal casualties were in Pleasonton's cavalry divisions and Warren's II Corps. Confederate losses were 1,826 men: 205 killed, 1,176 wounded and 445 missing – the vast majority of them in Kirkland and Cooke's brigades of Heth's Division which had attacked the railroad embankment at Bristoe Station.

Meade received plaudits from the press and his troops for not falling into Lee's trap. The Lincoln administration, however, was distressed, believing — correctly — that Meade had fallen back in front of a force much smaller than his own. The general's lack of aggressive instinct and perceived unwillingness to fight reinforced negative views of his abilities which had arisen when Lee's intact army escaped into Virginia after the battle of Gettysburg.

On the Confederate side there was much condemnation of A.P. Hill for his conduct of the fight at Bristoe Station. Many thought Hill had walked into a Union

ambush and charged him with blundering incompetence. Although the general manfully accepted responsibility for the reverse, he maintained that it would have been a mistake of equal proportions if he had not moved to strike the enemy when he encountered him at Bristoe. Lee did not reproach Hill publically and hoped his subordinate would learn a valuable lesson from the affair.

At the end of the day both Lee and Meade were disappointed with the results of the campaign —Lee because he felt a chance to do great harm to the Union army had been missed and Meade because he admitted he had been outgeneraled. Strategically, the Bristoe maneuver worked to the Confederacy's advantage. Although the operation had been brief, no permanent recovery of territory achieved, and no serious damage to the enemy accomplished, the Rebels had disrupted whatever offensive plans Meade had been devising. Additionally they had used up several weeks of decent campaigning weather, leaving little time for Meade to undertake an offensive before the dawn of winter.

The Army of Northern Virginia and its commander had also proven they had lost none of their daring as a result of Gettysburg. Indeed, Lee's men believed Meade's retreat simply confirmed their long standing sense of superiority over their Northern foes. Moreover, the South had accomplished all of this without the heavy casualties which would have resulted from a major battle. If Confederate victory now depended on prolonging the war and denying the Union meaningful progress in hopes that Northern voters would replace Lincoln with a peace candidate in 1864, the Bristoe Station campaign was a relatively inexpensive and time consuming step in that direction.

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