ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of Spotsylvania Courthouse

By **Gordon C. Rhea**

On the evening of May 3, 1864, the Union Army of the Potomac crossed the Rapidan River, aiming to swing west below the stream and attack General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. Halting so that the Federal force's supply trains could catch up, the Potomac army's commander Major General George G. Meade elected to stay overnight in a dense stand of second-growth known as the Wilderness. Lee seized the opportunity, sidled up to his opponent, and initiated a brutal two-day battle on terrain favorable to the smaller rebel force. By sundown on May 6, Lee had stymied Grant's offensive.

Accompanying Meade was Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, general-in-chief of all of the Union's military forces. Grant saw no point in continuing to butt heads with Lee in the Wilderness. The better strategy, he decided, was to maneuver Lee onto ground more advantageous to the Federals.

On the morning of May 7, Grant determined to leave the Wilderness and march toward the road junction at Spotsylvania Court House, ten miles south of the Wilderness. Once he had seized the crossroads, Grant predicted that Lee would have no choice but to follow, giving the Federals the match on open ground that Grant sought.

At his headquarters in Catherine Tapp's field, Lee tried to gauge Grant's intentions. Perhaps Grant meant to renew his hammering in the Wilderness; possibly he intended to shift to Fredericksburg and press south along the line of the Richmond, Fredericksburg & Potomac Railroad; or maybe he contemplated marching toward Spotsylvania Court House. Hedging his bets, the Confederate commander decided to hold most of his troops in the Wilderness until Grant showed his hand. Since the Union army already controlled the main north-south artery – the Brock Road – Lee ordered the construction of a new trail through the woods as an alternative route south.

Soon after dark, the Army of the Potomac threaded out of the Wilderness. Grant rode in front, wearing a regulation army hat, a plain blouse and trousers, and a pair of muddy cavalry boots that looked, according to one observer, "very unmilitary." The year before, Major General Joseph Hooker had retreated north after a drubbing by Lee only a few miles away at Chancellorsville. Grant, however, turned south on the Brock Road, and his soldiers erupted in cheers. "On to Richmond," they cried, clapping and pitching their hats into the air. "Afterwards," an officer reminisced, "in hours of disappointment,

anxiety, and doubt, when the country seemed distrustful and success far distant, those nearest the chief were wont to recall this midnight ride in the Wilderness, and the verdict of the Army of the Potomac after Grant."[1]

Meanwhile Major General Richard Herron Anderson – successor to Lieutenant General James Longstreet, who had been seriously wounded in the Wilderness -- withdrew the Confederate First Corps from its entrenchments and started south as well, following the narrow trail recently carved through the forest. Someone on the southern end of the Confederate line raised a shout, which was repeated to the line's far end, five miles away. Another chorus of shouts rippled along the Confederate trenches, and then a third. "It seemed to fill every heart with new life, to inspire every nerve with might never known before," a Southerner remembered.[2]

While the Union host jostled south, Anderson's soldiers pursued back roads and trails, putting as much distance as possible between them and the smoldering Wilderness. Shortly before daybreak, the Confederates reached the Po River, a narrow stream two miles from Spotsylvania Court House. There, near Block House Bridge, Anderson let his men rest.

Major General James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart's Confederate cavalrymen meanwhile struggled to delay Grant's infantry, fighting dismounted behind barricades of fence rails and logs. Concerned that his cavalry was insufficient to clear the road, Meade gave the job to Major General Gouverneur Kemble Warren, whose V Corps battered south, driving the Southern cavalrymen by sheer weight of numbers.

A mile and a half north of Spotsylvania Court House, Stuart's riders prepared for a final stand. Retreating across the farm of the Spindle family – Sarah Spindle was eating breakfast in her house, along with several of her children – the Confederate troopers deployed along a low ridge called Laurel Hill. Stuart, resplendent in his plumage, helped stake out the position, which afforded an unobstructed view across Mrs. Spindle's field, in the direction of the approaching Yankees.

From their bivouac near Block House Bridge, Anderson's soldiers heard the din from Warren's and Stuart's rolling fight. Suddenly couriers from Stuart pounded up and requested support. Clambering up the back side of Laurel Hill, Anderson's lead elements piled behind the makeshift barricades Stuart's troopers had tossed up only moments before. Stuart directed them into place – "cool as a piece of ice, though all the time laughing," an observer recalled.[3]

---

[1] Free B. Bowley, "A Boy Lieutenant in a Black Regiment," *National Tribune*, May 4, 1899; Horace Porter, *Campaigning with Grant* (New York: The Century Company, 1897), 78-79; Adam Badeau, *Military History of General Ulysses S. Grant* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1881), II, 134-135

[2] William S. Dunlop, *Lee's Sharpshooters: Or the Forefront of Battle* (Little Rock, Arkansas: Tunnah & Pittard. 1899), 43-44; Susan W. Benson, ed., *Berry Benson's Civil War Book*: *Memoirs of a Confederate Scout and Sharpshooter*(Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press 1962), 66.

[3] John Coxe, "Last Struggles and Successes of Lee," *Confederate Veteran*, (1914), XXII, 357.

It was 8:30 a.m. on May 8 when Warren's battle lines marched brazenly into Mrs. Spindle's field, snapping brittle corn stalks underfoot. The Confederates fired into the Yankees, who had no place to hide. A bullet sent shards of bone and gristle through the leg of Brigadier General John Cleveland Robinson, spearheading the Union attack. One Federal brigade lost three successive commanders in as many minutes. "At points where the enemy's fire was most concentrated," a Northerner recollected, "the drone of bullets blended into a throbbing wail, like that of a sonorous telegraph wire pulsing in a strong wind, punctuated by the pert zip of the closer shots."[4]

Desperate to gain the ridge, Warren pumped troops into the fight. But fresh soldiers only provided denser targets for the rebel riflemen and for a battery of Confederate artillery that jangled up and spewed canister into Warren's ranks. Appalled at the turn of events – his corps was being annihilated -- Warren seized a flagstaff and tried in vain to rally his soldiers as they stampeded back.

Federal sharpshooters took cover in Mrs. Spindle's house and began picking off the Confederates posted on Laurel Hill. The Rebels responded by lobbing incendiary shells into the house. "And then I saw a sight I never wanted to see again," a Southerner recounted. Sarah Spindle, her hair streaming behind her, ran from the burning structure with her children to seek refuge behind Confederate lines.[5]

As combat heated, Lee hurried the rest of his army to the emerging battle front, and Grant brought up the remainder of his troops. Toward evening, Major General John Sedgwick's Union VI Corps tried to slip around the eastern end of Anderson's entrenched position, but Lieutenant General Richard Stoddert Ewell's Confederate Second Corps arrived from the Wilderness in the nick of time, glided into place next to Anderson, and repulsed Sedgwick, securing Lee's hold on Spotsylvania Court House. Everything had gone right for the Confederates this bloody 8th of May.

Lee's engineers labored all night to lay out a defensive line. Anderson's Corps held Laurel Hill, on the Confederate left; Ewell's Corps extended the line eastward; and early on May 9, Lieutenant General Ambrose Powell Hill's Confederate Third Corps tacked onto the eastern end of Ewell's entrenchments, running the fortifications to the south. By the end of the day, the Army of Northern Virginia occupied a continuous six-mile array of earthworks blocking Grant's approaches to Spotsylvania Court House.

Lee's engineers made ingenious use of terrain, laying their entrenchments along high ground, clearing the land in front, and heaping tree limbs and brush against the face of the fortifications, pointed ends toward the enemy. The rebel works followed the ground's contours, creating angles and pockets that subjected attackers to overlapping fire from several directions.

[4] Charles E. Phelps, "Seventh Regiment Infantry," L. Allison Wilmer et al ,eds. *History and Roster of Maryland Volunteers, War of 1861-1865* (Baltimore: Press of Guggenheimer, Weil & Co., 1898), I, 271.i.
[5] Coxe, "Last Struggles and Successes of Lee," 357.

Grant's men also dug, running their earthworks parallel to those of the rebels. "If anyone got any sleep," a Union man remembered, "it was in very short naps in line on the ground with their guns by their sides, or in their grasp, ready to meet threatened attacks which came almost hourly."[6] Wounded men in Mrs. Spindle's farm cried piteously for water, but no one called a truce, and the field remained a killing zone. On May 9, a Confederate marksman shot Sedgwick in the face, making him the highest ranking general killed at Spotsylvania Court House. Brigadier General Horatio Gouverneur Wright assumed command of the Union VI Corps.

While the two armies burrowed behind formidable earthworks, the Union cavalry launched a mission to destroy Lee's mounted arm. The impetus for the operation was a simmering feud between Meade and Major General Philip Sheridan, Grant's protégé from the West who now headed the Potomac army's cavalry. The two men shared very different visions of the proper role of cavalry – Meade viewed Sheridan's job as screening the infantry's advance and scouting out Lee's positions, while Sheridan wanted to do battle with Stuart. Impressed by Sheridan's aggressive spirit, Grant authorized Sheridan to launch an expedition against his Confederate counterpart.

Early on May 9, Sheridan's troopers started toward the Confederate capital, anticipating that Stuart would follow. Their departure left Grant virtually blind, a situation that would cost the Federals dearly at Spotsylvania Court House.

Over the next three days, Grant initiated a flurry of offensives in an attempt to break through Lee's frowning battlements. Late on May 9, part of Major General Winfield Scott Hancock's II Corps marched around the left end of Lee's line to turn the western Confederate flank. Hancock crossed the Po River, but darkness fell before he could complete the maneuver. Lee, seizing the opportunity to attack Hancock's isolated force, shifted a division under Major General Henry Heth from the right end of his line to the left, poising Heth to tear into the unsuspecting Federals the next morning.

Near Block House Bridge, the Po turned sharply south. Hancock's objective – the rebel flank – lay directly across the stream, which he would have to cross for a second time, and the rebels had the far bank well defended. As Hancock prepared to move, news arrived that rebels – Heth's men – were closing to attack. While the bulk of Hancock's force retreated north, the rearguard under Major General Francis Channing Barlow became embroiled in a nasty action with Heth and barely escaped. "Their right and rear enveloped in the burning wood, their front assailed by overwhelming numbers of the enemy, the withdrawal of the troops was attended with extreme difficulty and peril," Hancock reported.[7]

[6] S. F. Hildebrand, "Notes and Reminiscenes of Services in the 139th Regiment," Harold C. George Collection, Library of Congress.

[7] Winfield S. Hancock's Report, United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies.* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 36, part 1, p. 332. (hereafter *O.R.*, I, 36, pt. 1, 332.)

Alert for an opening, Grant concluded that Lee must have pulled troops from his line to pound Hancock. To exploit this hypothetical weakness, he ordered an offensive against the entire Confederate formation that afternoon.

The plan went terribly awry. First, Hancock had to finish extricating his corps from the Po and resume his post on the western end of the Union formation. Then, mid-afternoon, Warren announced that he could successfully attack Laurel Hill. Headquarters assented, but Warren's assault deteriorated into a bloody repetition of his failed charges against the same objective on May 8. The army-wide offensive was delayed until 6:00 p.m. to give Warren time to regroup.

The postponement, however, threw another part of the intended offensive out of whack. A critical component of Grant's plan was an offensive to be led by Emory Upton, a fiery young colonel from upstate New York. Identifying a finger of woods that reached within two hundred yards of the Confederate line, Upton arranged twelve crack regiments into a compact formation comprised of four lines of troops. The first line was to charge without pausing, leap onto the rebel earthworks, shoot and bayonet the defenders, and push left and right to widen their lodgment. The second line was to pile in, followed by the third line, while the fourth line remained in the woods as a reserve. Once Upton had secured the breach, Brigadier General Gershom Mott's division was to slice into the opening and complete the business of ripping Lee's army in half.

Warren's aborted offensive required delaying Upton's charge, initially scheduled for 5:00 p.m. Shortly after 6:00 p.m., Upton's troops, tightly-packed and marching quickly as instructed, started toward the rebel works. "I felt my gorge rise, and my stomach and intestines shrink together in a knot, and a thousand things rushed through my mind," a Union man remembered. "Forward," cried Upton, who was running with his soldiers.[8] Northerners clawed their way up the face of the Confederate ramparts and leaped into the defenders, stabbing with their bayonets and swinging their muskets like clubs.

Spreading left and right, Upton's troops widened the cleft according to plan, allowing the second and third lines to pour in. Ewell rode toward the tumult, excitedly barking orders and pulling on his moustache. "Don't run, boys," he called to Confederate troops who were falling back. "I will have enough men here in five minutes to eat up every damn one of them!"[9] Lee also started toward the fight, turning back only when his aides promised to make sure the ground was recovered.

Upton's success depended on Mott's reinforcements. The earlier order postponing the attack, however, had never reached Mott; assuming that the offensive was

[8] Isaac O. Best, *History of the 121st New York State Infantry* (Chicago: N.p., 1921), 129-130.
[9] Cyrus B. Watson, "Forty-fifth Regiment", Walter Clark, ed., *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War of 1861-65 Written by Members of the Respective Commands*(Raleigh, North Carolina: State of North Carolina, E.M. Uzzell, Printer and Binder, 1901), III, 48.

still scheduled for 5:00p.m., Mott had launched his attack early and had been repulsed with severe loss. With no hope of support, Upton's soldiers climbed back over the rebel earthworks and huddled against the face of the barricades, where they contemplated the unpleasant choice of surrendering or fleeing across the field swept by Confederate guns. Many elected to run the gantlet of enemy fire, dragging wounded comrades with them. Of the nearly five thousand soldiers who made the charge with Upton, more than a thousand did not return. The grand venture had failed, through no fault of the colonel's. "I cried like a whipped spaniel," a participant admitted.[10] The attack, like so many before it, was a victim of mistakes by the Union high command.

That evening, Grant considered Upton's failed offensive. Once more, as in the Wilderness, the Army of the Potomac had let him down. Generals had faltered, orders had gone astray, and Meade had neglected to achieve even the semblance of coordination. Upton's attack, however, had demonstrated that Lee's line could be broken if an assault were pressed swiftly. If reinforcements had exploited Upton's initial success, would not the outcome have been vastly different? What if the assaulting force were larger? What if the attack had occurred just before sunrise, magnifying the element of surprise?

A cavalryman at headquarters overheard the Union commander discussing the possibilities with his aides. "A brigade today," Grant emphasized. "Will try a corps tomorrow."[11]

Near the center of Lee's position, rebel engineers had bent the line north, jogged it eastward, and then headed it off to the south, tracking a stretch of high ground. The result was a bulge half a mile wide and half a mile deep, pointing toward the Federals. The protuberance resembled a mule shoe, and the soldiers called it by that name. In military parlance, the Mule Shoe was a salient, a feature notoriously difficult to defend. Lee and his engineers, however, decided to hold the Mule Shoe because it occupied high ground. Lee directed Ewell to pack the salient with artillery, thirty pieces in all.

Grant selected the Mule Shoe for his next offensive and assigned Hancock's corps -- more than 20,000 soldiers, nearly double the number of men involved in Major General George Edward Pickett's famous charge at Gettysburg ten months earlier – to attack at first light. Simultaneously Wright's troops and Ambrose Everett Burnside's IX Corps, totaling forty thousand soldiers, were to plow into the Mule Shoe's eastern and western legs, while Warren's corps pinned Anderson's rebels at Laurel Hill. Crushed by irresistible numbers, Lee's troops would have no choice but to scatter or face destruction.

The sky darkened on May 11, and rain fell in torrents. "The wind was raw and sharp, our clothing wet, and we were just about as disconsolate and miserable a set of

[10] Samuel E. Pingree to Cousin Hunton, June 10, 1864, in Pingree Family Collection, Vermont Historical Society.
[11] Lumen H. Tenney, *War Diary of Lummen Harris Tenney, 1861-1865* (Oberlin, Ohio: Frances Andrews Tenney, 1914), 115.

men as ever were seen," a waterlogged warrior reported.[12] Toward evening, Hancock's corps began marching from the western end of Grant's line to the Brown family fields, across from the Mule Shoe. Apprised of mounting enemy activity, Lee mistakenly concluded that Grant was retreating. Aggressive as ever, Lee wanted his army poised to harass Grant during his withdrawal. To facilitate his pursuit, he ordered the cannon extracted from the Mule Shoe and brought back nearly two miles to firm roads at Spotsylvania Court House. Acting on a fatal misapprehension of Grant's intentions, Lee weakened the very sector of his line that the Union commander had targeted for a massive offensive.

Hancock's weary soldiers pursued a labyrinth of country roads and trails. The marching column kept breaking, and officers flailed about, cursing as they tried to reunite the pieces. No one on the Union side knew how strongly the rebel earthworks were manned, and even the half-mile stretch between the staging area at the Brown house and the Mule Shoe was a mystery. When one of Hancock's generals sarcastically inquired whether he might encounter a thousand-foot ravine that would swallow up his troops, no one could tell him. "For heaven's sake, at least face us in the right direction so that we shall not march away from the enemy and have to go round the world and come up in their rear," an officer quipped.[13]

Mud-spattered Federals filed into the Brown house fields all night. Half a mile south loomed the head of the Mule Shoe, manned by Major General Edward "Allegheny" Johnson's Confederate division of about 4,500 troops. By midnight, persistent reports from outposts convinced Johnson that Grant was preparing to attack, and he asked Ewell for his artillery back. Persuaded by Johnson's urgency, Ewell ordered the guns returned and informed Lee of Johnson's misgivings. Ewell's note puzzled Lee, as he still believed that Grant intended to retreat. Out of an abundance of caution, however, he, too, ordered the artillery returned to the salient by daylight.

Not until 4:00 a.m. did a rider slosh into the artillery camps near Spotsylvania Court House and deliver the orders. The road was only faintly illuminated by dawn as the guns started toward the front, horses straining and wheels slipping in muddy ruts.

The downpour slowed to a drizzle, and mist drifted over the fields around Mr. Brown's home, collecting as fog in low-lying hollows. "To your commands," Hancock directed.[14] The charge – the grand offensive aimed at bringing three years of war to a close -was to begin.

[12] William P. Haines, *History of the Men of Company F, with Description of the Marches and Battles of the 12th New Jersey Volunteers* (Mickleton, New Jersey: N.p., 1897), 59.
[13] Francis C. Barlow, "Capture of the Salient, May 12, 1864," Theodore F. Dwight *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts* (Boston: Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1881-1918), IV, 247.
[14] William Houghton, "A Staff Officer's Recollection of the Salient Angle,"*National Tribune* (September 1, 1890), 122.

Half a mile south, aides roused Allegheny Johnson and warned that enemy soldiers were approaching. Mounting the Mule Shoe's earthen walls, the general strained to see across the fields. "The fog was so dense we could not see in any direction," a Confederate remembered, "but soon we could hear the commands of officers to the men, and the buzz and hum of moving troops."[15]

Hancock's attack caught the Confederates unprepared, and Hancock's compact mass swarmed onto the earthworks. In parts of the salient, stunned defenders surrendered with scarcely a fight; other sectors witnessed horrific hand-to-hand combat as Federals battered their way along the trench line behind the works. Three thousand Confederates fell prisoner, along with the guns that had rolled in from Spotsylvania Court House.

Twenty thousand Federal troops were now shoe-horned into the tip of the salient. Men milled about, seizing prisoners and collecting mementos from abandoned rebel camps. In an attempt to maintain the initiative, Hancock urged his officers to regroup and pursue the defeated enemy. But the offensive was stymied.

Confederate leadership within the Mule Shoe was also in shambles. Johnson was a prisoner, and volatile Richard Ewell, his superior, seemed beside himself, cursing and whacking retreating soldiers across their backs with his sword. "How can you expect to control these men when you have lost control of yourself?" Lee demanded, adding: "If you cannot suppress your excitement, you had better retire."[16]

As Lee saw it, his best option was to abandon the Mule Shoe and prepare a new line on high ground a mile to the rear, near the home of the Harrison family. To buy time, part of his army would have to hold off the entire Union offensive. It was Lee's good fortune that his reserve force was in the hands of Brigadier General John Brown Gordon, the lanky, thirty-two year old Georgian who had spearheaded an evening attack on May 6 in the Wilderness. Launching a blistering charge, Gordon's forces drove some of Hancock's troops out of the eastern sector of the Mule Shoe. The situation on the Mule Shoe's western leg and across its apex, however, remained dangerous. Here massive numbers of northern soldiers had overrun the heart of Ewell's line, and Grant was ordering up artillery.

Lee's task was clear. His army's survival required driving the enemy from the Mule Shoe's western leg and apex and holding them in check until he could construct a new line in the rear.

In past battles, Lee generally delegated responsibility to his subordinates. Longstreet, however, was seriously wounded in the Wilderness, Hill was sick, Ewell seemed incapable of exerting intelligent leadership, and Stuart had ridden off to fight

[15] Robert Hunter, "Major Hunter's Story," *Southern Historical Society Papers* (Richmond, 1876-1944), XXXIII 337-38.
[16] Walter A. Montgomery, The Days of Old and the Years that are Past (N.p., n.d), 28.

Sheridan. This time, Lee could not delegate; he had to personally select the units necessary to recapture the Mule Shoe.

Lee first sent Brigadier General Stephen Dodson Ramseur, commanding a North Carolina brigade, toward the Mule Shoe's western leg. Advancing through a veritable blizzard of musketry, the North Carolinians drove the Northerners from the earthworks in front of them and wedged into a short sector of trenches. To Ramseur's right, the trench line dipped gently downhill, then rose to a slight crest, beginning the Mule Shoe's broad, flat apex. From this high ground, Union troops could enfilade the western leg. Simply put, whoever controlled the elevation would command the earthworks that Lee so desperately needed to occupy.

Coming to Ramseur's assistance were Alabama troops under Brigadier General Abner Monroe Perrin. Buffeted by intense fire, they piled into fortifications next to Ramseur, closer by yards to critical high ground and vulnerable to the deadly plunging fire. Then came Mississippians under Brigadier General Nathaniel Harrison Harris; Union musketry forced them to seek cover in entrenchments to the right of the Alabamians, extending the recaptured earthworks closer to the critical high ground.

Grant ordered Wright's corps into the fight, jamming rank after rank of Union soldiers against the outer face of the fortifications Lee's men were recapturing. Desperate to take the high ground, Lee ordered Brigadier General Samuel McGowan's South Carolina brigade into the fray. Suffering severe losses, McGowan's men drove the Federals from their commanding position and secured a toe-hold on that important piece of real estate.

It was now 9:00 a.m. Determined to recapture the high ground, the Union high command launched a welter of counterattacks. Coehorn mortars heaved shells in high, curving arcs behind the Confederate line, and Union artillery fired into the works at point-blank range. The plain became a field of blue-clad corpses, many pulverized into mush, and many soldiers broke under the strain and stood erect, firing slowly and deliberately until Confederate balls cut them down. The scene on the rebel side was equally horrific. Trenches brimmed with water "as bloody as if it flowed from an abattoir," a survivor recalled.[17] Wounded men drowned in muck, and bodies lay several layers deep, some floating in the foul mire.

Soldiers who lived through the experience described the horror of the combat. "Here was nothing of glamour, but unmitigated slaughter, a Golgotha without a vestige of the ordinary pomp and circumstances of glorious war," a participant remembered. Another man described "bloodshed surpassing all former experiences, a desperation in the struggle never before witnessed, of mad rushes, and of as sudden repulses, of guns

[17] Thomas D Cockrell and Michael B .Ballard, eds. *A Mississippi Rebel in the Army of Northern Virginia: The Civil War Memoirs of Private David Holt* (Baton Rouge,: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 256-67 ; Varina D. Brown, *A Colonel at Gettysburg and Spotsylvania* (Columbia, South Carolina: The State Company, 1931), 108-139.

raised in the air with the butts up and fired over log walls, of our flag in shreds."[18] Veterans later festooned battlefields such as Sharpsburg and Gettysburg with monuments to their valor. Few had any desire to return to the place they later named the Bloody Angle.

Night brought no slackening of fire, and the same four rebel brigades that had recaptured the works that morning held grimly on. For them, life had evolved into killing and dying, a slow-motion dance in a ghoulish paste of mud and corpses. After midnight, an oak twenty-two inches in diameter toppled, whittled through by multiple rifle shots as surely as if it had been chopped by a woodsman's axe. Near dawn on May 13, Lee's new line was finished, and the Mule Shoe's defenders retired noiselessly to the new position. "Exhausted, hungry and worn out for want of sleep, we were a sorry looking crowd," a Confederate remembered.[19]

The sun rose over a scene of carnage that shocked even hardened veterans. The fighting on May 12 had gained Grant a few acres of bloodstained Virginia soil. But tactically, the Union commander had gained nothing, and Lee now faced him from his strongest position yet.

The Bloody Angle underscored serious shortcomings in the Union army's leadership. The initial assault was well conceived, but no one anticipated what needed to be done once the attacking force had penetrated the rebel line. No organized body of troops stood ready to exploit the breach, and the inevitable confusion engendered by the charge and the capture of the rebel defenders took the steam out of the offensive. Surprisingly, neither Grant nor Meade visited the front or designated a subordinate to coordinate the various corps.

The battle also revealed much about Lee. The rebel commander's mistaken reading of Grant's intentions and his decision to remove artillery from the Mule Shoe almost cost him his army. But his ability to maintain his composure, react to crisis, and micromanage his troops had been impressive. Also impressive was the tenacity of his soldiers, who had repulsed a vastly larger force and held their ground.

May 12 was the bloodiest day of the campaign thus far. Some 9,000 Confederates and an equal number of Federals had been killed, wounded, or captured.

Grant, however, had no intention of abandoning the initiative. From his new line behind Mule Shoe, Lee's entrenchments covered the approaches to Spotsylvania Court House along Fredericksburg Road and terminated a short distance past the court house town near Massaponax Church Road. On the night of May 13-14, Grant dispatched Warren and Wright to assail the unprotected southern end of Lee's works, aiming to

[18] Richard Meade Bache, *Life of General George Gordon Meade Commander of the Army of the Potomac* (Philadelphia: Henry T. Coates & Co., 1897), 429; Thomas W. Hyde, *Following the Greek Cross* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin, 1895), 200.
[19] J. S. McMahon to Family, May 14, 1864, in Columbia South Carolina *Daily Southern Guardian*, May 26, 1864.

precipitate the collapse of the Confederate formation. But darkness, rain, and mud slowed the nighttime march and played havoc with Grant's timetable. By 4:00 a.m., the time set for the attack, Warren had only 1,200 bleary-eyed soldiers in place, and Wright's men were mired several miles to the rear. "Owing to the difficulties of the road have not got fully into position," Grant informed Washington, adding that "bad weather may prevent offensive operations today."[20]

Unknown to Grant, his ruse had worked. As a Confederate artillerist later observed, Grant had "devised an attack which would have had a fair chance of taking us quite by surprise, had he been able to make it."[21] Not until mid-afternoon did Lee fully realize his peril and direct Anderson to rush a division to the southern Confederate flank. By nightfall – due to Grant's failure to exploit his temporary advantage – Lee was able to close the back door to Spotsylvania Court House that had stood ajar all day.

Rain turned the roads around Spotsylvania Court House to quagmires and precluded movement for several days. Finally, on May 17, the weather cleared and Grant hit upon another plan. Lee, he observed, had shifted the weight of his army south to counter the Union buildup in the battlefield's southern sector. The last thing that Lee expected, Grant reasoned, was an attack from the north, across the abandoned Mule Shoe. So once again, under cover of darkness, Grant rearranged his army – this time reversing his deployment of May 13-14 by withdrawing Warren and Wright from the southern end of his line and sending them north.

Early on May 18, most of Wright's and Hancock's soldiers charged from the Mule Shoe's apex toward the new line that Lee had established along high ground near the Harrison house. "The appearance of the dead who had been exposed to the sun so long, was horrible in the extreme as we marched past and over them," a Union man recollected.[22]

Confederate artillery greeted the advancing Federals. Grant had caught Lee by surprise, but Ewell's soldiers had constructed an impregnable bastion. High dirt barricades ran along the ridge, replete with elevated towers for sharpshooters, and in front spread row on row of felled trees, forming an impenetrable barrier. "Heads, arms and legs were blown off like leaves in a storm," a Northerner remembered. "The whole morning's work was a deed of blood," another Federal recalled. Grant called off the attack, deeming it "useless to knock our heads against a brick wall," Meade wrote home.[23]

[20] Grant to Halleck, May 14, 1864, *O.R.*, I, 36, pt. 2, 746.
[21] Gary W. Gallagher, *Fighting for the Confederacy: The Personal Recollections of General Edward Porter Alexander* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), 380.
[22] William G. Mitchell, 2nd Corps Daily Memoranda, *O.R.*, I, 36, pt. 1, 361.
[23] H.W. Wingfield Diary, May 18, 1864, *Bulletin of the Virginia State Library*, 16 (1927), 39; Unsigned letter, "From the Rifle Pits, May 19, 1864, Providence Rhode Island *Daily Journal*, June 1, 1864; Meade to wife, May 19, 1864, in George G. Meade, *Life and Letters of General George Gordon Meade* (New York: Charles Scribner & Sons, 1913), II, p. 197.

When the shooting quieted, rebels ventured out to examine the execution. "Few men were simply wounded," a gunner noted. "Nearly all were dead, and literally torn into atoms; some shot through and through by cannon balls, some with arms and legs knocked off, and some with their heads crushed in by the fatal fragments of exploding shells."[24] Ewell, whose soldiers had been mauled by the same foe the previous week, gloried in their revenge. A rebel recalled how they affectionately patted the tubes of the artillery pieces, doting over them as one might treat a beloved pet.

May 18 was a bad day for Grant all around. The failed Union assault had demonstrated once again that Lee's Spotsylvania line could not be broken. Disheartening news also arrived from Grant's supporting armies. Major General Franz Sigel had been defeated at New Market in the Shenandoah Valley and was retreating north, and Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler had been repulsed at Drewry's Bluff and was withdrawing into the wedge of land between the James and Appomattox Rivers known as Bermuda Hundred.

The campaign that had started two weeks before with so much promise seemed on the verge of collapse.

****

[24] William S. White, "A Diary of the War or What I Saw of It" Carolton McCarthy, ed. *Contributions to a History of the Richmond Howitzer Battalion* (Richmond Virginia: Carlton McCarthy & Co., 1883- 1886), II, 256.