

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of Big Bethel: Jubilation and Despair

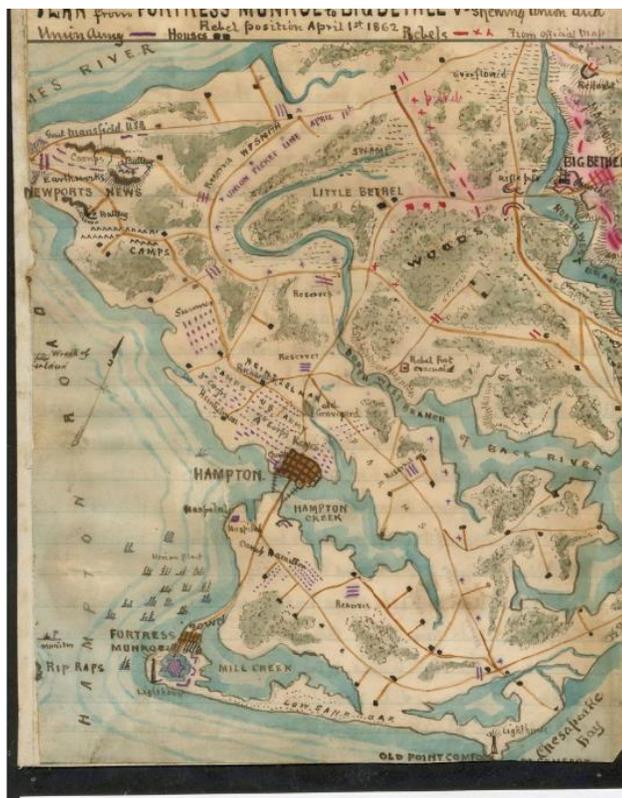
By John V. Quarstein

The Union's ability to maintain control of Fort Monroe during the secession crisis provided the Federals with an important strategic toehold in Confederate territory. Not only could Fort Monroe, located on the very tip of the Virginia Peninsula guarding the lower Chesapeake Bay and the Hampton Roads harbor, support operations down the Southern coast by the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron, but it also provided a springboard for a Union advance against the Confederate capital at Richmond. Fort Monroe, known as the Key to the South, quickly overflowed with Federal soldiers. When Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler, a Massachusetts lawyer, politician, and militia general, assumed command, he sought to use the Peninsula approach to strike against Richmond. By early June 1861, the Federals had occupied the colonial town of Hampton and had built two additional camps, Camp Hamilton just outside the walls of Fort Monroe and Camp Butler on Newport News Point overlooking the mouth of the James River. Butler's soldiers were ranging beyond Newmarket Creek (the southwest branch of the Back River, see map below), and the Confederates appeared unable to counter the Federal aggressions.

When Major General John Bankhead Magruder was assigned to take command at Yorktown, he immediately surveyed the Peninsula to ascertain how to defend this approach to Richmond. Magruder, a bon vivant and raconteur, nicknamed "Prince John" for his courtly manners and lavish dress, was an 1830 West Point graduate and hero of the Mexican War. He knew that he needed time to build a comprehensive defensive system to defend against any Union advance. He selected Big Bethel Church, located at the Hampton-York Highway's crossing of the northwest branch of the Back River, also known as Brick Kiln Creek, to bait Butler into an attack. Colonel Daniel Harvey Hill, a West Pointer, Mexican War hero, author, and pre-war educator, was sent by Magruder to Bethel to construct earthworks to block against any Union movement. Magruder arrived on June 9 and assumed overall command of the 1,400 Confederates including the 1st North Carolina, Major Edgar Burwell Montague's Virginia Battalion, the Wythe Rifles, and additional companies of Major George Wythe Randolph's Richmond Howitzers.

The Federals, meanwhile, had not been idle. Butler continued to receive reinforcements and begun probing beyond Newmarket Creek. Once the Confederate position had been firmly established at Big Bethel, Magruder sent elements of the 1st North Carolina south to Little Bethel Church and beyond to reconnoiter Union strength. Several minor clashes occurred from June 7 to June 9 between Little Bethel and Newmarket Creek as the no-man's land between the Back River's northwest and southwest branches was now hotly contested. Butler became aware of the Confederate presence at Little Bethel and Big Bethel. With the Confederates so close to Hampton the Union general was convinced that he must strike out and attack them. The capture of Big

Bethel, Butler believed, would open the door to Richmond. Accordingly, Butler, with the assistance of his military secretary Major Theodore Woolsey Winthrop, conceived a complex plan to send troops from Camp Hamilton, Camp Butler and Fort Monroe to converge near Little Bethel before dawn on June 10. The night march was planned to give the Union force an element of surprise that, they hoped, would ensure victory.



Robert Knox Sneden. “Plan from Fortress Monroe to Big Bethel Va.: showing Union and Rebel position April 1st, 1862”. Map courtesy of The Library of Congress.

The Union force was placed under the command of Mayflower descendent Brigadier General Ebenezer Weaver Peirce. The Massachusetts militia general was ordered to capture and then burn both the Bethel churches. The 5th New York, known as Duryee’s Zouaves, with one howitzer, led the advance from Camp Hamilton; the 3rd New York followed. Major Peter Thacher Washburn of the 1st Vermont organized men from his own regiment and the 4th Massachusetts into the New England Battalion. Washburn’s men were followed by the 7th New York (also known as the Steuben Regiment—all German immigrants) and two howitzers commanded by Lieutenant John Trout Greble of the 2nd U.S. Artillery. These troops from Camp Butler were to meet the troops marching from Camp Hamilton near Little Bethel. The Union force numbered 4,400 men.

As darkness began to fall that evening, the units assigned to the operation learned their marching orders. Duryee’s Zouaves were issued 20 rounds of buck and ball cartridges, a day’s rations and orders to wrap their white turbans around their left arm. At 9:30 p.m., Captain Hugh

Judson Kilpatrick took the advance guard of Zouaves from their camp at Segar's Farm to the Hampton River. There his men crossed the river at 10:00 p.m. in scows and began their march towards Little Bethel. The advanced guard's primary duty was to capture all citizens or pickets encountered to ensure the element of surprise. Kilpatrick's command was also to secure Newmarket Creek Bridge (the bridge across Newmarket Creek or Southwest Branch of Black River on the road from Hampton to Little Bethel) and then be in a position to attack Little Bethel by 1:00 a.m.

At midnight, Colonel Abram Duryee marched the rest of his command through Hampton en route to Newmarket Creek Bridge. One hour later, Colonel Frederick Townsend's 3rd New York followed towards Little Bethel. As these units marched, filling the night's quiet with a tramp of advancing men, Lieutenant Colonel Peter Washburn's New England Battalion left Camp Butler. Washburn was followed one hour later by Colonel John E. Bendix's 7th New York.

As Kilpatrick's command neared Little Bethel, Gordon Winslow, the regiment's chaplain, had scouted ahead and discovered a Confederate picket post. Winslow reported this news back to Kilpatrick. The intrepid captain then took eight men forward and surrounded the picket post. Kilpatrick had his men lie on the ground as he walked towards the fire-lit clearing. As the impetuous Captain approached, a sentry called out, "Who goes there? Who stands there?" Kilpatrick replied, "A Virginian!" Kilpatrick's and yelled "Charge!" and his fellows Zouaves fired into the Virginians and rush them with their bayonets. One Southerner escaped, and the others were captured. While these men were in civilian clothes they were armed, and the Zouaves referred to one of their captures as Captain Whiting. Henry Clay Whiting was considered by the Zouaves as a "fine specimen of a southern soldier standing six feet in height it could easily be seen that he was a perfect gentleman, and that he keenly felt his misfortune." Kilpatrick pulled Whiting off his horse and then rode it as he escorted the prisoners to the main body of Zouaves.¹

As the 3rd New York and Washburn's command neared Little Bethel, Colonel Duryee learned of Kilpatrick's episode and feared that it might have alerted the Confederates to the Federal approach. But his concerns were needless. As the evening's quiet was filled with the explosion of musketry. Duryee and Washburn believed that the Confederates had assaulted the other Union troops, and their men retraced their path toward the sound of gunfire. When they arrived, they discovered a chaotic scene.

The 3rd New York was marching into "a defile through a mute wood" when, according to Colonel Frederick Townsend, "a heavy and well-sustained force of canister and small arms was opened up upon the regiment."² The New Yorkers was totally surprised, as Townsend knew that he was following Duryee's Zouaves and could not believe that the enemy would be in such a position to fire upon his command. The 3rd New York reeled under the fire, broke ranks and fell into the woods on either side of the road. Townsend reorganized his men and returned fire as they shouted, "Boston!"³ General Peirce, who was 250 paces ahead of the 3rd New York with his aides,

¹ Brian C. Pohanka, "Red-legged Devils: History of the Fifth New York Volunteer Infantry", unpublished manuscript in the author's possession.

² *New York Herald*, June 12, 1861.

³ Joseph B. Carr, "Operations of 1861 About Fort Monroe," in Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War. Being for the Most Part Contributions by Union and Confederate Officers. Based Upon "The Century War Series"*, 4 vols. (New York: The Century Co. 1884-1888), 1:151.

a detachment of the 2nd New York and two howitzers, rushed back to the scene of action. He had passed there only minutes before and had noticed a large number of soldiers. He thought them to be friends and passed them by. Peirce and Townsend ordered the men, under heavy fire, to withdraw with fixed bayonets. The expedition's commander wanted Townsend's regiment to fall back across Newmarket Creek and burn the bridge with the hopes that the 'enemy' would follow and assault the Federals in a more favorable defensive position. Duryee and Washburn turned their troops away from Little Bethel and rushed to the sound of musketry. Lieutenant Colonel Washburn suspected that the 'skirmish' was friendly fire. When Washburn arrived on the scene, he "immediately formed my command and caused them to shout 'Boston' four times."⁴ It was now discovered that the enemy was in fact the Bendix's German-speaking 7th New York. No one had given Bendix the Boston password. Furthermore, Bendix understood that the Federals would not use cavalry during this operation; however, the horses used to draw the artillery and carry the officers prompted the Steuben Regiment to unleash their destructive volley into the 3rd New York. It was the first friendly fire incident of the Civil War and cost the Union twenty-one casualties.

The combat between the New York regiments had thrown the entire column into confusion. Townsend's soldiers, in response to the 7th New York's 'ambush,' had also fired toward a Zouave platoon escorting Lieutenant Greble's artillery from Newmarket Bridge. Colonel Duryee was actually challenged and almost shot at by members of the 1st Vermont. While none of these incidents caused any mishap, the sight of dead or wounded comrades, shot by their compatriots, must have been unnerving. As Corporal Edward Wright remembered later, "As I saw the life-blood ebbing from their wounds as they lay stretched out on the stoop of a small farm house nearby, I pitied their sad fate."⁵

Butler's complex plan to capture the two Bethels had backfired and fallen apart. The Union maps were outdated, and Peirce seemed confused as to what to do next. The militia general held a council of war. Duryee and Washburn stressed that since the element of surprise had been lost, the advance should be cancelled. Washburn believed that the Confederates would be reinforced from Yorktown; however, Peirce countered that he had already called the 1st and 2nd New York forward from Camp Hamilton to support the Bethel operation. Aides Major Winthrop and Captain Peter Haggerty pushed Peirce to continue the movement. Peirce "decided that it was my duty to follow my written instructions" and advised Washburn, Townsend and Duryee that the Federal troops would march forward based on General Butler's plans "to the extent of our several abilities."⁶

Peirce ordered the wounded to be returned to Camp Butler and guided his column toward Little Bethel. The position had already been abandoned by the Confederates. Peirce ordered the little chapel burned and prepared to move on to Big Bethel. He obtained information from local residents near Big Bethel that the Confederate garrison numbered over four thousand men. Consequently, Peirce sent West Pointers Judson Kilpatrick and Gouverneur Kemble Warren, both officers with the Fifth New York, on separate, but, similar, missions to scout the enemy's Big Bethel position.

⁴ United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 70 vols. in 128 parts (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 2, p. 84 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 2, 84).

⁵ Pohanka, *Red-legged Devils*.

⁶ *O.R.*, I, 2, 84.

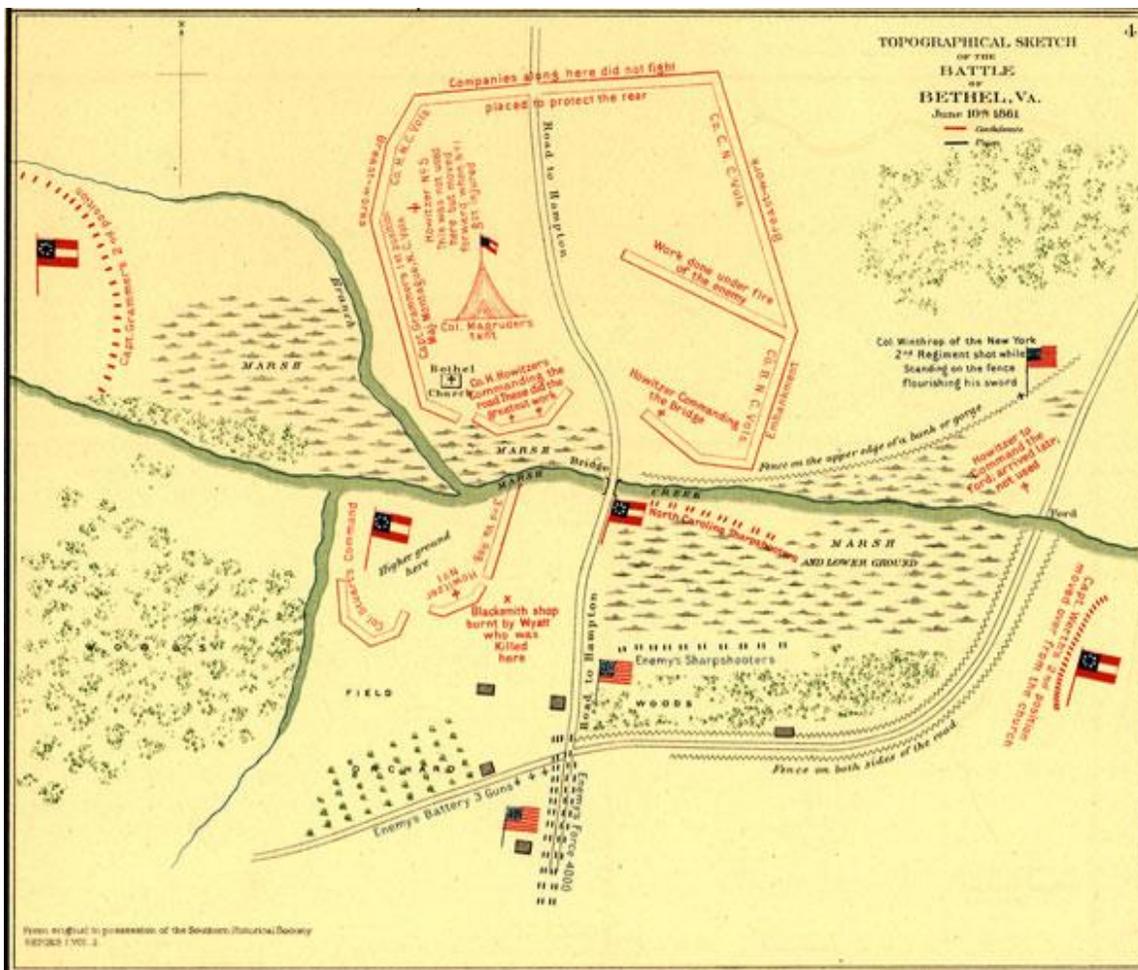
When Kilpatrick returned, he advised Peirce that he “found the enemy with about from three to five thousand men posted in a strong position on the opposite side of the bridge, three earthworks and a masked battery on the right and left; in advance of the stream thirty pieces of artillery and a large force of cavalry.” Kilpatrick believed that Big Bethel was an extremely strong position. Gouverneur Warren, a former topographical engineer, disagreed with Kilpatrick’s assessment and thought that the Confederates had fewer than two thousand men. He believed that the Confederate left could be easily turned. Warren furthermore advocated that the forward battery on the south side of Brick Kiln Creek was one of the “commanding eminences” and should be captured. Although the Federals realized that the element of surprise had been lost, Peirce was convinced that the prospect for victory was within the Union’s grasp.⁷

While the Federals had fought themselves and pondered their movement, the Confederates had been preparing for battle. At 3:00 a.m. on June 10, Magruder ordered the 1st North Carolina to march on Little Bethel and thence to Newmarket Creek. The drumroll awakened the soldiers. They quickly donned their gear and were ready to march. Magruder and Hill led the six hundred North Carolinians and three guns, manned by the Richmond Howitzers, down the Hampton (Sawyer Swamp) Road until they met a lady, Mrs. Hannah Nicholson Tunnel. Mrs. Tunnel’s home near Newmarket Creek had been occupied by Captain Kilpatrick and his company of Zouaves. They held Hannah’s brother-in-law, Mr. Robert Tunnel, prisoner. Once the Federals became embroiled in their friendly firefight, Hannah Tunnel had slipped away and rushed through the woods to avoid detection by the Federals until she reached the road far in advance of the Federal troops. Hannah then came upon the Confederate column about three miles south of Big Bethel. She warned Magruder and Hill that the Federals had over four thousand men marching toward them. Magruder then wheeled his men about and returned to Big Bethel. One member of the Richmond Howitzers, William S. White, later wrote that “all honor is due to a noble Virginia country woman, who undoubtedly saved our camp from surprise and kept the forces sent out early this morning from running into the enemy unawares.”⁸

Magruder’s prudent decision to fall back on Big Bethel to make a stand behind earthworks against a larger Federal force would give the Confederates a key advantage during the forthcoming battle. Hill deployed the troops, expecting the Federals to arrive on the field at any moment. The forward (one gun located on the south side of Brick Kiln Creek) was filled with one howitzer from the Richmond Howitzer Battalion commanded by Captain John Thompson Brown. This artillery position was supported by infantry mustered from Lieutenant Colonel William Stuart’s 3rd Virginia and Company A, 1st North Carolina. The main redoubt contained four howitzers, three of which commanded the approach to the bridge; the other guarded the Confederate right flank. Magruder and Hill then positioned Montague’s Battalion, Wythe Rifles, and companies G, H, I, D, C, and B, 1st North Carolina, along the interior walls of the main earthwork. To guard the Confederate right flank, skirmishers from the Wythe Rifles, as well as companies K and F, were deployed in the woods over one hundred yards beyond the entrenchment. Major John Bell Hood’s cavalry was positioned along the road to Yorktown behind the earthwork.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ William S. White, “A Diary of the War or What I Saw of it,” in Carlton McCarthy, ed., *Contributions to a History of the Richmond Howitzer Battalion* (Richmond, VA: Carlton McCarthy & Co., 1883-1886), 89.



Topographical Sketch of the Battle of Big Bethel, June 10th, 1861, circa 1861. Sketch courtesy of The Library of Congress.

As the hot sun rose into a cloudless sky, D. H. Hill walked among the untried, nervous soldiers, calming them for the engagement that was surely to come, saying, “When you hear the bugle you may know that the enemy is in sight.”⁹ While the men waited, they took time to improve the earthwork with sassafras boughs. Just before 9:00 a.m., an advance picket, Private Henry Lawson Wyatt, scampered back into the Edgecombe Guard’s skirmish line with the news that the enemy was nearby.

Peirce had left Little Bethel with Kilpatrick’s company of Duryee’s Zouaves in the advance. Once the Federals were about one thousand yards from Big Bethel, Peirce formed his troops into a line of battle. Duryee’s Zouaves were on the south side of the Hampton Road, and Washburn’s New England Battalion was placed to the east of the New Yorkers. On the left of the road, Townsend’s 3rd New York and Bendix’s 7th New York were in position. The Federals then

⁹ David N. Barefoot, *General Robert F. Hoke: Lee’s Modest Warrior* (Winston-Salem, NC: John F. Blair Publishing, 1996), 31.

began their deliberate march toward the Confederate fortifications. Just after 9:00 a.m., the Federals came in sight of the Confederates. It was an impressive array, with bayonets glittering in and the star-spangled banner waving over the heads of the Union soldiers. The scene was immediately disrupted when Major George Wythe Randolph fired a Parrott shell into the front of Bendix's command. Bendix lamented that even before his troops "had got ready for action the enemy opened their fire upon us, striking one man down by my side at the first shot."¹⁰

Randolph's well-aimed shell (some claimed that this first shot was sighted by Colonel Magruder) opened the first engagement. Continued accurate Confederate artillery fire forced the men of the 7th New York to find cover by moving off the road to the east. This positioned the 7th New York to operate on the Union's right flank adjacent to Lieutenant Peter Washburn's command.

Meanwhile, Peirce pushed Greble's three-gun battery forward, and during the next hour; an artillery duel ensued, Greble's shells whizzed through the main Confederate redoubt and beyond. The elevation was generally too high; however, Major Montague had a shell pass between his horse's front and hind feet and others fly over his head. The rain of shot, shell and canister had little effect upon the entrenched Confederates, and somehow no one was injured. Captain Benjamin Husk remembered one of his soldiers confess, "Colonel Hill [knows] about good breastworks and ditches than I do, and I'll never grumble again about throwing dirt."¹¹ Hill reassured his soldiers during the hour-long artillery exchange with his confident and brave demeanor. The Mexican War veteran stood in the open calmly smoking a short pipe and called to his men, "Boys, you have learned to dodge already." Hill added, "I am an old hand at it." He leaned away from a shell that whizzed past and shook his finger at the Federals, yelling, "You dogs! You missed me that time."¹²

As the Confederate shells zipped across the battlefield, Lieutenant Colonel Warren organized a skirmish line and pressed the Zouaves forward on both sides of the Hampton Road. Lieutenant Jacob Duryee (son of Colonel Duryee) felt the "disheartening shrieking sound" of shot flying overhead was "very terrifying" Karl Ahrent noted that "I thought of my mother, my brothers and sisters and friends. A thousand different thoughts ran through my head. But soon enough I thought about nothing at all anymore except to level my rifle and fire."¹³ Warren halted the skirmishes and conferred with Colonel Duryee. The soldiers then fell back upon the regiment in preparation for a concerted advance.

Colonel Duryee then pointed his sword at the Confederate earthworks and shouted, "I want every man to do his duty. The eyes of the whole country are upon you. Fire low and be careful of your ammunition."¹⁴ The advance was thrown into disorder by the effective Confederate cannon fire. George Burtis later wrote his brother, "One thing, well worth Knowing: I learned to dodge cannonballs...listening attentively for the report, then dropping flat, and lying until something whizzed over my head. Each time I expected to be nailed."¹⁵ Not all of the

¹⁰ *O.R.*, I, 2, 88.

¹¹ Benjamin Huske, "Account of the Battle of Big Bethel", unpublished manuscript in the author's possession.

¹² Manly Wade Wellman, *Rebel Boast: First at Bethel—Last at Appomattox* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 1956), 52.

¹³ Pohanka, *Red-legged Devils*.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Thomas P. Southwick, *A Duryee Zouave* (Brookneal, VA: Schroeder Publications, 1995), 42.

Zouaves practiced this technique, and the unit began to take casualties. Private George Tiebout was the first of the regiment to be killed. Tiebout was struck by a canister ball that tore his heart out. William McIlvane noted that Tiebout “fell at my side without uttering a word or knowing he was struck.”¹⁶ Private James Gregg was cut in two by a cannonball, and a shell fragment knocked the musket out of the hands of Sergeant George Mitchell. Private James Taylor, nephew of the wealthy financier Moses Taylor and known to be “in intelligence and mental ability...far above the ordinary run of young men,”¹⁷ was firing his musket from a prone position when he was accidentally shot through the body, mortally wounded by a fellow Zouave.

The Federals were suffering several losses from the Confederate cannon fire, Judson Kilpatrick noted, “The enemy’s fire at this time began to fall on us with great effect. My men were falling one after another.”¹⁸ Duryee’s Zouaves found cover in some woods on the left side of the Hampton Road. Despite the shelling, Colonel Duryee and several of his officers went from the cover of the woods to plan another assault against the enemy’s position. The Confederates, spotting the exposed Federals, sent a round of grapeshot at them. Kilpatrick was hit in the right hip and exclaimed, “Are we going to stay here and be shot down, and do nothing?”¹⁹ The same round wounded Private Thomas Cartwright and tore off Colonel Duryee’s right shoulder strap.

Duryee and his staff went back into the woods; however, his son, Lieutenant Jacob Duryee, decided that the Zouaves should attack. The younger Duryee shouted, “Who will follow me? I will charge the batteries.”²⁰ Kilpatrick and about 250 Zouaves attempted a charge. While Kilpatrick’s wound made him weak from the loss of blood, he could only go forward with the help of his men. The Zouaves then moved out of the woods, through the peach orchard and into the field in front of the forward battery. The Confederate artillery and musketry was too hot for the Zouaves to go any farther, and they fell back into the woods. Other Federal units offered their own piecemeal attacks during this phase of the engagement. Townsend sent skirmishers from the 3rd New York forward against the one-gun battery; however, they were unable to make headway against the fierce Confederate resistance. Likewise, Lieutenant Colonel Peter Washburn endeavored to maneuver against the main Confederate redoubt. “The attack by my men was very spirited,” he later recounted, “The enemy’s fire seemed to be concentrated on us...The enemy brought their artillery to bear on us...I ceased firing and withdrew my men...under the woods.”²¹

Magruder was directing the adjustment of his command to counter these uncoordinated Federal assaults. Werth’s company of Montague’s Battalion was reassigned to the Confederate left, and their effective fire blocked the Unionists from crossing the creek. The Federals failed to take advantage of their numerical superiority with these limited assaults. D.H. Hill noted that the Federal “organization was completely broken up.”²² There was no concert of action between Peirce’s units. North Carolinian B.M. Hord remembered that a “regiment would come up, fire a volley or two, mostly our heads and precipitately fall back as quickly as possible.”²³ As this

¹⁶ *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, July 1, 1861.

¹⁷ Pohanka, *Red-legged Devils*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *O.R.*, I, 2, 89.

²⁰ Alfred Davenport, *Camp and Field Life of the Fifth New York Infantry* (New York: Dick & Fitzgerald, 1879), 58.

²¹ *O.R.*, I, 2, 89.

²² *O.R.*, I, 51, pt. 2,4.

²³ B.M. Hord, “The Battle of Big Bethel,” in *The Confederate Veteran Magazine*, (1911), 419.

phase of the engagement ended, Hill noted that “we were now as secure as at the beginning and as yet no man killed.”²⁴

Peirce, perhaps remembering that Gouverneur Warren had earlier advised that the key to the Confederate position was the control of the forward one-gun battery, decided to make a thrust to capture the battlefield’s commanding eminence and organized another assault with the 3rd and 5th New York. A detachment of Zouaves, commanded by Colonel Duryee himself, surged forward toward the battery as Townsend’s regiment moved to flank the Confederate right. Several Zouaves saw the Albany Regiment advance off to their left and approached Lieutenant Duryee. They demanded, “For God’s sake, lead us on!” Duryee responded, “Will you follow?” When all the men shouted “Yes!” Duryee yelled with a wave of his sword, “I will charge the batteries!”²⁵ This group of about fifty Zouaves rushed through the peach orchard toward the Confederate battery. Just as all the Zouaves neared the one-gun battery, a priming wire broke in the vent, thereby spiking the gun. Captain J. Thompson Brown withdrew this useless gun. Lieutenant Colonel Stuart reported to Magruder that the Federals were advancing in his front with a heavy force (Stuart estimated it to be over fifteen hundred men), and another line of skirmishers was moving onto his right flank. Magruder immediately ordered Stuart to withdraw into the main redoubt next to Montague’s position.

A critical moment had arrived for the Confederates. The Zouaves occupied the empty one-gun battery and “everything promised a speedy victory”²⁶ for the Federals. D.H. Hill quickly responded to overcome this major threat to the Confederate right. He organized a counterattack with Captain John L. Bridgers’s Edgecombe Guards, supported by Company C. Bridgers formed his men and then led them in a determined assault. “They advanced calmly,” the *Hillsborough Recorder* later reported, “coolly, when at the distance...the Zouaves fired on them...not a muscle was moved, but they leaped right on at the double-quick.” Duryee, recognizing that his men had no support by which to counter this bold Confederate charge, ordered his men to fall back. As the Zouaves vacated the battery, the North Carolinians swept into this key position “in a most gallant manner,” Magruder later reported. The Confederate commander lauded that Bridgers’s Edgecombe Guards retook the battery and “held it until Captain Brown had replaced and put into action another piece...Colonel Hill’s judicious and determined action was worthy of his ancient glory.” Hill merely reported afterward, “It is impossible to overstate this service. It decided the action in our favor.”²⁷

As the Zouaves attacked, captured and retreated from the battery, Colonel Townsend’s 3rd New York moved to envelop the Confederate right. Townsend urged his men forward, however, he had already missed his opportunity to consolidate the Union’s capture of the one-gun battery. “By the time the regiment had arrived at its position, it had become evident that the right portion of the battery had been strongly reinforced by men from the enemy’s left.” Townsend recounted, “and that an effort to take the battery was then useless.” Nevertheless, the 3rd New York was still in a position to turn the Confederate left. Unfortunately, a portion of his command had become separated from the main body. Townsend then became alarmed when he saw through the undergrowth and hedges, “the glistening of bayonets in the adjoining field,” and he believed that his command was being flanked by the enemy and “conceived it to be my duty immediately to

²⁴ *O.R.*, I, 2, 95.

²⁵ Pohanka, *Red-legged Devils*.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Hillsborough Recorder* (Hillsborough, NC.), June 16, 1861.

retire and repel that advance.” Only later, when it was too late to press an advance against the Confederate left, did he realize that the enemy was made up of members of his own command.²⁸

Meanwhile, Co. A, 1st North Carolina, was reinforced in the one-gun battery by Co. B, the Burke Rifles, 1st North Carolina, elements of Stuart’s 3rd Virginia and a detachment of the Wythe Rifles. D.H. Hill crossed the creek and inspected these units’ deployment within the forward Confederate entrenchment. He immediately noticed that several Zouaves had taken cover in an old blacksmith shop and an abandoned house to fire upon the Confederate position. These Zouaves were acting as sharpshooters using the new rifled muskets, they had been issued the day before. As Hill walked along the fortification, he passed Captain Bridgers and suggested, “Can’t you have that house burned?” Bridgers called for volunteers, and five men stepped forward: Corporal George Williams and privates Henry Lawson Wyatt, Thomas Fallon, John H. Thorp and R.K. Bradley. Armed with only hatchets and matches, they leaped over the earthwork and dashed toward the building when, according to John Thorp, “A volley was fired at us by a company, not far from the house, but from the road to the left. As we were well drilled in skirmishing, all of us immediately dropped to the ground, Wyatt mortally wounded. He never uttered a word or groan, but lay limp on his back, his arms extended one knee up and a lot of blood on his forehead as large as a man’s fist.” The other Carolinians carefully made their way back to the battery. Wyatt’s body remained where it was as a grim vision of what could happen when exposed to enemy fire.²⁹

The shot that actually struck Wyatt in the forehead was attributed by Sergeant Felix Agnus of the 5th New York to Captain Judson Kilpatrick. Kilpatrick had collapsed from loss of blood during the Zouaves’ final movement against the Confederate one-gun battery. Several Zouaves, including Agnus and Corporal Allen Seymour, helped Kilpatrick into a frame house located in front of the Confederate works. Once they had gained cover, Angus yelled to Kilpatrick, “Captain, the Rebs are coming!” He added, “Can you shoot?”³⁰ Angus quickly loaded his and another musket and handed them to Kilpatrick. While the Confederates believed that Wyatt was shot by Zouaves from the other side of the Hampton Road, Agnus claimed it was Kilpatrick’s first shot that mortally wounded the young Confederate soldier. As Wyatt’s comrades fell to the ground, the Zouaves abandoned the building. It was a timely escape for Kilpatrick and his companions, as the Richmond Howitzers soon sent a shell into the building that set it ablaze.

Meanwhile, Magruder decided that he needed to protect his right flank along the north side of the creek beyond the one-gun battery. He rode up upon Company I, Enfield Blues, 1st North Carolina, and asked “Who commands this company?” “Second Lieutenant Parker came the reply, Magruder then ordered, “Lieutenant, deploy your men along this swamp as sharpshooters. Protect them as well as you can and keep a sharp lookout to the front, as I expect an attack right in your front.” Parker protested that his men could not become sharpshooters, stating, “We are armed with smoothbores, sir.” This circumstance was of no concern to Magruder as he reiterated, “Deploy your men, deploy your men.”³¹

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Walter Clark, ed., *Histories of the Several Regiments and Battalions from North Carolina in the Great War 1861- '65*, 5 vols. (Raleigh, NC: E.M. Uzzell, Printer and Binder, 1901), 1:101.

³⁰ Pohanka, *Red-legged Devils*.

³¹ Wellman, *Rebel Boast*, 54.

While the Confederates adjusted their position, anticipating another attack, Peirce endeavored to strengthen his left and center. Union reinforcements, the 1st and 2nd New York, now arrived on the field. Since Duryee had already reported that his men were spent, General Peirce ordered the 3rd and 5th New York to retire from the front line and replaced these units with the 1st and 2nd New York. As he did so, an independent Union assault was being organized against the Confederate left by Lieutenant Colonel Peter Washburn and Major Theodore Winthrop. Washburn and Winthrop brought portions of the 1st Vermont and 4th Massachusetts together to assault the main Confederate redoubt looking south across Brick Kiln Creek Bridge. By making this move against the Confederate earthwork's left flank facing east, Winthrop thought that he could achieve success. The New Englanders, followed by Colonel John Bendix's 7th New York, made their way through the tangled woods and found a ford across the dark, yet narrow stream. Holding their cartridge boxes and muskets over their heads, they crossed the waist-deep creek.

As the column cleared the swamp and moved toward the main redoubt, they brushed aside Confederate pickets. The Confederates had white bands around their caps as did the New Englanders. So as Winthrop's command came upon the Confederates, they shouted, "Don't fire!" as if they were friends. The New Englanders then began "to cheer most lustily" and rushed the earthwork.³² The Union soldiers believed that the Confederate earthwork was open at its gorge and with a sudden rush they could get inside the entrenchment. Companies B and C, 1st North Carolina, poured volleys deliberately and well directed into the Federals. Magruder, upon hearing a mistaken report that the Union soldiers had carried the Confederate position, he reinforced the point of attack with portions of G, C, and H, 1st North Carolina. Major Randolph advised Magruder, "Colonel, the North Carolina boys are doing the prettiest kind of work." Magruder replied, "Then sir they are whipped." Benjamin Huske, who had overheard the conversation, reflected, "The fire was incessant, and the roar awful, but I felt perfectly secure because Colonel Hill was there."³³

The North Carolinians repulsed the Union attack. Winthrop; however, was not willing to give up. He urged his men forward again toward the main redoubt. In an effort to rally his men for this final charge that he believed would carry the day for the Union, Winthrop stood up on a log waving his sword, shouting, "Come on boys; one charge and the day is ours."³⁴ He was immediately shot through the heart and fell dead on the ground. Many a Carolinian claimed that the shot that killed Winthrop was their own; however, Captain Richard Ashe of Company B, Orange Light Infantry, 1st North Carolina, noted the shot was actually fired by his African American servant, Sam Ashe. Winthrop's death completely demoralized his troops, and they fell back across Brick Kiln Creek. "This retreat," wrote D.H. Hill, "decided the day in our favor."³⁵

Winthrop's body was left where he fell. As the New Englanders retreated, they were followed by the 7th New York. Colonel Bendix later reported, "After firing some time withdraw back into the woods. When we got into the woods, I found the troops retreating and followed."³⁶

Meanwhile, Peirce realized that the day was lost, His men were utterly exhausted and thoroughly discouraged, The Massachusetts militia general ordered the two fresh New York

³² Ibid.

³³ Huske, "Account of the Battle of Big Bethel".

³⁴ *O.R.*, I, 2, 93.

³⁵ *O.R.*, I, 2, 99.

³⁶ *O.R.*, I, 2, 92.

regiments to the front to act as a rear guard as he prepared his command to retreat at about 12:30 P.M.. Everything would then quickly fall apart for the Federals.

George Wythe Randolph noticed after the last Union assault, “apparently a re-enforcement, or reserve, made its appearance on the Hampton Road and pressed forward towards the bridge, carrying the United States flag near the head of the column.” Randolph rushed to bring up another howitzer to sweep the approach to the bridge with canister; however, before he could do so, other members of his unit used a Parrott rifle to drive the Federals back. In the meantime, a howitzer had been brought into the main redoubt by Lieutenant Moseley from the Half-Way House three miles west of Yorktown. Randolph, who had learned that sharpshooters were still peppering the Confederate position from the house that Wyatt and his compatriots had tried to burn earlier during the battle., determined to shell the building. The Richmond Howitzer’s commander also noted that the Union battery covering the Union retreat was in line with the house. Consequently, he decided to simultaneously shell the Federal artillery position. Randolph remembered, “After an exchange of five or six shots a shell entered the window of the house, increased the fire already kindled, until it soon broke out into a light blaze, and, as I have reason to believe, disabled one of the enemy’s pieces. This was the last shot fired. They soon after retreated and we saw no more of them.”³⁷

Randolph’s last shot killed Lieutenant John Trout Greble. Greble had commanded the Union artillery throughout the entire action, and at the engagement’s conclusion he was striving to cover the Federal withdrawal. The last Confederate shell exploded near his gun. A large shell fragment tore off part of Greble’s skull and killed him instantly. John Greble died while “nobly fighting his guns” and was lionized for his valor and sacrifice. Lieutenant Greble was the first regular army officer and West Point graduate killed during the war. He had commanded with distinction during the battle and was described as possessing “to a notable degree the two qualities most needed at the time, namely, military skill and presence of mind in the face of the enemy.”³⁸

In the meantime, the Federal retreat had evolved into a confusing rush to reach the Newmarket Creek Bridge. Lieutenant Colonel Warren of the 5th New York strived to bring some order to the chaos. Warren pleaded with Peirce “to remain and see that the rear was properly attended to;” however, Peirce, who it is said had lost “all presence of mind,” thought it was unnecessary for him to do so as he had assigned that duty to the 1st New York.³⁹ Gouverneur Warren was utterly disgusted by the conduct of Peirce. He already knew that the 1st New York had fallen away from the battlefield with some haste. Accordingly, he organized some men to help him gather up the killed and wounded Union militiamen along the Hampton Road. Warren personally carried Greble’s body onto an artillery limber so that the dead officer’s remains could be removed from the battlefield. One Vermont soldier, Private Reuben Parker, became separated from his unit when he tried to rescue Major Winthrop’s body. Parker was captured and exchanged a few days later. Parker claimed that his prisoner exchange was the first of the Civil War.

Meanwhile, Hill had ordered Captain Robert Hoke and his company, the Southern Stars, to investigate whether any Federal sharpshooters had remained behind to guard the Union retreat. Learning that all of the Federals were in retreat, he sent Captain Robert Douthat’s company of

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Pohanka, *Red-legged Devils* and *New York Times*, June 14, 1861.

dragoons to harass the Federal withdrawal as far as Newmarket Creek Bridge. The Hampton Road was littered with equipment. “The enemy in his haste,” recounted D.H. Hill, “threw away hundreds of canteens, haversacks, overcoats, etc., even the dead were thrown out of the wagons...the pursuit soon became a chase.”⁴⁰

The Federal retreat from Big Bethel was indeed disorganized. Zouave Philip Wilson called “it the most damned disgraceful retreat I ever witnessed, and one for which there was no excuse whatsoever.”⁴¹ “The men were tired, hungry, sick and disheartened,” Private Thomas Southall remembered, “blackened with powder and covered with dirt, but there were no laurels wreaths about their brows.” Many Union soldiers had seen enough of the battle, like George Burtis, who later admitted, “I was not all sorry to hear the order given to retreat.”

Most of the Federal soldiers were dejected due to the poor leadership or by the sights that they had witnessed. Private Thomas Murphy became horrified when he saw a shell cut down two men. Private David Treforth’s head was “blown about twenty feet from his body.” The Zouave was further shocked during the retreat when he passed Greble’s body strewn across his cannon with his brains “splattered across the barrel.” Murphy was discharged within a month of the battle as unable to perform his duty after his 90-day enlistment expired.⁴²

Several Union soldiers were motivated by Warren’s example and stayed behind to help their wounded comrades, despite the horrific scenes they encountered. Private Davenport passed a severed hand found in the dirt, realizing it had belonged to Private John Dunn, who had undergone the first battlefield amputation of the war. The surgery was performed by 5th New York surgeon Rufus H. Gilbert. According to Davenport, Dunn “bore the ordeal stoically.” Mortally wounded James Taylor begged his friend William Gilder “to leave him by the roadside to make room in the wagon for someone...who can live and fight another day.” Privates Phil Wilson and George Guthrie searched the wood to recover their wounded friend, Thomas Cartwright. Cartwright was found, and Gouverneur Warren, who was with them, took Guthrie’s musket and guarded the men as they moved Cartwright into a cart. All of the wounded that could be recovered made their way in the rear of the retreat, protected by men from the 2nd, 5th and 7th New York. As he sat in the cart, the wounded Cartwright fired his musket at the Confederate cavalry harassing the withdraw.⁴³

Once Warren had done his duty recovering the wounded, he rode ahead and organized a naval contingent with boat howitzers to guard Newmarket Creek Bridge. Brigadier General John Wolcott Phelps, West Point graduate and former commander of the 1st Vermont, had disapproved of Butler’s plan to attack the Bethels and recognized it would only end in failure, sent wagons filled with crackers and pickled herring to feed the worn-out troops when they crossed Newmarket Creek. He went among his fellow Vermonters, many of whom were greatly affected by the defeat, advising them that he would personally led them to victory in the next battle. These actions put an end to the “series of errors from the time we left Hampton until our return,”⁴⁴ Warren later lamented.

⁴⁰ *O.R.*, I, 2, 93.

⁴¹ Southwick, *Duryee Zouave*, 43.

⁴² Pohanka, *Red-legged Devils*,

⁴³ Davenport, *Camp and Field Life*, 60.

⁴⁴ Pohanka, *Red-legged Devils*.

Big Bethel was a baptism of fire for a nation newly involved in civil war. The soldiers who served at Bethel would never forget the rude awakening of shells bursting among the smartly clad Zouaves or how Henry Lawson Wyatt of Tarboro, North Carolina laid lifeless upon the field. Confederate Benjamin Huske remembered that the “scene was...horrible beyond description, men with limbs shot off, brains oozing out and every imaginable horror.”⁴⁵ Those who were there quickly realized that the war would not be filled just with parades and it would not be over before Christmas. All knew that it would be a bloody, desperate affair.

The victorious Confederates wandered about the battlefield and shared stories about their roles in the engagement. Many were saddened by the sight of their fellow compatriot Henry Lawson Wyatt’s body lying upon the field. Benjamin Huske also was struck by the bodies of the slain Federals. He was particularly touched by the lifeless body of Major Theodore Winthrop and especially moved when he examined Winthrop’s watch with the pictures of two lovely women inside and thought that the “death of that poor officer affected me more than anything else, for I knew that there was one home whose light had gone out. Great God! Avert the horrors of this civil war! That we should conquer was all for me while it lasted, a man’s blood gets up and he doesn’t mind danger. But when the time of action is passed, we feel the truth of what Wellington said, ‘But one thing is more terrible than victory, and that is defeat.’”⁴⁶

While these soldiers were truly touched by the pathos of war, others went through the Union jetsam found across the battlefield. Many collected souvenirs or found replacement equipment. Some soldiers quickly wrote home to their loved ones reflecting about the great victory and how they missed death by inches. Captain Egbert Ross wrote, “I saw six Zouaves take deliberate aim at me and fire but fortunately they missed me.”⁴⁷ “Gracious! How the balls showered around us...you can form no idea how they hissed and struck just like a shower of hot stones falling into the water,” Benjamin Huske excitedly recounted.⁴⁸ Despite these close calls, most of the Confederates were in “high glee” after the battle. D.H. Hill reported that the Confederate soldiers “seemed to enjoy it as much as boys rabbit-shooting.”⁴⁹ B.M. Hord later remembered that the battle “reminded me more of a lot of boys fighting a bumblebee nest than a real battle.”⁵⁰ Southerners rejoiced over the victory as they learned about Big Bethel, and laurels were spread everywhere. The one Confederate killed, Private Henry Lawson Wyatt, achieved martyrdom. He was the first Confederate soldier killed in battle, and as Magruder later wrote, “Too much praise cannot be bestowed upon the heroic soldier we lost.”⁵¹

Magruder lauded all of the officers and men who had served at Big Bethel. “North Carolinians!” Prince John Magruder announced, “You have covered yourself with glory, not only as undaunted in the presence of an overwhelming force bearing yourself with bravery restless but above all with a perfection of discipline in an exciting that was unequaled.”⁵² Magruder also noted how units like the Wythe Rifles had behaved with gallantry and acknowledged the outstanding service of the Richmond Howitzers. Major George Wythe Randolph, Magruder

⁴⁵ Huske, “Account of the Battle of Big Bethel”.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Craig S. Chapman, *More Terrible than Victory: North Carolina’s Bloody Bethel Regiment 1861-1865* (Dulles, VA: Brassey’s, 1998), 35.

⁴⁸ Huske, “Account of the Battle of Big Bethel”.

⁴⁹ *O.R.*, I, 2, 95.

⁵⁰ Hord, “The Battle of Big Bethel”, 420.

⁵¹ *O.R.*, I, 2, 93.

⁵² *O.R.*, I, 2, 95.

proclaimed, “has no superior as an artillerist in any country,” and “the victory was partially credited to the ‘skill and gallantry’ of the Richmond Howitzers.”⁵³

It was Magruder; however, who was accorded most of the glory for the Big Bethel victory. President Jefferson Davis announced the battle to be a “glorious victory.”⁵⁴ While Robert E. Lee took pleasure in expressing “my gratification at the gallant conduct of the men under your command and approbation of the dispositions made by you, resulting as they did, in the rout of the enemy.”⁵⁵ Southern newspapers rejoiced over Magruder’s reputation as “the picture of the Virginia gentleman, the frank and manly representative of the chivalry of the dear Old Dominion.”⁵⁶ Magruder was placed in the pantheon of Southern heroes with General P.G.T. Beauregard and called “every inch a King.” “He’s the hero for our times.” one ballad proclaimed, “the furious fighting Johnny B. Magruder.”⁵⁷ Exactly one week following the battle, 17 June 1861, Magruder was promoted to brigadier general. The fame seemed to fall upon Magruder naturally, and in every fashion he strove to live up to the honor bestowed upon him. His impressive nature, dramatic flair and strategic sense had given the South its first victory on the field of battle.

Big Bethel was a complete failure for the Union, and the Northern newspapers were harsh critics. One song was written to the tune of “Yankee Doodle” that epitomized this humiliating Union defeat:

Butler and I went out from Camp
At Bethel to make a battle
And then the Southerns whip’t us back
Just like a drove of cattle
Come throw your swords and muskets down
You do not find them handy
Although the Yankees cannot fight
At running, they’re the dandy.

Shame was felt throughout the North, even though many of the Union officers involved in the fight endeavored to lessen the engagement’s impact. Colonel Joseph Carr of the 2nd New York Volunteers believed the “disastrous fight at Big Bethel” was of no importance. Carr considered Bethel a “battle we may scarce term it.” The future major general believed that neither the Union officers nor men were prepared to conduct such an operation: “To the want of experience and confidence a great measure of the failure at Big Bethel may be attributed.” “Save as an encouragement to the Confederates,” Carr concluded, Big Bethel “had no important result.”⁵⁸

Nevertheless, the Union ineptitude during the battle required that a scapegoat be found. Butler was blamed for ordering his troops into battle with poor intelligence and for remaining at Fort Monroe during the battle. Gouverneur Warren, who served as lieutenant colonel of Duryee’s

⁵³ *O.R.*, I, 2, 94.

⁵⁴ *O.R.*, I, 2, 95.

⁵⁵ *O.R.*, I, 2, 94.

⁵⁶ *Richmond Dispatch*, June 26, 1861.

⁵⁷ Patricia L. Faust, ed., *Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986), 468.

⁵⁸ Carr, “Operations of 1861 About Fort Monroe”, 151

Zouaves at Big Bethel, later reported to the congressional committee on the conduct of the war that the plan was “from the very beginning evolved like a failure.” Warren noted that the maps, which dated from 1819, were all wrong. The complicated advance “was planned for a night attack with very new troops, some of them had never been taught even to load and fire.” The planning was poor and the leadership abysmal.⁵⁹

Of course, Butler strove to deflect all of the criticism from himself. His confirmation as a major general of volunteers was at risk due to the public outcry. Butler blamed it all on Ebenezer Peirce. He noted that no one had criticized the plan when it was developed, and that he had no choice but to place the strike against Big Bethel under the command of his senior brigadier general. While Butler conceded that the plan evolved upon the battlefield, he maintained that the various efforts to strike at the Confederates were generally uncoordinated and disorganized. Obviously, Ebenezer Peirce received most of the blame for the Union disaster. He was confused during the entire operation, and as a result, Captain Charles Bartlett of Duryee’s Zouaves noted “that there no uniformity of action anywhere.” Zouave Karl Ahrent witnessed during the battle Peirce “hiding behind a tree shivering with fright.” Ahrent believed that Peirce was a “slack and decrepit individual who would be far better suited for enjoying the comforts of a house and garden than leading a soldiers life.” Major Peter Washburn later wrote about the lack of battlefield leadership stating “We had no head...All the different commanders behaved nobly; but there was no reconnaissance, no plan of attack, and no concert of action. A little military skill in the General, a little regard to the simplest rules of attack would have rendered our charge successful. As it was, it was a failure--an egregious blunder.” A Massachusetts militia general, Ebenezer Peirce lost control of his force following the friendly fire incident and never gained effective command again, even when striving to organize an orderly retreat. Peirce was labeled incompetent and mustered out of the army after his 90-day enlistment expired.⁶⁰

The *New York Leader* tried to salvage some honor out of the defeat and called the Union troops courageous as “they fought both friend and foe alike with equal resolution and only retired after exhausting their ammunition the face of a powerful enemy.” The friendly fire incident prompted a brief debate in the New York newspapers as to who was to blame for this deadly mistake. Louis Schaffner, adjutant of the German speaking 7th New York Regiment, believed that several units in the 3rd New York wore uniforms similar to the enemy and caused the confusion. Furthermore, Schaffer noted that the mounted commanders and their staff, as well as the failure to inform the Steuben (7th New York Volunteers) Regiment about the white armbands or password, caused the New Yorkers to fire into their compatriots. The debate ended with the recognition that it was just an unfortunate affair based on an ill-conceived plan.⁶¹

Northern newspapers lauded all of the officers and men at Big Bethel. Theodore Winthrop and John T. Greble were lionized for their valor and sacrifice. Winthrop, who was told by Butler to “Be Bold! Be Bold but not too Bold,”⁶² almost won the day for the Union with his bravery. Greble, commander of the Union battery at Bethel, covered the Federal retreat until he was killed by shell fragments. Many other officers, like Greble, received accolades for their

⁵⁹ “Testimony of Colonel G. K. Warren, January 28, 1862,” in Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War, *Report of the Joint Committee on the Conduct of the War*, H.R. Rep. No. 38(2) (1865) part 3, Department of the West, Accomac Expedition, 384 (hereafter cited as *RJCCW*).

⁶⁰ Pohanka, *Red-legged Devils*.

⁶¹ *New York Leader*, June 22, 1861.

⁶² Benjamin F. Butler, *Butler’s Book: Autobiography and Personal Reminiscences of Major-General Benj. F. Butler* (Boston, MA: A. M. Thayer & Co. Book Publishers, 1892), 269.

devotion to duty at Big Bethel. Peirce made special reference “to the gallant and soldier-like conduct of Colonel Townsend, who was indefatigable in encouraging his men and leading them in the hottest scenes the action.” He also noted that “Colonel Carr, and covering the retreat, showed himself a good soldier and willing to do his duty.”⁶³ G. K. Warren was also commended for remaining on the battlefield and recovering the dead and wounded directly after the engagement. Captain Judson Kilpatrick of Duryee’s Zouaves attained virtual hero status for his involvement in the battle. Big Bethel was filled with difficulties and impossibilities for the Union. Despite the individual bravery, the Federal plan and execution could not overwhelm the superior Confederate leadership, élan, and defensive preparations.

Big Bethel had major consequences for the Union and Confederate forces on the Peninsula. During the next ten months the Federals were content to control the very tip of the Peninsula below Newmarket Creek. The Union was able to use this position to protect the lower Chesapeake Bay as a base for the North Atlantic Blockading Squadron for operations against sites like Port Royal Sound and Roanoke Island. Furthermore, the Union-controlled lower Peninsula enabled the Union to welcome more escaped slaves as contrabands of war. Contraband communities and schools were created and thrived. The Confederates, despite Magruder’s wish to sweep the Federals into the sea, were unable to contest the Union Department of Virginia’s control of the lower Virginia Peninsula. Hampton Roads, Virginia became the major base for Union amphibious operations by late summer 1861 primarily due to the three Federal bases: Camp Butler on Newport News Point, Camp Hamilton, and Fort Monroe. The small town of Hampton was located between these facilities and was abandoned by the local population in late May 1861. The Confederates decided to destroy the town on 7 August 1861 rather than allow it to be use by the Federal forces.

The Confederate victory at Big Bethel: nevertheless, blocked the first Union advance against Richmond via the Peninsula. The battle lines were drawn, and the Confederates maintained control of the Peninsula north of Brick Kiln Creek. The area between the Northwest and Southwest branches of the Back River became no man’s land. This strategic situation allowed the Confederates to construct an in-depth defensive system that would eventually befuddle Major General George Brinton McClellan during the early stages of his 1862 Peninsula Campaign. Magruder’s ability to retain of the Peninsula protected the industrial centers of Norfolk and Portsmouth and allowed the Confederates to construct their ironclad, the CSS *Virginia*. Furthermore, it enabled the Confederates to continue to harvest this rich agricultural region to support their armies in Virginia.

On the national scene, Big Bethel would eventually fade in importance. Even though it would retain its status as the war’s first land battle, it was merely a skirmish and would be overshadowed by bloody and decisive engagements such as First Manassas and Shiloh. Nevertheless, Big Bethel had a major impact on both sides. The Union men who were at Big Bethel gained battlefield experience and the recognition that it would require a serious commitment to ensure that the Union would be preserved. One unidentified New Yorker wrote, “I’ve seen enough to satisfy me that warfare ain’t play.”⁶⁴

⁶³ *O.R.*, I, 2, 87.

⁶⁴ *New York Leader*, June 28, 1861.

In turn, the Confederate victory at Big Bethel raised enthusiasm for the war and reinforced the myth that one Southerner could defeat at least four or five Northerners. Consequently, they felt that they could indeed win the war. Southern newspapers chimed in with their praise. The *Richmond Whig* proclaimed, “The rush, the dash, the elan of our boys was; however, the great and distinguishing feature of the affair...Their dashing bearing, in the face of four times their number, will inspire a spirit of emulation among all of our forces, and lead to the rout of the invaders wherever they show themselves.”⁶⁵ The *Petersburg Daily Express* lauded all “in this first pitched battle on Virginia soil in behalf of Southern rights and independence.”⁶⁶

Despite all the detailed coverage in both the North and South, Big Bethel would quickly become a minor memory. Almost six thousand men were part of the engagement. The casualties were low: the Union lost 76 men, 18 of whom were killed and the Confederates lost one killed and 9 wounded. Many of the survivors would go on to greater acclaim, and others would serve their enlistments and go home. All of them would never forget their first baptism of fire that hot day at Big Bethel Church.

⁶⁵ *The Richmond Whig*, June 22, 1861.

⁶⁶ *The Petersburg Daily Express*, June 12, 1861.