

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of the Wilderness

By **Gordon C. Rhea**

As the spring of 1864 approached, President Abraham Lincoln questioned whether voters would award him a second term. Spurred by the need for military successes, Lincoln summoned Ulysses S. Grant to Washington, arranged for his promotion to lieutenant general, and placed him in charge of the nation's military might. Lincoln's new general-in-chief set as his objective the destruction of the Confederate armies, determining to "hammer continuously," as he put it, "against the armed force of the enemy and his resources until by mere attrition, if in no other way, there should be nothing left to [the rebels] but an equal submission with the loyal section of our common country to the constitution and laws of the land."

One of Grant's first steps was to meet with Major General George G. Meade, commanding the Army of the Potomac, to gauge whether to appoint a new leader of the Union's premier fighting force in the East. Grant decided to keep him on, reserving for himself broad strategic policy while delegating to Meade day-to-day leadership of the Potomac army. "My instructions for that army were all through him," Grant observed, "and were all general in their nature, leaving all the details and the execution to him."

Grant decided to accompany Meade in the spring offensive, a move that guaranteed a collision between his own penchant for bold action and Meade's more cautious streak. The addition of Major General Ambrose Burnside's IX Corps to Meade's expeditionary force further complicated matters, as the New Englander had formerly commanded the Army of the Potomac, and his commission as major general predated Meade's. Grant's solution to this nightmare of military protocol was to let Burnside manage his corps independently while Grant coordinated Burnside's and Meade's movements.

A recent reorganization of the Potomac army into three infantry corps headed by generals who had never before worked as a team added more complications. Major General Winfield S. Hancock, commanding II Corps, would spend much of the ensuing campaign incapacitated by a Gettysburg wound; Major General John Sedgwick, heading VI Corps, would falter during the fast-moving exercise envisioned by Grant; and Major General Gouverneur K. Warren, leading V Corps, would openly second-guess his superiors. And General Philip H. Sheridan, Grant's subordinate from the West who now

commanded the Cavalry Corps, would engage in a bitter feud with Meade over the proper role of the army's mounted arm.

Grant's strategy for the approaching campaign capitalized on the Union's formidable edge in numbers and materiel. In coordinated movements, Major General William T. Sherman was to advance against Confederate forces in Georgia while Meade attacked General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, encamped south of the Rapidan River in central Virginia. As Meade engaged Lee head-on, a second Union army under Major General Franz Sigel was to press through the Shenandoah Valley west of Lee, threatening the rebel army's flank. Simultaneously, Major General Benjamin F. Butler's Army of the James was to advance against Richmond from the south. Battered by the huge Potomac army, denied sustenance by Sigel's Valley incursion, and harassed in the rear by Butler, Lee, Grant predicted, would be cornered and brought to bay.

By 1864 the Confederacy's President Jefferson Davis understood that the North's overwhelming edge in manpower and industry precluded the South from winning independence by military prowess. But by staving off Federal victories, Confederate armies might nourish the budding Northern peace movement and persuade the exhausted Union to let its defiant sister go. "Every bullet we can send is the best ballot that can be deposited against [Lincoln's] election," the *Augusta Georgia Constitutionalist*, January 2, 1864, reminded its readers. "The battlefields of 1864 will hold the polls of this momentous decision."

The Confederacy's fate – in the Eastern Theater, at least – rested with General Robert E. Lee, whose victories in Virginia had made him a symbol of the rebellion's determined spirit. Like Grant, Lee was a master at offensive operations and possessed an uncanny knack for turning seemingly impossible situations his way. His most brilliant successes had been against armies that outnumbered him better than two-to-one, coincidentally the same numerical advantage that the Army of the Potomac held over him this spring.

By the end of April, Lee commanded an army of nearly 64,000 soldiers. His victories during the previous two years had exacted a painful toll in casualties, and replacements for fallen heroes were becoming harder to find. Facing an enemy almost twice as numerous and much better supplied than his own force, Lee nonetheless held important advantages. His troops were accustomed to victory, and they displayed the élan of men defending their native soil.

The Army of Northern Virginia, like its Union counterpart, started the campaign with three infantry corps whose heads exhibited exasperating blends of talents and flaws. These included Lieutenant General James Longstreet, Lee's "War Horse," fresh from an unsuccessful independent foray in Tennessee and commanding the 1st Corps; Lieutenant General Richard S. Ewell, the eccentric, peg-legged 2nd Corps' commander who sometimes seemed befuddled by Lee's deferential style of leadership; and Lieutenant General Ambrose P. Hill of the 3rd Corp, wracked by ill health and overwhelmed by the

responsibilities of high command. Perhaps the steadiest of Lee's subordinates was the flamboyant Major General James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart, still commanding the Confederate army's Cavalry Corps.

By mid-April, Lee had concluded that Grant intended to initiate a major offensive in the Old Dominion. Ever aggressive, Lee preferred to seize the initiative and attack, hoping that a Confederate victory might compel Lincoln to recall his forces to defend Washington. But food and fodder remained scarce, and Butler's force congregating south of Richmond posed a worrisome threat.

Accordingly, Lee adopted a defensive strategy. Ewell's and Hill's corps manned the Rapidan River fortifications in front of Orange Court House, and rebel cavalry patrolled the country beyond the infantry, prepared to sound an alarm if the Federals tried to sweep around the fortified river line. At the first hint of a hostile move, Lee meant to concentrate rapidly toward the enemy, catching him as he crossed the river or shortly afterwards. Lee directed Longstreet to remain near Mechanicsville, a few miles south of Gordonsville and almost fifteen miles south of Orange Court House, where he had ready access to rail lines leading to the Valley and to Richmond. Above all, Lee was determined to avoid falling back to Richmond, which would destroy his ability to maneuver and deny him the trump card in his deck of military tricks. "If I am obliged to retire from this line," Lee famously predicted, referring to his hold on the country below the Rapidan River, "either by flank movement of the enemy or want of supplies, great injury will befall us."

The stage was set for the Civil War's decisive campaign. In later years, popular historians touted Gettysburg as the conflict's turning point. But by the spring of 1864, Lee had largely repaired his Gettysburg losses. Entrenched below the Rapidan River, he faced the Army of the Potomac with only slightly fewer men than he had taken into Pennsylvania the previous year. Supplies were thin, but Lee's lean veterans would lose no battles because of hunger or shortage of ammunition, and their morale remained high. "I don't have any fears but what we will give the Yanks the worst whipping they have got if they do attempt to take Richmond," a Southerner penned his family.

Keeping with their new relationship, Grant left Meade to devise the details of the Army of the Potomac's movement against Lee. In most respects, Meade's plan, drawn in large part by his chief-of-staff Major General Andrew A. Humphreys, was well conceived. Rather than attacking the rebels head-on across the Rapidan, Meade elected to slip downstream and cross to Lee's side of the river, negating Lee's strong defenses and turning him out of his earthworks. Two fords – Germanna and Ely's – provided convenient crossings for Meade to bring his army across the river in dual columns, speeding the maneuver.

The strategy, however, raised serious risks. After crossing the Rapidan, the Northerners would find themselves in an inhospitable region of tangled second growth known as the Wilderness. Streams meandered in unexpected directions, and dense

second-growth created a situation where grand maneuvers were impossible, artillery would be useless, and cavalry would be confined to a few roads and blind trails. The Confederates, on the other hand, would benefit tremendously from their intimate knowledge of the Wilderness' obscure byways.

Yet the Federal brass decided to advance into the Wilderness and to stay there for a night to give the army's ponderous supply wagons time to catch up. The assumption that Lee could not move quickly enough to ambush the Union army in the dark forest, ranks among the most egregious command errors of the Civil War.

After dark on May 3, two Union columns started downriver toward the Rapidan crossings. Brigadier General James H. Wilson's cavalry division, followed by Warren's V Corps, made for the closest crossing at Germanna Ford. Near dawn on May 4, Wilson's lead elements ventured across the river, trading sporadic fire with North Carolina troopers picketing the far bank. Engineers constructed twin pontoon bridges, workers carved a road up the far bank, and soon Warren's infantry was across the river and marching into the Wilderness along Germanna Plank Road. Sedgwick's VI Corps followed close behind.

Five miles downriver, Brigadier General David McMurtree Gregg's division of Union horsemen, followed by Hancock's II Corps, reached Ely Ford and crossed the Rapidan virtually unopposed. By mid-afternoon, Hancock's soldiers were settling into camps around Chancellorsville, near the Wilderness's eastern reaches. A few miles west, near Wilderness Tavern; Warren's men began lighting their cooking fires, as did Sedgwick's troops to their immediate north. Burnside's independent command, bringing up the rear, camped north of the Rapidan.

With most of Grant's army on his side of the Rapidan, Lee faced a difficult decision. If he retreated, he would forfeit the initiative and diminish his room to maneuver. Going on the offensive was hazardous but offered the possibility of success. From Lee's position near Orange Court House, three roads, like fingers extending from a hand, ran east toward the Wilderness and the Union army. The northernmost route, called the Orange Turnpike, ran just below the Rapidan; a few miles south was Orange Plank Road, and still farther south was Catharpin Road. Determined to strike Grant in the Wilderness, Lee decided to thrust Ewell's Corps out the Turnpike and Hill's Corps out Orange Plank Road, pinning the Federals in the forest. While Ewell and Hill detained the massive Union force, Longstreet was to slip below the forest's southern fringe and veer north into the exposed end of the enemy line. If all went as Lee planned – and if the Union generals obligingly panicked when Longstreet's veterans appeared on their flank – Grant would share the fate of his predecessor Major General Joseph Hooker, who had suffered defeat on this same ground almost exactly a year earlier.

The risks of Lee's plan were obvious. Until Longstreet arrived, Ewell and Hill would be locked in mortal combat with a foe that outnumbered them better than three-to-one. Each corps would have to wage its own battle, one on the turnpike and the other on

the plank road, separated by miles of intractable woodland. If Grant learned that Lee had divided his army, he could focus irresistible pressure against either rebel wing, crush it, and then turn on the other wing. Under that grim scenario, a possibility by no means far-fetched, the Army of Northern Virginia would collapse, Richmond would fall, and the Confederacy would be doomed.

Unknown to Lee, mistakes by Grant's cavalry aided the Confederate strategy. Instead of maintaining a strong cavalry screen, Sheridan gave the critical assignment of patrolling the roads toward Lee to Wilson, his least experienced general heading his smallest division. Misunderstanding what was expected of him, Wilson mounted tentative probes out the Orange Turnpike, found nothing, and moved on, camping for the evening on Orange Plank Road at Parker's Store.

Shortly after nightfall, Ewell's Confederates, who had been marching toward the Wilderness on the Orange Turnpike, stopped for the night only two miles from Warren's Union pickets. A few miles south, on Orange Plank Road, Hill's men pressed on to New Verdiersville, a few miles short of Wilson's campground. And more than thirty miles away, Longstreet's troops started through the night toward the Wilderness.

Lee was up before daylight on May 5, eager to exploit the opportunity Grant had given him. Mounting Traveler, he joined Hill at the head of the 3rd Corps on Orange Plank Road. A few miles north and east, Ewell's troops set off along the Orange Turnpike. As the Confederates advanced, the turnpike and the plank road slowly diverged, increasing the distance between Lee's two Confederate wings.

Unaware of Lee's approach, Meade issued orders intended to deploy the Army of the Potomac in a convex line facing west. Hancock, comprising the Union formation's southern wing, was to advance west along Catharpin Road; Warren, in the center, was to follow a wagon road cross-country to the Orange Plank Road; and Sedgwick, on the right, was to march to Wilderness Tavern and push west along the Orange Turnpike, supported by Burnside. Once the Union troops had assumed their new line, they were to continue west toward Lee, whom headquarters assumed was still twenty miles away near Orange Court House.

After a short march, Ewell's lead elements reached a stubble-filled clearing called Saunders' Field, athwart the Orange Turnpike. Eight hundred yards away, on the field's far side, they spotted Union pickets, who quickly alerted Warren that rebels were materializing at Saunders' Field. Taken by surprise – Warren had mistakenly presumed that Union cavalry would alert him of any rebels in the vicinity – Warren forwarded the information to Meade, who directed him to attack. "If any opportunity presents itself of pitching into a part of Lee's army," Grant wrote back in approval, "do so without giving time for disposition."

A courier from Ewell located Lee on Orange Plank Road and advised him that Ewell had encountered the enemy at Saunders Field. The Confederate commander

advised his 2nd Corps commander against hazarding a “general engagement” until Longstreet arrived, which Lee did not expect to happen before dark. Deploying along the western margin of Sanders’ Field and into woods on each side of the clearing, Ewell’s Confederates stacked logs and tree limbs into low barricades.

Hours passed as Warren tried to position his troops to attack. Most of his soldiers had set off along the wagon road toward Parker’s Store, and bringing them back risked an impossible traffic jam. Companies and regiments lost contact with one another in the thick foliage and maze-like ravines. Resorting to compasses, some troops attempted to navigate the Wilderness like mariners on a choppy sea.

Around 9:00 a.m., Meade received reports that Hill’s Confederates were advancing along Orange Plank Road. Grant, who had joined Meade on a knoll near the Orange Turnpike, directed Meade to rush soldiers southward to keep the Confederates from gaining the strategic crossroads where the Plank Road intersected the Brock Road, which was the main artery running south. In short order, three VI Corps brigades under Brigadier General George W. Getty were hurrying toward that important road junction.

Hill’s Confederates meanwhile pressed east, brushing aside elements from Wilson’s cavalry and a small infantry contingent from Warren’s Corps. As they neared the intersection, they passed through a clearing that was home to Catherine Tapp, a widow who lived there with several children, a granddaughter, and a laborer. Lee chose Widow Tapp’s Field as his headquarters: it was three miles due-south of Saunders’ Field, where Ewell was girding to fight Warren’s thousands, and about a mile shy of the Brock Road intersection.

Hill’s lead division under Henry Heth pressed on to discover that Getty’s three brigades had occupied the intersection. Halting, Heth’s troops dug in along a low ridge cut by gullies. Only a few hundred yards of saplings and undergrowth separated the Confederate and Union pickets, who shot at the slightest flicker of movement.

Lee’s plan seemed to be working. Ewell and Hill had pinned Grant in the Wilderness. If the Northerners continued to dawdle, Longstreet would have time to arrive. But if Grant concentrated his weight against either of Lee’s wings, the Confederate line would buckle. Not since Sharpsburg had the Army of Northern Virginia found itself in a more precarious position.

Smoking cigars on his knoll by the Orange Turnpike, Grant had reached the end of his patience. It was early afternoon, and Warren still had not attacked. Ewell’s rebels were now firmly ensconced behind log and earthen barricades, and their artillery was rolling into place. In the six hours since their appearance, they had made Saunders Field a death trap.

Pressured mercilessly by Grant and Meade, Warren ordered an attack without waiting for Sedgwick’s corps to arrive in support. Brigadier General Charles Griffin’s

division strode into Saunders' Field in neat lines of blue, Ewell's men opened fire, and the clearing became the slaughter pen that Warren had feared. Then the rebels counterattacked, ramming into pockets of disheartened Yankees and driving them back. The receding blue wave gave Ewell's marksmen excellent targets, making the retreat as deadly as the advance. Dry stubble ignited, and thick black smoke rolled across Saunders' Field, creating a nightmarish scene. Soldiers burned to death, and men died when flames ignited the powder in their cartridge belts.

In little over an hour, the fighting – at least the organized part of it – was over. Repulsed at Saunders' Field, Warren's men huddled on the clearing's eastern edge. Ambulances and wounded men packed the Orange Turnpike back to Wilderness Tavern, where piles of severed limbs rose higher by the minute.

Soon after the V Corps' repulse, Sedgwick's VI Corps pressed through the woods north of Warren and engaged in a nasty fight against the uppermost end of Ewell's formation. With Warren out of the fight, Ewell was able to shift units northward, where the thickets helped nullify Sedgwick's edge in numbers and permitted him to hold his own. Combat in the Orange Turnpike sector quieted around 4:00 p.m. as Sedgwick began entrenching on Warren's right. Aided by favorable terrain and by his enemy's failure to coordinate its assaults, Ewell had performed his defensive assignment to perfection.

As combat waned around the Orange Turnpike, Grant pestered Meade to attack along Orange Plank Road. Getty was in place, but he did not want to advance until supporting troops from Hancock's II Corps arrived. At 4:00 p.m., his patience exhausted, Meade ordered Getty to attack, with or without Hancock. Once again, Union headquarters' impatience had concocted a recipe for disaster.

Getty's men waded into the Wilderness, brushing through branches and vines and stumbling over logs and stumps hidden in the undergrowth. Muskets flashed, and sheets of lead tore into the Union ranks. Lying down, the Federals fired back through the haze at indistinct flashes. Tramping feet heralded Hancock's approach, and the fresh soldiers marched into the forest in support of Getty. As evening shadows stole over the Wilderness, the woods west of the Brock Road intersection witnessed a scene of unrelieved slaughter. "It was a mere slugging match in a dense thicket of small growth," a survivor reported, "where men but a few yards apart fired through the brushwood for hours."

Grant now understood that Lee had divided his army. Since Hancock and Getty had fastened Little Powell Hill in place, he reasoned; why not forward troops from the turnpike sector to strike the exposed northern end of Hill's line? Major General James S. Wadsworth, whose V Corps division was near Wilderness Tavern, began bushwhacking south toward Hill's flank, and Brigadier General Francis C. Barlow's division of Hancock's corps attacked Hill's front. Hill's only reserves were 150 Alabama troops assigned to guarding prisoners, and he sent them charging through the darkening woods,

where they brought Wadsworth's advance to a halt. Nightfall ended the day's combat, and the hostile forces entrenched where they stood.

Lee had hoped that Ewell and Hill could pin Grant in the Wilderness, and they had not disappointed him. He had also expected Longstreet to arrive the next morning and swing into the Union army's vulnerable southern flank. Reconsidering his plan, Lee directed his War Horse to shift onto Orange Plank Road and come up in support of Hill. An aide located Longstreet at Richard's Shop, ten miles away, and delivered Lee's orders. Calculating his marching time, Longstreet decided to let his men rest until 1:00 a.m. Acting on assurances that Longstreet would arrive by morning, Lee firmed his new plans. Ewell was to keep the Federals busy on the Orange Turnpike, and as soon as Longstreet appeared, Hill was to retire to Catherine Tapp's farm and reach north, filling the void between the Confederate force's two wings. With his army united and fighting defensively, Lee hoped to stalemate Grant in the Wilderness.

Worried that their troops were unprepared for a concerted attack, Hill's division heads visited Hill at Widow Tapp's Field. Hill assured them that Longstreet's fresh troops would arrive before dawn and insisted that they not disturb their men.

At Wilderness Tavern, Grant directed a coordinated effort for the next morning. While most of Warren's and Sedgwick's Corps assailed Ewell at Saunders' Field to pin him in place, Hancock's augmented force was to grind forward and crush Hill with overwhelming numbers. To ensure Lee's destruction, Burnside was to drive between the two Confederate wings and turn south into Hill's fleeing troops, wrecking what remained of the Confederate 3rd Corps.

Soon after midnight, Longstreet started toward the Wilderness. He was unfamiliar with the road, however, and a guide sent by Lee lost his way. Trying to make up for lost time, the War Horse ordered his divisions to double up and march abreast.

Near sunrise on May 6, Warren initiated his holding action against Ewell, and Hancock attacked, overwhelming the Confederate 3rd Corps. The Army of Northern Virginia now faced its most serious crisis; Hill's troops were in full retreat, and Longstreet had not appeared. "Go back, men! You can beat those people," Lee shouted as he rode into the mob of soldiers retreating through Widow Tapp's Field. As Hancock's lead elements advanced into the clearing, a Confederate battery tried in vain to hold them back. "Why does not Longstreet come?" an aide heard Lee ask. "This was one of the most anxious times I felt during the war," one of Hill's staffers admitted. "The minutes seemed like hours, and the musketry was getting uncomfortably near and everything looked like disaster."

In the nick of time, Longstreet's Corps, ten thousand men strong, marched toward the sound of combat. Riding ahead to Widow Tapp's Field, Longstreet sized up the situation and acted decisively, deploying his troops as they arrived. "Keep cool, men, we will straighten this out in a short time – keep cool," Longstreet was heard to exclaim.

Unable to contain his excitement, Lee stood high in his stirrups, swung his hat, and cried to the mixed Texas and Arkansas brigade in Longstreet's lead, "Texans always move them!" When he started forward with the troops, however, they shouted back, "Lee to the rear!" And when Lee ignored their pleas, a tall, bearded officer seized Traveler's bridle, and his companions stood in front of the animal, forming a human barricade. "Can't I, too, die for my country," a staffer heard Lee mutter under his breath as he turned and rode to the rear.

With piercing yells, Longstreet's corps charged across Widow Tapp's Field and drove the Federals from the clearing. Through an impressive feat of arms, the War Horse had reversed the battle's momentum and broken the Union offensive.

To Hancock's north, Burnside's attempt to cleave between Ewell and Hill and land in the Confederate rear came to naught. Advancing through dense forest, Burnside's troops were fought to a standstill by one of Ewell's brigades supported by artillery. The Wilderness's disorienting terrain was working to Lee's advantage and thwarted the Union offensive.

During the ensuing lull, Lee's chief engineer, Major General Martin Luther Smith, reconnoitered south of the Orange Plank Road and found the trace of an unfinished railroad. Planned before the war as a rail line between Orange Court House and Fredericksburg, the corridor had been cleared, but no tracks had been laid. By 1864, the unfinished railway grade was little more than a path through the forest.

Around 10:00 a.m., Smith approached Longstreet with an idea. The lower end of the Union army now rested in woods a short distance north of the unfinished railroad grade. By advancing troops along the railway grade, the Confederates could get athwart this vulnerable Union flank and launch a devastating surprise attack. Eager to multiply the damage, Longstreet decided to simultaneously assail the front of the Federal formation along the axis of the Orange Plank Road. Slammed by coordinated offensives, the Union force was bound to collapse. A vigorous pursuit might well drive the invaders across the Rapidan and give Lee the victory that he sought.

Assembling a handful of brigades, Longstreet dispatched them to the point designated by Smith. In an astonishing oversight, Hancock had neglected to strengthen his exposed southern flank or to post pickets. The Confederate attack came as a complete surprise. As the Union line buckled under the weight of the unexpected attack, Longstreet hurled the rest of his corps forward and achieved precisely the result he had desired. "You rolled me up like a wet blanket," Hancock admitted to Longstreet after the war.

The morning's despair among the men in gray turned to jubilation as Longstreet rode east along Orange Plank Road, accompanied by his headquarters cavalcade, several generals, and fresh troops from South Carolina under young Brigadier General Micah Jenkins, one of Lee's promising subordinates. Disaster struck, though, when Virginians

in the fore of the flanking party crossed the plank road, realized they had outdistanced their supporting units, and circled back. Spying men on horseback, the Virginians opened fire. “Steady men, for God’s sake steady,” Jenkins hollered and tumbled from his mount, a ball through his brain. A minié ball pierced Longstreet’s neck and exited the general’s right shoulder. Severely wounded, he was taken to the rear by his men.

Longstreet’s wounding seemed like an ill omen. Almost precisely a year before and within this same wilderness, Stonewall Jackson had been mortally wounded in an accidental shooting by his own soldiers. The parallel with Longstreet’s shooting was uncanny, especially since Jackson, like Longstreet, had been cut down while executing a brilliant turning movement.

With the maneuver’s mastermind incapacitated, the Confederate counterattack ground to a halt. Quiet settled over the woodland while Hancock pulled his forces back to the Brock Road and reorganized them in a line facing west. Anticipating that Lee might attack, Hancock’s troops cleared the land in front of their position and constructed chest-high barricades.

Lee did not disappoint them. At 4:15 p.m., screaming rebels repulsed Hancock’s pickets, burst into the cleared killing zone, and assailed Hancock’s earthworks. In places, the barricades caught fire and billowed thick, resinous pine smoke. Confederates catapulted over the smoldering barriers, appearing, a Northern man thought, like devils leaping through flames. A breach appeared near a stand of Union artillery, and the gunners opened at close range with double-shotted canister as Union reinforcements rushed in, closing the break almost as quickly as it had opened. Vaulting over their wooden fortifications and charging into the demoralized Confederates, Hancock’s troops drove them back through the woods.

As Longstreet’s Confederates retired from the Brock Road and its flaming barricades, Lee’s generals on the Orange Turnpike initiated yet another offensive. Near dark, Confederate Brigadier General John B. Gordon moved troops to a concealed position near the far northern end of the Union line, occupied by novices from New York. The Federals had just stacked their muskets and started cooking when Gordon’s men descended on them, “like a pack of wild dogs,” according to a surprised Union man.

Couriers rushed to Grant’s headquarters with news of the disaster. When an officer warned that Lee meant to cut the Union army off from the Rapidan, Grant lost his temper. “Oh, I am heartily tired of hearing about what Lee is going to do,” he said. “Some of you seem to think he is suddenly going to turn a double somersault, and land in our rear and on both of our flanks at the same time. Go back to your command, and try to think what we are going to do ourselves, instead of what Lee is going to do.”

The danger had indeed been exaggerated. Nightfall and the Wilderness’ disorienting effect took the steam out of Gordon’s offensive, and Union reinforcements

expelled the attackers, ending the crisis and bringing the Battle of the Wilderness to a close.

In the short run, the Battle of the Wilderness was a Confederate victory. Lee's smaller army had fought Grant's juggernaut to an impasse, holding the attackers to the line of the Rapidan River as Lee had hoped. The Confederate general's gamble had paid, and his army now held a strong defensive position along high ground.

The bigger picture, however, was less comforting for Lee. The battle had cost Grant some 18,000 soldiers, almost 20% of his combat force, but Lee's subtractions were also severe -- about 11,000 men, a smaller number than Grant's losses, but also close to 20% of the Confederate army. Grant could replace his losses, but Confederate reinforcements were limited. A few more battles like the Wilderness, and the Army of Northern Virginia would be shattered. In addition, Grant had fought with persistence unusual for Union generals in Virginia. And the Federal commander still held the strategic advantage; locked in place by the larger Union force, Lee was unable to launch the grand maneuvers that had characterized his warring in the past.

The next morning, Grant settled on his next move. Rather than batter against Lee's defenses in the Wilderness, he would shift the Union army southward, toward Spotsylvania Court House. With the Federal force between Lee and Richmond, the Confederates would have no choice but to abandon their strong position in the Wilderness and rush south to protect the Confederate capital, giving Grant a chance to attack Lee on open ground. That evening, the Army of the Potomac started south, opening the next chapter in Grant's campaign of maneuver in the Overland Campaign.
