

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

Cold Harbor and the Advance to Petersburg

By **Gordon C. Rhea**

In early May, 1864, Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant launched a campaign to crush General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and bring the American Civil War to a close. The Army of the Potomac, commanded by Major General George Gordon Meade and accompanied by Grant, was to press across the Rapidan River and attack the Army of Northern Virginia; the Army of the James, commanded by Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler, was to advance up the James River, capture the Confederate capital of Richmond, and continue north into Lee's rear; and Major General Franz Sigel was to march south through the Shenandoah Valley, threatening Lee's left flank and completing the disruption of the rebel army's supply lines.

The Army of the Potomac, with some 120,000 soldiers to Lee's 65,000, was more than double the size of Lee's force and opened the campaign by attempting to flank Lee out of his defensive position below the Rapidan River. When that tactic failed, Grant ventured turning movements to break deadlocks at the Wilderness, Spotsylvania Court House, and the North Anna River. Each time, Lee fought or maneuvered Grant to stalemate. The details of those offensives are covered in the initial three articles in this series on the Overland Campaign.

Following the impasse on the North Anna River, Grant decided to disengage from Lee under cover of darkness and sidle downriver to crossings near Hanover town on the Pamunkey. The move would bring the Army of the Potomac seventeen miles from Richmond, and provisions could be shipped from the Chesapeake and unloaded at White House Landing. A quick dash across the Pamunkey, Grant predicted, and the Confederate capital would fall, bringing the war to a rapid close.

The night of May 26-27, Major General Philip Henry Sheridan's Union cavalry staged a diversion while the Potomac army disengaged, crossed the North Anna on pontoon bridges, and headed downstream. Not until the next morning did Lee learn that the Federals had left and were materializing at Hanover town.

Lee quickly marched to interpose between Grant and Richmond. On May 28, each commander sent cavalry to reconnoiter, Sheridan leading the Union horsemen and Major General Wade Hampton III the Confederate riders. The mounted forces collided south of the Pamunkey at Haw's Shop in a battle that raged most of the day. Sheridan finally drove Hampton from the field, making him the battle's apparent winner, although Hampton claimed bragging rights as well, as

he had succeeded in his underlying assignment of discovering Grant's army while shielding Lee's location.

The next day, Lee deployed along Totopotomoy Creek, a narrow stream south of the Pamunkey that intersected Grant's route to Richmond. Union attempts to break the Confederate line failed, and Grant once again faced the prospect of stalemate. Federal fortunes brightened on May 30, when Major General Gouverneur Kemble Warren's Union 5th Corps crossed Totopotomoy Creek downstream from Lee and marched west along Shady Grove Road, toward the rebels. Seizing the opportunity to assail a detached Union force, Lee directed Major General Jubal Anderson Early, commanding the Confederate 2nd Corps, to attack Warren in cooperation with Major General Richard Heron Anderson's 1st Corps. Early's lead elements drove some of Warren's men—the Pennsylvania Reserves—back on Old Church Road to Bethesda Church, but Anderson's troops failed to make headway on Shady Grove Road, and the attempt to turn Warren's flank ended in a bloody repulse for the rebels.

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Grant again looked to maneuver to break the impasse. A few miles south of Totopotomoy Creek, the Old Cold Harbor Intersection offered the Federals an unobstructed route to Richmond and a chance to strike Lee's flank and rear. Butler, whose Army of the James had stalled south of Richmond at Bermuda Hundred, dispatched Major General William Farrar "Baldy" Smith's 18th Corps in ships to White House Landing, within easy marching distance of Cold Harbor. Concluding that Grant intended to threaten his right flank, Lee forwarded cavalry to Cold Harbor and persuaded Lieutenant General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard, who was confronting Butler's force at Bermuda Hundred, to send him Major General Robert Frederick Hoke's infantry division. The next day, Sheridan captured the Cold Harbor intersection, and Hoke's soldiers arrived and erected a defensive line facing Sheridan.

During the night, the Union 6th Corps under Major General Horatio Gouverneur Wright left its Totopotomoy line and marched south. Meade ordered Smith to head that way as well, and Lee directed Anderson to start south with the Confederate 1st Corps and join Hoke. All night, troops wearing blue and gray packed the roads in a race for Cold Harbor.

The morning of June 1, Anderson's lead elements—a South Carolina brigade under Colonel Lawrence Massillon Keitt, an original fire eater who had championed secession—attacked Sheridan's entrenched troopers at Cold Harbor only to be driven back by concentrated fire from the cavalymen's repeating carbines. Retiring to the line that Hoke had established the previous evening, Anderson's men dug in, extending the rebel formation northward. Within hours, Wright's

Union 6th Corps tramped into Cold Harbor, and by late afternoon, Smith's troops arrived and entrenched on the 6th Corps' right.

That evening, Union and Confederate infantry faced off behind earthworks along a north-south axis. Around 6:30 p.m., anxious to maintain the initiative, Wright and Smith attacked. Funneling into a ravine, elements from both Union corps managed to breach the rebel line, but darkness fell before the Federal commanders could achieve complete success. Each side lost about 2,000 soldiers, and the Federals were well positioned to exploit their gains the next day.

Hoping to strike a killing blow, Grant pulled Major General Winfield Scott Hancock's 2nd Corps from the northern end of his line and hurried it toward Cold Harbor. But dark roads and an improvident short-cut delayed Hancock's march, and not until noon the next day could his winded men straggle into position. Rather than press the offensive, Grant postponed the attack until June 3. The delay would prove fatal, as Lee, now fully alerted to Grant's intentions, shifted soldiers from the northern end of his line—Major General John Cabell Breckinridge's division, recently arrived from the Shenandoah Valley, and Lieutenant General Ambrose Powell Hill's 3rd Corps—to the southern sector facing Cold Harbor. All day, the rebels perfected their works in anticipation of Grant's assault.

Grant's decision to attack Lee's entrenched position at Cold Harbor the morning of June 3 was grounded in a sober appraisal. As Grant saw it, relentless pounding in the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania Court House had severely weakened Lee's army. Proof of Lee's disability lay not only in his failure to close his trap at the North Anna; he had also permitted Grant to cross the Pamunkey unopposed, had fumbled at Bethesda Church, and had almost failed to hold his line on June 1 at Cold Harbor. Lee's army, it seemed, was a defeated force and ripe for plucking. The Army of the Potomac was as strong as ever, having been reinforced with fresh troops from Washington and by Smith's 18th Corps. A successful assault at this juncture stood to wreck the Confederate army, capture Richmond, and bring the war to a speedy conclusion.

Delaying made no sense, and further maneuvering would be difficult. Moreover, the Republican convention was due to meet soon; what better gift could Grant offer President Abraham Lincoln than the destruction of the main Confederate army and the capture of Richmond? Aggressive by nature and accustomed to taking risks, Grant decided to proceed. If the offensive worked, the rewards would be tremendous; if it failed, it would simply be another reverse in a campaign filled with reverses, and Grant would try another ploy. In short, the consequences of not assaulting—losing the chance for quick victory and prolonging the war—seemed worse than attacking and failing.

Grant intended an army-wide offensive across a six-mile front, and Meade, who was responsible for overseeing the assault's details, failed miserably. Resentful of his subordinate position and thoroughly disapproving of Grant's hard-hitting tactics, Meade expressed his

discontent by doing little. The record reveals no steps to reconnoiter or to coordinate the army's elements, as diligent generals ordinarily do before sending troops against fortified lines.

At 4:30 a.m. on June 3, the Union army's southern wing—Smith's, Wright's, and Hancock's corps, arrayed north to south in that order—stepped forward under a deadly rain of musketry and artillery fire. Hancock's troops briefly broke the rebel lines but were quickly expelled with heavy losses. Wright's troops advanced a short distance and began digging for protection, and in Smith's sector, three brigades marched into a pocket lined with rebel muskets and cannon and sustained horrific casualties. The attack ended in less than an hour. Later in the morning, Warren's and Burnside's men made disjointed attacks in the battlefield's northern sector and were unable to make headway. By noon, Grant adjudged the offensive a failure and called it off.

The Union assault at Cold Harbor was a disaster, although stories of fields strewn with blue-clad corpses convey a distorted impression of what really happened. Some sectors saw great slaughter, but along much of the battle line, Union losses were minor, and many Confederates had no idea that an offensive had even been attempted. Chroniclers of the battle have posited Union casualties ranging from 7,500 to well over 12,000, all supposedly incurred in a few terrible minutes. A careful analysis of the returns from the units actually engaged, however, suggests that the grand charge at Cold Harbor generated something like 3,500 Union casualties. Total Union casualties for the entire day were in the range of 6,000, while Confederate losses amounted to some 1,500.¹

The armies lay entrenched for several days, and corpses lying between the lines rotted under the scorching summer sun. After a tragic interval of delays and misunderstandings, Grant and Lee negotiated a truce to remove the dead and wounded on the evening of June 7. For most injured soldiers still in the fields, the truce came too late.

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¹ Severe as Grant's losses were on June 3, the two years preceding Cold Harbor had seen many days in which Union and Confederate armies each sustained far higher casualties. Lee's losses in three days at Gettysburg, for example, exceeded 22,000, with Confederate losses on the last day of the battle topping 8,000. Pickett's famous charge at Gettysburg—a frontal attack that lasted about as long as Grant's morning assault at Cold Harbor—cost the Confederates between 5,300 and 5,700 men, a number well in excess of Grant's casualties during his initial June 3 attack.

Remaining at Cold Harbor was unacceptable to Grant and his generals. The hot, marshy lowlands were notorious for fevers, and a prolonged stalemate would only sour the Union army's spirit and the nation's morale. The Army of Northern Virginia's earthworks were impregnable, and the political price of another costly reverse might well be catastrophic. The rebels had to eat, however, and their provisions and other supplies arrived by way of a transportation network that converged in Richmond. By cutting the supply routes to the Confederate capital, Grant hoped to compel Lee to abandon his Cold Harbor bastion and engage him on open ground. His new plan was to dispatch Sheridan's cavalry north of Richmond, wrecking the Virginia Central Railroad and perhaps severing the James River Canal in cooperation with Major General David Hunter's forces in the Shenandoah Valley, which were moving toward Lynchburg. A second component involved cutting the flow of Confederate supplies from Petersburg to Richmond. Butler's Army of the James was well positioned at Bermuda Hundred to execute that operation, especially if supported by all or part of the Army of the Potomac.

Over the following week, Grant honed his strategy. He determined to reinforce Butler with Smith's 18th Corps, which would move directly on Petersburg while the rest of the Potomac Army disengaged from Lee and marched south across the Chickahominy and James Rivers. Once Petersburg was in Union hands, Lee would have no choice but to abandon his Cold Harbor defenses and seek a new source of supplies, most likely fleeing west toward Lynchburg. Grant intended to follow and pounce on the retreating rebels. He recognized the movement as "hazardous," since the Potomac Army's withdrawal would free Lee to attack Butler and to send reinforcements to Hunter in the Valley. But he believed that his plan offered a likelihood of victory that fairly compensated for the dangers of leaving Lee temporarily untended. "The move had to be made," he later claimed.²

On June 5, the Army of the Potomac began contracting south toward the Chickahominy River, and two of Grant's aides reconnoitered the James for an ideal crossing. Preparations were made to shift the army's supply base from White House Landing on the Pamunkey to City Point, where the James and Appomattox Rivers converged, and Union headquarters requisitioned boats and bridging material for constructing a pontoon bridge across the James. Instructions went to the Navy to ensure that the James remained free from Confederate ironclads that might interfere with the operation.

Lee and his subordinates meanwhile searched for opportunities to go on the offensive. Hoping to strike the northern end of the Union line, Lee urged Early and Anderson to arrange a "systematic advance . . . from which good results might be obtained." The two generals launched multiple attacks on June 6 and 7 but were unable to make headway, in part because of their inability to cooperate. In his headquarters tent near Gaines's Mill, Lee tried to make sense of Grant's

² Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1885-1886), 2:280-1.

unusual quiescence. He suspected the aggressive Union commander would resume offensive operations, but where he aimed to strike was clear. Hunches ran from a Union offensive against the railroads north of Richmond to the more likely possibility of a sweeping maneuver south, although whether the bluecoats meant to stage such an expedition from the ten-mile stretch of land between the Chickahominy and the James or from a point south of the James was anyone's guess.³

On the morning of June 7, Sheridan started north with two of his three cavalry divisions, then swung west to hit the Virginia Central Railroad. Lee dispatched two cavalry divisions under Hampton to intercept Sheridan, and the opposing mounted forces met on June 10 at Trevilian Station. Hampton prevailed, ending Sheridan's threat to Lee's supplies from the Valley.

Grant, however, continued with his plan to capture Petersburg and set the night of June 12 for Meade's withdrawal from Cold Harbor. Grant had successfully executed disengagements of comparable difficulty after impasses in the Wilderness, at Spotsylvania Court House, and at the North Anna River. This time, however, Lee expected precisely the maneuver Grant had in mind and posted cavalry along the Chickahominy to sound the alarm the moment the Union army set off.

Meade's Chief of Staff Major General Andrew Atkinson Humphreys drew up the blueprint for the movement, dispatching the Union force to the James in four coordinated columns. Warren was to screen the maneuver from Lee by crossing the Chickahominy at Long Bridge and swinging west, blocking Lee's approaches to the moving columns. Hancock was to follow Warren across Long Bridge and push south, while Wright and Burnside were to cross nine miles downriver at Jones's Bridge. A third column, comprised of Smith's corps, was to slide east to the Pamunkey, board transports at White House Landing, and follow the Pamunkey, York, and James Rivers back to Bermuda Hundred. A fourth column with the army's wagon trains was to proceed east of the infantry and cross the Chickahominy downriver from Jones's Bridge. Grant anticipated that two days of rapid marching would see Smith rejoining Butler while the Potomac Army crossed the James. When the 18th Corps reached Bermuda Hundred, it would be ideally positioned for a swift and unexpected assault against Petersburg.

Lee meanwhile was busy reacting to developments in the Shenandoah Valley. On June 6, Hunter's Federals captured Staunton, threatening Lynchburg and the rest of the Valley. Lee released Breckinridge's division to counter Hunter and on May 12 instructed Early to head for the Valley with his entire 2nd Corps. These troops would be sorely missed at Cold Harbor, but Lee calculated that Lynchburg's fall and the permanent disruption of supplies from the Valley were disasters that he could not survive. Unknown to Lee, he was dramatically weakening the Army of Northern Virginia on the very eve of Grant's grand maneuver. To meet Grant's shift toward the

³ Robert E. Lee to Richard H. Anderson, June 6, 1864, in the Edward Porter Alexander Papers, #7, Southern Historical Collection, The Wilson Library, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

James, Lee could muster only two infantry corps, a division recently borrowed from the defenses of Petersburg, and six cavalry regiments, totaling at most 40,000 men.

After dark on June 12, the Army of the Potomac quietly left Cold Harbor. “We hailed, almost with acclamations, the announcement of our withdrawal from this awful place,” a New Jersey soldier remembered. “No words can adequately describe the horrors of the twelve days we had spent there, and the sufferings we had endured.” By midnight, Union cavalymen had brushed aside their Confederate counterparts at Long Bridge, and Union engineers were busy constructing a pontoon bridge across the Chickahominy. Early on June 13, while the rest of the army pursued its assigned routes, Warren’s men pushed west out Long Bridge Road to the Riddell’s Shop intersection, barring the approaches from Lee’s army.⁴

Although Lee anticipated Grant’s possible maneuver south, the Union withdrawal caught him by surprise. Shortly after sunrise, as word arrived that the Federal trenches were empty, Lee put his diminished army in motion, crossing the Chickahominy and angling toward Riddell’s Shop to intercept the Union advance. Warren’s lead elements, assisted by Union cavalry, fought stubbornly, pinning Lee in place at Riddell’s Shop and nearby White Oak Swamp. Unable to penetrate Warren’s infantry screen, Lee posted his army in an arc running from White Oak Swamp to Malvern Hill, manned by his two remaining corps under Hill and Anderson. While Grant’s rapid southward progress suggested to Lee that the Union commander contemplated a thrust toward Petersburg, the strong Union cavalry and infantry presence at Riddell’s Shop militated in favor of a Federal movement against Richmond north of the river. If Grant intended to loop back toward Richmond, Lee was positioned to block him. And so Lee decided to wait, forfeiting the initiative to his opponent.

Grant, however, had no intention of attacking Richmond. That evening, Hancock’s troops filed into camps near Charles City Court House, on the James River’s northern bank, where they were joined the next day by the rest of the Potomac Army. Screened by Brigadier General James Harrison Wilson’s cavalry division, Hancock on June 14 started across the James by ferry while Union engineers labored on a 1,250-foot pontoon bridge over the James at Weyanoke peninsula. The Federal troops, exhausted by some forty days of marching and fighting, reveled in the richness of the James River plantations. “Where we bivouacked was a delightful part of Virginia, almost a garden, and the most fertile and luxuriant we have seen,” a Union infantryman recalled.⁵

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⁴ Alanson A. Haines, *History of the Fifteenth Regiment New Jersey Volunteers* (New York: Jenkins & Thomas, Printers, 1883), 214-15.

⁵ Margery Greenleaf, ed., *Letters to Eliza from a Union Soldier, 1862-1865* (Chicago, IL: Follett Publishing, 1970), 103.

On the morning of June 13, Baldy Smith's 18th Corps boarded transports at White House Landing for the hundred-mile river journey back to Bermuda Hundred. According to Smith, he had received "no intimation" that he would be expected to spearhead the attack against Petersburg. Mid-morning on the 14th, Grant visited Butler at Bermuda Hundred. Expecting Smith's troops to arrive that afternoon, Grant instructed Butler "to send General Smith immediately, that night, with all the troops he could give him," to attack the Petersburg defenses early the next morning. The Union commander-in-chief also advised Butler that Hancock's corps "would cross the river and move to Petersburg to support Smith in case the latter was successful."⁶

Smith reached Bermuda Hundred near nightfall on June 14 and learned that he was to lead an offensive against Petersburg at daylight the next morning. While Butler "had formed no plans," he did assure Smith that the Petersburg defenses—a perimeter of forts and earthworks known as the Dimmock Line, after the engineer who had laid them out—were "not at all formidable," and that no enemy force of consequence occupied the city. In addition to his two veteran 18th Corps divisions, Smith was assigned Brigadier General August Valentine Kautz's cavalry division and an infantry division of black troops commanded by Brigadier General Edward Winslow Hinks. The additional elements not only increased Smith's numbers but were familiar with the terrain, having participated in an abortive offensive against Petersburg the previous week.⁷

Nothing, Smith later wrote, was said to him about the availability of reinforcements from the Army of the Potomac. As he understood his assignment, he was to march a force comprised in part of troops he had never commanded across eight miles of country that he had never seen, and attack a fortified position, also unseen by him, by sunup the next day.

The elements of Smith's command lay scattered from Bermuda Hundred Landing to Point of Rocks on the Appomattox River. "The transports were arriving all night," Smith later wrote, "and, with the exception of the commands of Generals Hincks and Kautz, it was impossible for any general to tell what troops he had or would have with him." Smith's only comfort lay in repeated assurances from Butler and Kautz that his offensive would be virtually unopposed. Meanwhile, several miles downriver, Hancock's 2nd Corps veterans went into camp at Windmill

⁶ Ulysses S. Grant's Report in 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 36, part 1, p. 25 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 36, pt. 1, 25); Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 2:293-4. Later that day, Grant informed Butler that the situation looked "favorable for the success of your attack on Petersburg tonight," adding that Hancock's Corps would be across the James before daylight on the 15th and on its way to Petersburg "with directions, however, to halt at the point on that road nearest City Point, unless he receives further orders." If Smith needed reinforcements, he had only to summon Hancock, and the 2nd Corps would come to his assistance. Grant to Butler, June 14, 1864, in *O.R.*, I, 40, pt. 2, 36.

⁷ William F. Smith, "The Movement Against Petersburg, June 1864," in Theodore F. Dwight, ed., *Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts*, 15 vols. (Boston: The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, 1918), 5:80; Herbert M. Schiller, *Autobiography of Major General William F. Smith, 1861-1864* (Dayton, OH: Morningside Press, 1990), 99-100.

Point, on the James' south shore. However, not only did Butler fail to inform Smith of Hancock's proximity, but Grant apparently failed to notify either Meade or Hancock that Smith might need Hancock's help assailing Petersburg.⁸

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Around 6:00 on June 15, Brigadier General John Henry Martindale's division of Smith's corps set off along River Road, sparring with small pockets of rebels, while the remainder of Smith's troops, led by Hinks' United States Colored Troops (USCT's), followed City Point Road. Some three miles out, Hinks encountered elements from Brigadier General James Dearing's Confederate Cavalry, which had thrown up fence-rail breastworks on the nearby Baylor farm, blocking the route to Petersburg. Smith ordered Hinks to push the Confederates aside. Thrusting untried black troops into combat was risky, but Smith wanted to preserve Brigadier General William Thomas Harbaugh Brooks' veterans, who were following close behind, for the big assault on the rebel works a few miles ahead. After a rough start, Hinks's troops overran Dearing's works and captured a 12-pounder howitzer. "The work was beautifully accomplished," a Union officer effused.⁹

Smith had won the action at Baylor's Farm—the first major offensive in Virginia by black troops—but he now realized that breaking the Confederate defenses around Petersburg would not be as easy as Butler had led him to believe. "At a most unexpected place I had been called upon to develop my force and make an assault," he later observed, "and this fact leaving not of question the time lost in the operation caused me at once to cease to take anything for granted that had been asserted [to him by Butler]."¹⁰

By 9:30 a.m., Smith's troops were streaming toward Petersburg in three coordinated columns. Martindale's division strode cautiously along River Road, its right flank near the Appomattox River; Brooks' division crossed the Baylor Farm and continued down City Point Railroad and an adjacent wagon road, throwing out skirmishes to maintain contact with Martindale; and Hinks's division moved over to Jordan's Point Road to comprise the left of the advance. Farther left, Kautz's cavalry cantered along the Norfolk and Petersburg Railroad, cut over to the Baxter Road, and headed for Petersburg.

Hinks's troops reached the Dimmock Line near 11:00 a.m. and deployed next to Brooks, who was arriving on his right, facing a clearing dominated by the Dimmock Line's Battery 5. Pressing south along River Road, Martindale's division arrived in the flat floodplain to the right

⁸ Smith, "The Movement Against Petersburg," 81.

⁹ Robert N. Verplanck to mother, June 17, 1864, in Robert N. Verplanck Collection, Adriance Library, Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

¹⁰ Schiller, "Autobiography of Major General William F. Smith," 101.

of Brooks, its right reaching toward the Appomattox. Kautz's cavalry continued along the Baxter Road toward the Confederate fortifications. Coming under withering fire, the Union horsemen retired and assumed a new line near their former position. They would play no more part in the day's events.

His progress stymied, Smith contemplated the rebel fortifications. Cold Harbor had taught him a brutal lesson in the killing power of well-sited entrenchments, and the situation here gave him cause for reflection. For two hours, Smith methodically reconnoitered the fortifications, noting that while the Confederate artillery appeared formidable, the entrenchments were thinly manned. A densely packed body of assaulting troops would take severe casualties, but troops loosely arrayed stood a fair chance of success, as artillery would pass harmlessly through their formation. So Smith decided to open with a heavy bombardment to suppress rebel fire, then attack with a double line of widely-spaced skirmishers. Once the skirmishers had overrun the works, the remaining troops were to follow and consolidate the gains.

Around 4:00 p.m., Smith's men formed to attack. Unknown to Smith, his artillery chief, Captain Frederick Maximus Follett, "without any consultation or authority," had ordered his guns to the rear so that he could water the horses pulling the caissons. The flustered general had no choice but to wait until the guns could be brought back into position.¹¹

Hancock had also been enduring a frustrating day. The promised rations had never appeared, and his lead elements did not leave Windmill Point until 10:30 a.m., long after battle smoke had cleared from Baylor's Farm. A map provided by headquarters "was found to be utterly useless," Hancock later wrote, "the only roads laid down on it being widely out of the way." Instead of heading toward Smith where he was needed, Hancock angled several miles north of Smith's impending fight. "My orders were based on incorrect information," Hancock later complained, "and the position I was ordered to take did not exist as it was described on my instructions." Hancock still had no inkling that he was expected to join Smith in an assault against the Dimmock Line. "Sent wrong [by his initial orders]," Hancock's aide Colonel Francis Amasa Walker later observed, "his line of march increased by several miles, after his time of starting had been delayed several hours, Hancock led forward the corps without an intimation that his presence was to be imperatively required at Petersburg."¹²

At 4:00 p.m., a staff officer from Grant's headquarters informed Smith that Hancock had been authorized to assist Smith if needed. This was Smith's first inkling that reinforcements might be available, and he hastily drafted a message to Hancock inquiring when he might arrive. Hancock did not receive Smith's note, and a companion message from Grant, until almost 6:00.

¹¹ Schiller, *Autobiography of Major General William F. Smith*, 141-2.

¹² Winfield S. Hancock's Report, in *O.R.*, I, 40, pt. 1, 303-4; Hancock to Andrew A. Humphreys, June 15, 3:30 p.m., in *O.R.*, I, 40, pt. 2, 59; Francis A. Walker, *A History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1887), 529.

According to Hancock, these dispatches were the “first and only intimations I had that Petersburg was to be attacked that day. Up to that hour I had not been notified from any source that I was to assist General Smith in assaulting that city.”¹³

Alerted finally to the true nature of his mission—a joint attack on the enemy’s works—Hancock sprang into action and ordered two of his divisions down a country road toward Smith. At 6:30 p.m., Hancock’s aide Morgan reached Smith and assured him that Hancock was on his way.

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An hour later, Smith had still heard nothing from Hancock but concluded that he had to attack immediately to take the Dimmock Line before dark. A message from Butler added a spur. “Time is of the essence of this movement,” it stated. “I doubt not the delays were necessary, but now push and get the Appomattox between you and Lee. Nothing has passed down the railroad to harm you yet.”¹⁴

Three Union batteries opened, and Brooks’ skirmishers started toward the Dimmock Line. “Their path lay across a wide open plain,” one of Brooks’ officers remembered, “and a tremendous fire of shot, shell, and Minnie bullets was poured into them as they advanced, mowing them down by scores and thinning their ranks terribly.”¹⁵

New Hampshire troops descended into the ravine at the foot of Battery 5 and scampered forty feet up the side of the fort—“some straight up over the front walls,” an officer recounted, “others up the north side, on bayonets stuck in the sand, grasping grass and weeds to assist in climbing, striking their boots into the gravel—anyhow so it be the quickest way in.”¹⁶ Skirmishers from Colonel Louis Bell’s brigade ventured an equally daring foray toward the interval between Batteries 5 and 6, pushed behind the two forts, and discharged a volley into Battery 5’s unprotected rear. Captured in the battery were five cannons—four brass 12-pound howitzers and an iron gun—211 prisoners, and the 26th Virginia’s battle flag. A Confederate officer complained that the fort had fallen to “a damned Yankee skirmish line.”¹⁷

Emboldened by the fall of Battery 5, Martindale ordered his division forward, capturing Batteries 3 and 4. Things also went well on Hinks’s front. When Battery 6 capitulated, Colonel Joseph Barr Kiddoo’s 22nd U.S.C.T. made for Battery 7, which they captured, along with Battery 8. Several of the fort’s defenders escaped to Battery 9, regrouped, and launched a counterattack,

¹³ Hancock’s Report, in *O.R.*, I, 40, pt. 1, 304.

¹⁴ Butler to Smith, 7:20 p.m., June 15, 1864, in *O.R.*, I, 40, pt. 2, 83.

¹⁵ S. Millett Thompson, *Thirteenth Regiment of New Hampshire Volunteer Infantry in the War of the Rebellion, 1861-1865* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1888), 386-7, 393.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 387-8.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 388.

but the U.S.C.T.'s repelled them and captured Batteries 9 and 10 as well. Then Hinks's second line—the 5th and 6th U.S.C.T.—pitched in, guided by flashes of musketry from the forts as they stumbled through stumps, fallen timber, bushes, and pools of water. It was now after 9:00 p.m. and almost dark. More than a mile and a half of the fortified Dimmock Line—Batteries 3 through 11—was in Union hands.

Smith peered down the road to Petersburg, which descended into a narrow valley. "I knew that no fortifications stood between me and Petersburg and that the bridges across the Appomattox were commanded by the ground on the Richmond side, [and] that to hold them I must hold the left bank," the general later wrote, adding that he had received "a telegram from Butler informing me that [Confederate] reinforcements were already pouring into the town and I determined to hold what I had, if possible, till the Army of the Potomac came up." Reflecting on his decision thirty years later, Smith contended that he would have been "reckless to have plunged into the woods, in an unknown country, at ten o'clock at night, to meet such a force as was reported by Butler and his signal officers, besides having to attack, before reaching the Appomattox, a town where every house was a fortification, and all this in the middle of the night."¹⁸

At 9:00 p.m., Smith advised Butler that he "must have the Army of the Potomac reinforcements immediately". The head of Hancock's column, it developed, was still about a mile from Smith's line, but Hancock rode up and informed Smith that he had two divisions close by, ready to assist. "I replied that I thought any further advance that night involved more hazard than was warranted by any hope of success to be gained, and that if he could relieve my tired command in the front, I thought it was all and the best that could be done," Smith later wrote. "By the time the movement was completed it was 11:00," Hancock recollected, "too late and dark for any immediate advance," so his troops filed into the captured works.¹⁹

At midnight, Smith informed Butler of the situation. "It is impossible for me to go further tonight," he wrote, "but, unless I misapprehend the topography, I hold the key to Petersburg." For the rest of that night, however, the key would remain unturned, and by morning on June 16, veteran Confederate troops occupied a new defensive line. "The most bloodcurdling blasphemy I ever

¹⁸ Schiller, *Autobiography of Major General William F. Smith*, 104-5, 142. Smith, "General W. F. Smith at Petersburg," in *Century Magazine* 54 (1897), 637. Butler's signal station at Cobb's Hill near Point of Rocks had indeed been reporting Confederate reinforcements streaming toward the Cockade City. "A train of fourteen cars loaded with troops just passed toward Petersburg," a signal officer warned at 6:50 p.m. "The enemy also appears to be sending troops on the roads west of Petersburg. Another train of twenty-two cars has just passed toward Petersburg loaded with troops." At 7:30 p.m., the signal station advised that thirteen train cars had just passed toward Petersburg, and that the turnpike was "full of rising dust." An hour later, two more trains were spotted approaching the town. David L. Craft to Lemuel B. Norton, in *O.R.*, I, 40, pt. 2, 79; Charles F. Garrett to Norton, in *Ibid*; Craft to Norton, in *Ibid*.

¹⁹ Smith to Butler, 9:00 p.m., June 15, 1864, in *O.R.*, I, 40, pt. 2, 83; Hancock's Report, in *O.R.*, I, 40, pt. 1, 306; William G. Mitchell's Report, in *O.R.*, I, 40, pt. 1, 317; Schiller, *Autobiography of Major General William F. Smith*, 105.

listened to, I heard that night, uttered by men who knew they were to be sacrificed on the morrow,” one of Hancock’s troops later reminisced.²⁰

* * *

Responsibility for Smith’s failure to capture Petersburg on June 15 begins with Grant, who failed to clearly communicate his plan to his subordinate commanders. He envisioned a coordinated assault involving Smith and Hancock, yet Meade, Hancock, and Smith denied that Grant had shared his vision with them, and their behavior on June 15 corroborates their denials. During the previous month of campaigning, relations between Grant and Meade had become increasingly strained. And while Grant informed Butler that Hancock would be available to support Smith, Butler clearly failed to pass that information on to Smith—a casualty, most likely, of strained relations between those two headstrong generals. The Union high command resembled a dysfunctional family, of which the Petersburg fiasco of June 15 was a prime exhibit.

In July 1864, Meade candidly wrote Grant that if “Major-General Hancock and myself [had] been apprised in time of the contemplated movement against Petersburg, and the necessity of [Hancock’s] cooperation, I am of the opinion [Hancock] could have been pushed much earlier to the scene of operations.” In reply, Grant conceded that he was “very much mistaken if you were not informed of the contemplated movement against Petersburg as soon as I returned from Wilcox’s Landing from Bermuda Hundred.” The cost of the lost opportunity was apparent to all. “If General Hancock’s orders of the 15th had been communicated to him, that officer, with his usual promptness, would have undoubtedly been upon the ground around Petersburg as early as four o’clock in the afternoon of the 15th,” Grant admitted in his *Personal Memoirs*, adding: “I do not think there is any doubt that Petersburg itself could have been carried without much loss.”²¹

Hindsight leaves little doubt that a joint attack by Hancock and Smith during the afternoon or evening of June 15 would have overrun the Dimmock Line and pushed into Petersburg, achieving the mission’s objective of severing Lee’s supply line. While it is true that Confederate reinforcements were streaming toward the Cockade City, none of those troops reached town until well after Smith had broken the Dimmock Line.

²⁰ Smith to Butler, 12 midnight, June 15, 1864, in *O.R.*, I, 40, pt. 2, 83; Frank Wilkeson, *Recollections of a Private Soldier in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons The Knickerbocker Press, 1887), 162.

²¹ Meade’s Indorsement, July 27, 1864, in *O.R.*, I, 40, pt. 1, 315; Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 2:298. Hancock concurred, noting that he could have “joined General Smith by marching directly toward him at Petersburg by 4 p.m.” Hancock’s Report, in *O.R.*, I, 40, pt. 1, 304.

The Overland Campaign was over, and the ten-month Petersburg Campaign was about to begin.
