

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of New Market

By **Charles R. Knight**

Perhaps no small engagement is better known than the Battle of New Market. Fought on a rainy Sunday in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley, the battle pitted a small division-sized Confederate force which included 257 cadets from Virginia Military Institute commanded by Major General John Cabel Breckinridge against a larger Union force under Major General Franz Sigel. Although the VMI cadets were but one of the Confederate units engaged, their participation has given New Market a place unrivaled in the historiography of the war.

When Ulysses S. Grant was given command of all Union armies in March 1864, the scope of the war changed drastically. Prior to Grant, there had been no centralized plan for any sort of unified Northern offensive. Grant's vision of concentration in time as well as concentration in space would bring into play the North's advantage in manpower and deny the Confederates the ability to shift troops from one threatened theater to another as they had done previously. Union armies would move simultaneously into all parts of the South, pinning down Confederate forces in their respective fronts, and stretching Southern manpower to the breaking point.

Three major Union forces would operate in Virginia: the main thrust would come from Major General George Gordon Meade's Army of the Potomac, with which Grant himself would make his headquarters, which would move against its old nemesis General Robert E. Lee and the Army of Northern Virginia; smaller forces would operate on Meade's flanks—Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler's Army of the James would move up the James toward Richmond and Petersburg threatening those cities as well as Lee's right and rear, and a column was to move through the Shenandoah Valley to capture Staunton, denying the South the resource-rich Valley while at the same time threatening Lee's left flank.

The Shenandoah Valley had been scene of Lieutenant General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson's campaigns of 1862, and its strategic importance to both sides was made plain at that time. The Valley stretches for some 120 miles from Harpers Ferry, where the Shenandoah River flows into the Potomac, south to near Lexington, the Blue Ridge Mountains to the east and the Alleghenies to the west. The central Valley is dominated by a 60-mile-long ridge known as Massanutten Mountain, running from Front Royal to Harrisonburg; the only road across Massanutten was at its very center between Luray and New Market. The region was home to some of the most fertile farmland in

Virginia, with its harvests stuffing the haversacks of the Army of Northern Virginia, much being transported east along the Virginia Central Railroad via Staunton. In addition, the Confederacy's main salt and lead mines were not far beyond the southern reaches of the Valley proper, in southwestern Virginia. The *Virginia & Tennessee Railroad*, the main link between Richmond and the West, also passed through the southwestern corner of the state. Virginia Military Institute, the "West Point of the South" as it was called, where Jackson had been professor of artillery tactics before the war, was located in Lexington. And as Jackson had illustrated in 1862 and Lee in 1863, the Valley was a natural invasion route aimed at the North's vitals—a Confederate force could be screened by the Blue Ridge and emerge at Harpers Ferry or Martinsburg with Washington, Baltimore, or Harrisburg only a short march away.

Commanding the Federal efforts in western Virginia in the spring of 1864 was Major General Franz Sigel. The German-born Sigel was one of several high-ranking Union officers who owed their positions more to political connections than to military ability. Sigel attended the military academy at Karlsruhe, and finding himself on the losing end of the 1848 revolution in Germany, immigrated to the United States where he became a leader of the growing German population in America. When the Civil War broke out in 1861 Sigel was living in St. Louis and was commissioned colonel of an all-German Missouri unit. Recognizing his influence in the German-American community, Lincoln promoted Sigel to brigadier general. He was second in command of the Union forces at Pea Ridge in March 1862 and was given a second star and brought east to Virginia soon thereafter. He would command a corps in Major General John Pope's Army of Virginia and eventually took the reins of the mostly-German XI Corps of the Army of the Potomac, but never led that corps into combat before being replaced in early 1863.

Sigel would spend a year all but forgotten in an unimportant command in Pennsylvania. However, the approaching 1864 Presidential election would return the Lincoln administration's attention to Sigel. A second term for Abraham Lincoln was far from assured, so recognizing Sigel's influence within the German-American community, Grant was told to find a highly visible place in his coming offensive for Sigel—something Grant was loathe to do, given Sigel's track record. The logic was that by showing confidence in Sigel by returning him to the front, the general would then bring thousands of votes into Lincoln's camp in November.

Grant personally had little confidence in Sigel's ability to capture the Shenandoah Valley, so planned on putting Sigel as far from the battlefield as possible while giving him subordinates whom Grant trusted. Grant envisioned a two-pronged assault on western Virginia: one column from the Kanawha Valley moving against the *Virginia & Tennessee Railroad* and the lead and salt mines around Wytheville, while another column would move south through the Valley proper from Martinsburg, with both forces to unite at Staunton. Commanding the western arm would be Brigadier General George Crook, while Major General Edward Otho Cresap Ord would lead the force in the Valley; Sigel would oversee operations of both from departmental headquarters in Cumberland,

Maryland. Such an arrangement would actually play up the strengths of all involved, as for all his shortcomings on the battlefield, Sigel was an excellent organizer and administrator, an officer who was perhaps much better suited to staff work than combat command. These were talents that were needed, as the majority of the troops in Sigel's department were scattered along the *Baltimore & Ohio Railroad*, or part of the garrisons at Cumberland, Martinsburg, or Harpers Ferry. Many of them had never been in combat before, or even functioned as parts of larger commands, and those that had seen combat usually had not been on the winning end of it.

Problems arose almost immediately however, in that Sigel displayed extreme jealousy and resentment that Grant dealt directly with Crook rather than going through proper channels, thereby cutting Sigel out of the loop. Worse yet were relations between Sigel and Ord, who absolutely detested each other and could not work together. Ord would be relieved by his own request after only a very short time under Sigel's command and Sigel would decide to take command of Ord's field army himself—completely destroying Grant's original plan to keep Sigel behind a desk and off the battlefield.

Commanding at the other end of the Valley was Major General John C. Breckinridge, who was a newcomer to the Eastern Theater, having spent the first half of the war in his native Kentucky, Tennessee, and Mississippi. Breckinridge had been Vice President under James Buchanan immediately before the war, and was one of four candidates for President in 1860. A career politician with scant military experience, Breckinridge had surprised many by displaying considerable skill on the battlefield. In the process however he had made an enemy of General Braxton Bragg, commander of the Army of Tennessee, who had attempted to make Breckinridge scapegoat for the defeat at the Battle of Murfreesboro (Stones River) in January 1863. Bragg would also blame Breckinridge for Grant's lifting the Confederate siege of Chattanooga in November 1863. The War Department felt that a change of scenery was necessary for Breckinridge and he was assigned to southwest Virginia in early 1864.

Breckinridge was responsible for guarding a vast region and had only a handful of troops with which to do it. Union troops could approach from at least three directions. If they came from more than one Breckinridge would not have the strength to oppose them and thus would have to choose which one to concentrate against. Making matters worse, he had been advised by Lee that if threatened, Breckinridge would have to make do with the troops at hand as Lee could spare no reinforcements for western Virginia. The only assistance available for Breckinridge were the cadets of Virginia Military Institute—who numbered less than 300—and a brigade of cavalry in the Shenandoah Valley under Brigadier General John Daniel Imboden.

Confederate scouts divined Federal intentions and were on the look-out for an advance into the Valley as well as into southwest Virginia once the campaign season opened. The disparity in numbers, however, dictated that the Confederates would have to wait for the Federals to show their hand before they could counter any offensive.

On April 29 Sigel began his advance, leading a column of about 10,000 men southward from Martinsburg. This force was comprised of eight infantry regiments in a 2-brigade infantry division under Brigadier General Jeremiah Cutler Sullivan, two brigades of cavalry under Major General Julius Stahel, and five artillery batteries. If he could not achieve his main objective—to drive the Confederates from the Valley and link up with Crook at Staunton—he was to at the very least draw as much Confederate attention to himself as possible.

Sigel's army reached Winchester the evening of May 1, much to the dismay of the town's residents. Federal troops burned several homes in town in retaliation for the killing of a trooper of the 21st New York cavalry several days before, the shot reportedly having been fired from one of the dwellings. Soon Federal artillerymen practiced their aim firing across the town from the hilltops ringing it, and several rounds fell well short of their mark hitting the town. Sigel also issued orders confining the townspeople to their homes. His army remained in Winchester for more than a week, allowing the Confederates time to concentrate. During that time, Sigel drilled his troops relentlessly, even staging several mock battles—all in full view of Imboden's scouts, thus the Confederates were well aware of the strength of Sigel's column.

Breckinridge meanwhile began concentrating his scattered brigades and made plans to move with his available infantry and artillery to join Imboden in the Valley, leaving only a token force to oppose Crook's force. Joining the force in Staunton were the VMI cadets.

Just as the last of Breckinridge's infantry prepared to leave Dublin Depot for Staunton, Crook's army appeared outside of town. One Valley-bound infantry brigade was retained to oppose Crook, who overcame the small Confederate force in a sharp engagement at Cloyd's Mountain on May 9. Crook's Ohioans and West Virginians were able to destroy a portion of the *Virginia & Tennessee Railroad* and were poised to wreak considerable havoc in western Virginia, but turned back to West Virginia when Crook received faulty intelligence that both Sigel and Grant had been defeated. Breckinridge was thus able to devote his full attention to Sigel and the Valley.

As Crook was approaching Dublin, a small band of Confederate partisans under Captain John Hanson McNeill raided the *B&O Railroad* at Piedmont and Bloomington, West Virginia, on May 5 destroying the extensive machine shops there as well as several locomotives and upwards of 60 railcars. Sigel responded by sending about 500 troopers of the 15th New York and 22nd Pennsylvania cavalry under Colonel Jacob Higgins to hunt down McNeill. Higgins caught up with McNeill on May 8 at Moorfield, scattering the guerrillas in a brief skirmish. It was a short-lived victory as Imboden's scouts reported Higgins' departure almost immediately. Surmising Higgins' mission, Imboden took two of his own regiments, 18th and 23rd Virginia Cavalry, in pursuit. The day after the skirmish with McNeill at Moorfield, Higgins led his column into an ambush by Imboden's men at Lost River Gap. The trap turned into a running engagement and

Imboden's troopers drove Higgins' command for miles and into the Potomac River and out of the campaign.

While Crook fought at Cloyd's Mountain, Sigel renewed his advance. With all but a handful of Imboden's force gone from his front in their pursuit of Higgins, the Federals faced little opposition. Luck shone on Sigel when his cavalry captured Woodstock on May 11, as the Confederates were forced out of the town so quickly that several telegrams between Breckinridge and Imboden fell into Union hands. This correspondence revealed the strength and location of both Confederate forces as well as a rough time table for their junction—Sigel's own version of the "Lost Order" of the Maryland Campaign. But rather than being spurred into action, Sigel continued to advance with caution, allowing the Confederates much-needed time to concentrate.

The farther south Sigel's army advanced, the longer his supply lines became. This provided a tantalizing target for John Mosby's guerrillas, and Mosby detailed two full companies of his command to harass the Federals in the Valley. As Mosby's attacks become more frequent, Sigel is forced to detail more troops to guard his rear, further weakening his mounted arm.

On May 12 Breckinridge had his full force assembled in Staunton—two infantry brigades, one artillery battalion and 257 cadets from VMI. The same day Imboden returned to the Valley from his pursuit of Higgins to find that Sigel had pushed almost as far south as the town of New Market in the central Shenandoah Valley.

The crossroads at New Market was key to the central Valley—there the Luray-Sperryville Turnpike led east from the Valley Turnpike across Massanutten Mountain to Luray and from there across the Blue Ridge to central Virginia. Fearing that there may be Confederate forces operating in the vicinity of Luray, Sigel had dispatched Colonel William Henry Boyd with 400 cavalry mostly of the 1st New York to guard his left flank and clear the Luray Valley. Boyd's orders were to rejoin the army at New Market via New Market Gap.

On Friday May 13, Boyd crested Massanutten Mountain and surveyed the Valley floor below him. Clearly visible was a large body of troops north of New Market, between the town and the bridge carrying the Valley Turnpike over the Shenandoah River. Although these troops were deployed in a defensive position facing to the north, and had their supply wagons to the south of their position, Boyd determined that this was the advance of Sigel's army—the force he was to meet at New Market. When his officers pointed out that if this was indeed a friendly force, they were advancing with their wagons in the lead, Boyd was not swayed. He gave orders to descend the mountain and rejoin the main army.

What Boyd was seeing was John Imboden's brigade. Imboden's pickets had spotted Boyd's column almost as soon as it appeared in the gap. The Confederate commander quickly plotted a trap for Boyd—the 23rd Virginia Cavalry and a company of under-age Rockingham County militia would meet the Federals in front on a ridge

overlooking a creek at the foot of Massanutten, while the 18th Virginia Cavalry and a section of artillery followed a farm lane farther south which would bring them up on Boyd's left flank and rear. Boyd was unaware of the trap until it was too late—his column was decimated as it crossed Smith's Creek. In a span of only a few days, Imboden had taken half of Sigel's cavalry out of the campaign at only a minor loss to his own force.

By May 14 the two armies were closing in on New Market. It was apparent to the residents that a battle was near and many of them fled southward or into the mountains. Breckinridge's force was about one day's march to the south; Sigel's main body was about an equal distance to the north. Imboden still held the town but Union cavalry was just across the Shenandoah at Mt. Jackson. Throughout the afternoon of the May 14 Union cavalry skirmished with Imboden, driving the Confederates back on the town itself. Breckinridge sent orders to Imboden to hold the town until nightfall, and that they would affect a junction in the morning hours of May 15. Sigel also had designs on the town, having sent forward a portion of his infantry under Colonel Augustus Moor.

Imboden put up a bold front deploying his men in a single line from Shirley's Hill southwest of town across the Valley Pike, giving the appearance of twice his actual numbers. Once Moor secured the northern portion of the town he refrained from attacking Imboden's position, preferring to wait for more troops to come up the following day. Moor's troops took up position opposite Imboden on Manor's Hill, a somewhat lower elevation directly west of New Market. Twice during the night Imboden sent his men forward in dismounted attacks against the 1st West Virginia and 123rd Ohio of Moor's command. Around midnight Imboden pulled up stakes and headed south to rendezvous with Breckinridge.

The pre-dawn hours of Sunday May 15 found the Confederate forces united and on the march toward New Market, with a screen of Imboden's troopers in the lead. Together Breckinridge and Imboden had about 4,500 men and 16 artillery pieces. After consulting with Imboden, Breckinridge had determined to try and draw the Federals out of New Market to attack him, figuring a defensive battle offered the best chance for success. Moor's roughly 2,000 men had passed a rainy night on Manor's Hill. Moor knew the remainder of Sigel's force would be up that day, and Moor had no intention of taking the offensive until he was reinforced.

While Breckinridge was concentrating his forces for battle that morning, Sigel was doing the opposite. Moor had about one third of the army with him at New Market. Sigel had about another third with him 15 miles away at Edinburg. The rear third of the army was still at Woodstock—almost 20 miles from the lead elements. And Sigel showed more concern that morning for a missing liquor flask than he did for the divided condition of his army.

Having been unable to bait Moor into attacking in the morning, Breckinridge shifted his thinking to going over to the offensive. He deployed his artillery atop Shirley's Hill, from which the guns could rain fire on Moor's position in town and on

Manor's Hill. The Confederate infantry was arrayed in three lines: Brigadier General Gabriel Colvin Wharton's brigade on the left, with the 62nd Virginia of Imboden's command attached; Brigadier General John Echols' brigade on the right rear of Wharton; the VMI cadets and the other reserves well to the rear of Wharton. Imboden's cavalry covered the ground from Echols' right flank down to Smith's Creek.

As rain fell off and on throughout the day, Federal reinforcements began arriving, Sigel himself arriving on the field around noon. Sigel kept Moor's force in position on Manor's Hill, although the Confederates overlapped his line on the east. But rather than strengthen Moor, Sigel began forming a new line about a mile to the north.

Shortly after noon Breckinridge ordered his infantry forward. Union artillery took a considerable toll on the cadets who moved down Shirley's Hill as though passing in review on the parade field at VMI while their veteran comrades quickly scampered down the slope to cover in a ravine at its base. Although Sigel had more troops on the field, his deployment actually gave the Confederates local superiority of numbers. Being outflanked on his left, Moor offered only token resistance, before retreating. He reformed several hundred yards north of his original position, but this time with even fewer troops—only the 18th Connecticut and 123rd Ohio, the remainder having continued on to Sigel's main line of resistance. Moor's two regiments were overpowered and driven from their second position, many of the men fleeing the field and playing no farther role in the battle.

Imboden meanwhile had gotten permission to cross Smith's Creek to take up position on a knoll where he could enfilade Moor's position. He was also in search of a way to the rear of Sigel's army, to get between it and the bridge over the Shenandoah River. If he could cut off Sigel's line of retreat, Breckinridge could potentially capture or crush the entire Union force. Little is known however of Imboden's actions once he crossed Smith's Creek, only that recent rains had swollen the normally placid stream to a torrent which he was unable to cross, effectively removing the Confederate cavalry from the battle entirely.

Sigel put his available troops in position on a ridge just north of Jacob Bushong's farm. The Union right was anchored on a bluff some 200 feet above the Shenandoah River, with a sheer rock face that prevented any turning movement in that direction. Three infantry regiments were in line from that bluff eastward to the Valley Pike, with a fourth regiment in reserve. Two artillery batteries were positioned on the far right on the highest point of the line, another at about the midpoint of the infantry line, and a fourth on the left of the infantry on a knoll beside the Valley Pike. What was left of Stahel's cavalry extended the line from the Pike to Smith's Creek.

The terrain north of New Market would serve to funnel the attacking Confederates into a frontal assault across open ground. The river swept in gradually from the west; Smith's Creek mirrored its course on the eastern side of the field, in essence making an hour glass-shaped field with Sigel's army occupying the narrowest point. The bluffs to

the west prevented any flanking attempt around Sigel's right, and the flooded Smith's Creek prevented any crossing to the east.

The Confederate assault bogged down as it neared the Bushong house. Seventeen Union guns concentrated their fire into and around Bushong's orchard, and blue-clad infantry added small arms fire. The units at the Confederate center, the 30th Virginia Battalion and right companies of the 51st Virginia, wavered and eventually broke under the fire creating a huge gap. Occupying the northeast corner of the orchard was Company A 1st Missouri cavalry of Imboden's brigade—the only Missouri unit to serve in Virginia during the war—commanded by Captain Charles Hugh Woodson. Woodson carried around 65 men into battle that morning; nearly all of them would fall dead or wounded in the orchard—only seven men answered roll call that evening. The remainder of Wharton's men hunkered down behind a fence that ran from the Valley Pike along the Bushong house lane and the northern boundary of the orchard, while waiting for Echols' men to come abreast of them on the right.

Seeing the Confederate advance stall, Sigel ordered a counterattack. But instead of attacking the wavering Confederate left and center, he sent his cavalry forward against the Confederate right—troops that had not yet fired a shot. Most of Breckinridge's artillery had stayed close to the Valley Pike and had taken up position beside the Pike just behind Wharton's right flank. Thus the Union cavalry was about to strike the strongest part of the Confederate line.

As the Federal horsemen rode forward in a grand Napoleonic charge, Confederate artillery peppered them with canister and Echols' infantry formed into a "V" around the guns. The Union cavalry were taking artillery fire in front, and infantry fire on both flanks; the attack was doomed before it began. Only a handful of horsemen actually reached the guns, the rest were either dropped by enemy fire or turned and fled. Few halted when they reached their jump-off point on the ridge opposite, leaving the Federal left flank in the air.

After ordering his cavalry forward, Sigel belatedly ordered forward his infantry toward the Bushong orchard. Although it was intended to be a brigade attack by the three infantry regiments, coordination was lacking the attack was made piecemeal, each regiment going it alone. By the time the attack got off the ground around 2:00 p.m., the gap in the Confederate line had been filled by reserves—including the VMI cadets.

Breckinridge had had no intention of using the cadets in the battle; now he had been forced to throw them into the very hottest part of the fight. As they approached the Bushong house, casualties mounted. As they entered the orchard, their commander Lieutenant Colonel Scott Ship fell wounded. They fell into position along the fence just as Federal infantry approached across the rain-swept field to their front.

Moving in to attack first was the 1st West Virginia, a veteran unit in the Union center. Seeing no support on either flank, the West Virginians broke off their attack before making much progress. After the West Virginians turned back, the 34th

Massachusetts, a green unit on the right flank, moved in to attack. They advanced the farthest and suffered severely—Colonel George Duncan Wells had his horse shot out from under him; the regimental mascot dogs followed the unit across the field and all were killed; the unit itself suffered roughly 50% casualties; the only way Colonel Wells could halt the unit was to physically grab the color bearer and lead him off the field personally. Seeing the other units advance and assuming he had similar orders, Colonel Jacob Miller Campbell led forward his 54th Pennsylvania on the Union left. By the time Campbell's Pennsylvanians moved forward, the cavalry on their left flank was gone leaving their flank exposed to envelopment by Echols' men. The 54th would also suffer severely in this assault, losing about 40%.

The Union assault rebuffed, Breckinridge renewed his assault. Elements of the 51st Virginia and 26th Virginia Battalion managed to work their way along the tree line atop the bluff unnoticed and got in among the Union guns atop Bushong's Hill, capturing three of the cannon there. The cadets and 62nd Virginia pressed forward in the center, while Echols continued turning the Union left. Immediately north of the orchard was a sizeable depression in a wheat field. The recent rains had pooled in that area, and the mud in places was calf-deep. The cadets advanced through this morass directly at the five Napoleons of Captain Alfred von Kleiser's 30th New York Battery. The cadets were among the guns before they could all be gotten off the field, and Cadet Color Bearer Oliver Perry Evans leapt atop one of the guns waving the VMI flag, while other cadets rounded up prisoners.

Sigel made one last attempt to salvage the battle, trying to get his sole reserve regiment, the 12th West Virginia to make a counterattack. Reportedly the excited Sigel had begun giving orders in German. Regardless, the 12th was swept up in the retreat.

The colors of the 1st West Virginia were very nearly captured, with only a valiant effort by Sergeant James Madison Burns saving both flag and color sergeant. Decades later Burns would receive the Medal of Honor for his actions at New Market.

As the Union line collapsed the rear elements of Sigel's army began to arrive. Captain Henry A. DuPont's Battery B, 5th US Artillery, covered the retreat, leapfrogging his guns northward along the Valley Pike. Two fresh Ohio infantry regiments deployed on Rude's Hill, and were soon joined by DuPont and elements of Wells' and Campbell's units. This rear guard bought just enough time for the rest of Sigel's army to cross the Shenandoah River to Mt. Jackson. DuPont continued to bring up the rear, claiming the honor of setting fire to the bridge for himself.

With the bridge destroyed, Breckinridge was unable to pursue farther than the river and the fighting ended at nightfall at the bridge. Sigel would pause several hours to regroup at Mt. Jackson, then retreated northward back toward Winchester. Breckinridge's army returned to the vicinity of New Market. Casualties were heavy—about 550 for the Confederates, including 10 cadets killed or mortally wounded and another 47 wounded, and about 800 men and five guns for the Federals.

Sigel returned to his old camps along Cedar Creek outside of Middletown, and within days was replaced by Major General David Hunter.

As Breckinridge was unable to pursue Sigel and deliver a knock-out blow, Lee summoned him east of the Blue Ridge to reinforce the Army of Northern Virginia. Breckinridge took not only his infantry and artillery, but took Imboden's 62nd Virginia as well to offset his losses. The cadets received the thanks of the Confederate Congress and return to their studies in Lexington. Breckinridge participated in the fighting at Cold Harbor before being returned to the Valley in June.

The Confederate victory at New Market kept most of the Valley in Confederate hands, and came at a time when morale both on the home front as well as in the ranks needed a boost in the wake of the death of Jeb Stuart, the huge losses at the Wilderness and Spotsylvania, and the Army of the James' lodgment at Bermuda Hundred between Richmond and Petersburg. However, the victory was offset very quickly when Hunter advanced sooner than anyone anticipated, and by the first week of June had captured Staunton. In retaliation for the cadets' participation at New Market, Hunter not only burned the barracks and classrooms at VMI but ransacked the institute, even carrying off the large statue of George Washington. Years later VMI would be reimbursed by the Federal government for this destruction through legislation sponsored by Delaware Senator Henry DuPont.

New Market is not the only time that a cadet corps from one of the military institutes participated in a pitched battle, but it is the best known. Today, the majority of the battlefield is owned and operated by the Virginia Military Institute. Six of the cadets killed in the battle are buried beside the parade ground at the foot of a statue *Virginia Mourning her Dead*, sculpted by one of the "New Market Cadets" Moses Ezekiel, and every May 15 the Institute holds a ceremony to honor the 10 cadets killed at New Market.
