

The Battles of Spotsylvania Courthouse and Cold Harbor

By Darrell Osburn c 1996

[pic of Grant]

In the first week of May, in 1864, Union General Ulysses S. Grant tried to break through the rugged, wooded area of northern Virginia, known as the "Wilderness," to try to break the army of

[pic of Lee]

Confederate General Robert E. Lee.

[fighting, rebs push yanks back through the woods, rebs do the rebel yell]

But Grant was unable to accomplish either of these goals.

[Grant talking with his officers]

Lee had stopped all of the Union commanders, whenever they tried to push south. All had retreated north after tangling with Lee's ragged army.

[pic of Lincoln]

But General Grant had promised Lincoln, that no matter what happened, there would be no turning back.

[Grant and his officers confer with map, with US marchby in background]

Grant believed that Lee would pull back toward the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia. Grant underestimated Lee, as Lee did not often do what his opponents expected him to do.

[Lee planning with his officers]

Lee always seemed to know the plans of the Union generals.

[map of the Wilderness battle?]

Even as Lee was able to stop Grant in the Wilderness, Lee knew that Grant was different. Grant would not retreat, as all the others had.

Lee predicted that Grant would swing around to the southeast, around Lee's right, to try to put the Union army between Lee and Richmond.

[US marchby]

This move, if successful, would force Lee to attack Grant on the ground of Grant's choosing.

[CS marchby, right shoulder shift, double-quick march]

Lee ordered his army, the Army of Northern Virginia, to move quickly to take the vital crossroads at Spotsylvania Courthouse. He knew he must take that ground before Grant's Army of the Potomac arrived.

[US right-shoulder shift, double-quick marchby]

So it became a foot race to see who could get there first.

[CS DQ MBy]

The southerners, having a shorter distance to go, got there first.

[Pics of Sedgwick and Warren? or US officers planning with maps]

Grant's generals Sedgwick and Warren, were not sure how much force was against them.

[Yanks advance, pan rebs ready in battle line, both fire volleys, take hits, yanks retreat, rebel yell]

On May 8th, their 2 Union Core launched an attack on the divisions of Richard Ewell and Richard Anderson.

But the Union forces were driven back with heavy losses.

[both sides building fortifications]

On May 9th, both sides dug in to await reinforcements.

[US artillerymen are ducking bullets from unseen sharpshooters]

[pic of Gen. Sedgwick]

General John Sedgwick was perhaps the most dependable general that Grant had.

[Gen. Sedgwick berates the ducking artillerymen]

Gen. Sedgwick came upon some Federal artillerymen, taking cover from unseen sharpshooters. Sedgwick believed these men were being overly cautious.

[SPEAKING PART- Gen. Sedgwick]:

Get up, men and go about your business. They could not hit an elephant at this distance!

[Sedgwick is shot in the face and killed instantly. His men, still ducking, rush to him]

No sooner than these words left his mouth, Gen. Sedgwick was struck in the face by a Confederate mini-ball, killing him instantly.

[Gen. Grant gets the report]

When Gen. Grant got the report of his death, he didn't believe it. Grant had to ask twice

[SPEAKING PART-Grant: Is he dead? Is he really dead? Grant shakes his head]

Gen. Sedgwick's death was a great loss to the Federal army.

[US attacks rebel fortifications, lot of shooting, hits, etc.]

On May 10th, the Yankees attacked the Rebel fortifications, known as the mule-shoe salient or the bloody angle.

Grant said [SPEAKING PART-Grant: I propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer]

[caring for the wounded]

On May 11th, heavy rains put a temporary end to the fighting but on this day, Lee made a mistake.

[reb cannons are pulled out of line, being rolled away]

Lee believed Grant was making another flanking movement. Lee ordered his cannons out of the mule-shoe salient to be ready to move southeast.

This was very unlucky for the Southerners, because Grant had already issued orders for an attack on these very works to begin the very next morning.

[Yanks attack reb works]

May 12th saw some of the heaviest fighting of the war.

[Yanks attack out of the rain, taking the first 2 lines of rebel works, hand-to-hand fighting]

[rebs streaming into battle, reb cannons are brought back, yanks capture the cannons]

Both sides poured in more troops. Every available rebel soldier was sent into the mule-shoe salient to bolster the weakening center. The cannons Lee had ordered out, were brought back, just in time to be captured by the Yankees.

[heavy fighting]

Never before in the Civil War was the firing so heavy. So many bullets were fired so quickly that large oak trees were cut down, by the spinning, zipping lead.

[In the thick of battle, Lee desperately encourages his men to fight]

Gen. Lee exposed himself to enemy fire, trying to encourage his men to hold on.

[Heavy fighting]

Troops on both sides had been fighting since dawn without food or rest.

Lee ordered his men to hold on until a second line of works could be built in the rear. But when darkness came, the Confederates were told that they still could not withdraw.

[Dead scene]

In the 2 days of fighting, the North lost about 11,000 men, the South lost about 10,000.

[Dead and wounded and stretchers]

On May 13th, there was no fighting. Both sides cared for their wounded and buried their dead.

[Soldiers sitting around, huddled and miserable]

On May 14th, 15th, and 16th, heavy rains returned, putting an end to the Union marches and attacks.

[both sides form ranks, prepare for battle]

Both sides spent the 17th preparing for more attacks on the 18th.

[US attack reb works, take first set, are mowed down in rows when they try to take the second set of works]

These were badly delivered. As Grants men took over the first line of rebel works and advanced on the second line, the rebels shot down 2,000 more bluecoats.

[US survivors fall back]

Grant had to call off these attacks.

[Lee gets reports, gives orders]

On May 19th, Lee got reports that Grant had weakened his right flank. Lee ordered Gen. Ewell's division to make a counter-attack on Grant's presumably thinned-out Yankees. This time, though, Lee made the wrong decision, based on reports that were not true.

[US marchby, form for battle]

The Union right had not been weakened, in fact, it had just been reinforced, by the 7,500-man division of Robert O. Tyler.

[Yanks on defense repel rebel charge]

And although most of Tyler's Yankees had never been in a battle before, they did manage to throw back Ewell's counter-attack.

[US marchby]

On May 20th, Grant sidled southeast again. Grant hoped Lee would attack his advance core, and to do that, Lee would have to come out into the open. But Lee figured out what Grant was up to, and did not attack.

[map]

Lee positioned his men along the banks of the North Anna River. The rebels put themselves into an upside-down V with the point of the V on the river.

[Grant in his HQ, with officers, studying maps]

This meant that if Grant wanted to concentrate his army on either side of this wedge, his men would have to cross and re-cross the river, in easy musket range of the rebel army. This would be both difficult and dangerous.

[Lee doesn't feel well]

If Lee had been in good health at this time, he might have been able to attack one wing of the Union army with a fair chance of destroying it. But Lee was suffering from fever, diarrhea and heart trouble. Many of his best generals were either sick or dead. Lee was not able to lead an attack himself. So Lee missed a rare chance to destroy Grant.

[night-shot-US cannons fire on rebel works]

On the north side of the North Anna River, Union artillery harassed and out-gunned the Confederates on the south side.

[US charges rebel works, are repulsed]

In the next 4 days, Grant made 2 large attacks and many more small ones, and it cost him 2,000 more men. Still, he could not find a weakness in Lee's lines.[]

[US double-quick marchby]

On May 26th, Grant fell back across the North Anna and hurried southeast toward Cold Harbor. This time, Grant stole a day's head start on Lee,

[CS double-quick marchby]

but it was not enough.

[US double-quick marchby]

By May 30th, the Yankees were within 10 miles of the Confederate capital of Richmond, Virginia.

[rebels in their works, ready to receive an attack]

Lee's army had a shorter distance to march and once again, Lee's men were solidly entrenched across Grant's path.

[more US and CS attacks]

On June 1st, several inconclusive attacks were attempted by both sides.

[Grant in his HQ]

Grant ordered an all-out attack to be made on the morning of June 2nd, but his soldiers were utterly exhausted, so the charge was delayed until the morning of June 3rd.

[night-shot: lots of US soldiers pin or sew a paper to the backs of their uniform coats]

On the night of June 2nd, knowing they were doomed, thousands of Union soldiers sewed or pinned papers to the backs of their coats. On the papers, they had written their names and contact information so that they could be identified, and their families could be told.

[massive US advance]

On June 3rd, at 4:30 in the morning, 50,000 blue-coats advanced toward Lee's entrenched riflemen. This determined attack was intended to end the war.

[rebels mow down Yankees bigtime]

But the rebels mowed the Yankees down in rows. The Federals lost 7,000 men in 20 minutes' time.

[US retreat under fire]

[Another US attack, not as strong]

Grant ordered a 2nd attack. Some went forward, others did not. The rebels repulsed this attack also.

[Grant issues orders for the 3rd attack]

Incredibly, Grant ordered a 3rd charge.

[US refuse to budge]

but this time, all of the troops refused to obey this order. Grant later said that he regretted the attack at Cold Harbor more than anything he had ever done.

[Thousands of US dead and wounded on the field between the 2 armies, crying for mother, water, and help]

Grant refused to ask Lee for a truce to collect his wounded. To Grant, only the loser of a battle would ask for a truce. So for nearly a week, Federal soldiers heard their comrades crying for help and water and screaming in pain.

[US dead]

Of the thousands of wounded Union soldiers who fell on that field, only 2 men survived.

[US marchby]

Despite the terrible defeat at Cold Harbor and the heavy losses in the other battles he had fought, Grant was determined to advance on Richmond, by way of Petersburg, Virginia.

[Dead scene, smoke, cannons destroyed, etc.]

In the one month of near-continuous fighting, the Union army lost 60,000 men. The Confederate army lost almost 33,000. That means that in the space of one month's time, nearly 100,000 Americans were killed, wounded, captured or missing. From early May, to early June, 1864, was the bloodiest month in American History.

Grant may not have known whether he could defeat Lee, but he did know that he could draw upon many more reinforcements than Lee could. The North had a much larger population than the South.

Lincoln's wife, Mary, thought that Grant was a butcher who cared nothing about the lives of his men. But Lincoln said, "I cannot spare this man. He fights!"

Grant's greatest asset was his determination. Grant would grind Lee's army down until the Union was victorious over the Confederacy.

[EPILOGUE-surrender at Appomattox-painting or live action?]

About one year later, Lee finally surrendered to Grant. Grant asked Lee if he remembered meeting him during the Mexican War. Lee admitted that he did not remember Grant.

Grant and Lee had not fought each other in the first 3 years of the Civil War, until the battles of the Wilderness, Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor. And although Lee did not remember meeting Grant, Lee did make a prediction when he first learned that Lincoln had appointed him to be General-in-Chief.

[SPEAKING PART-Lee: That man will fight us every day and every night until he no longer can, or no longer must.]

And so he did.