



# The Battle of North Anna's Place

## Within the 1864 Overland Campaign

by *Bob Munns*

For the campaign season of 1864 Grant, the newly appointed general-in-chief of all Union armies, was able to create the first truly coordinated plan that utilized the major Federal forces in both the eastern and western theatres. Union armies were to be on the attack everywhere that spring, simultaneously pressuring each of the remaining rebel armies. This was expected to keep the Confederate forces off-balance and prohibit their sending reinforcements from non threatened areas to those that were, a practice which in the past had help them to partially offset the Union's superiority in men and material. In this new plan there were to be no areas left unthreatened.

In Grant's overall strategic plan the drive of the Army of the Potomac (AOP) toward Richmond was the centerpiece in this coordinated offensive against the Confederacy. The eastern theatre portion of the plan had two additional elements. Sigel was to tie up the Confederate forces in the Shenandoah Valley and lessen that areas contribution toward sustaining CSA armies in the east. Butler, with his forces landing at Bermuda Hundreds on the James River, was to be threatened if not occupy both Richmond and Petersburg, and to perhaps act in concert with the AOP to trap the Army of Northern Virginia (ANV) between them. The main western element was to be Sherman's drive from Chattanooga to Atlanta, with the secondary western element of Banks' Red River campaign.

The South needed to defeat or at least blunt these efforts, making them extremely costly in men and material to the Union forces involved. By this point of the war the only chance for the Confederacy's survival was to increase the war weariness of the North, perhaps weakening support for Lincoln enough in the upcoming November elections that the opposition party, lead by former general McClellan, would take power. Such a change of administration would likely have brought about an end to the fighting in a manner that allowed the Confederacy to continue in existence.

So far the Northern plan was not working out well. All of the Union's supporting secondary thrusts in Grant's scheme had failed. In the west Banks' drive up the Red River had ended in failure by May 20th, being fortunate to extract his command from near disaster. Sherman's main Union thrust in the west from Chattanooga toward Atlanta was making continued progress, but more slowly than anticipated. General Joe Johnson's gradual withdrawals in front of the Union armies in northern Georgia so far had frustrated Sherman's attempts at bringing the Confederate Army of Tennessee to a decisive engagement. However Johnson himself had missed what may have been his best opportunity to destroy a major portion of Sherman's forces at Cassville on May 18th when he failed to carry out a planned counter-attack.

In the east the Confederate victory at the battle of New Market on May 15th against the Union forces in the Shenandoah Valley under Sigel allowed Breckinridge to



reinforce Lee with two brigades plus two artillery battalions. And as a consequence of Butler's defeat at the hands of Beauregard and D.H. Hill on May 16th at the battle of Drewry's Bluff, Butler's Union Army of the James failed to advance on Lee's Army of Northern Virginia from the rear, or at a minimum, tie up considerable Confederate forces by threatening Richmond and Petersburg. Butler's forces now found themselves "bottled up" back within the confines of the Bermuda Hundreds, with little prospect of further contributions to that summer's war effort. This allowed three brigades that had previously made up Pickett's division to return to Lee as reinforcements from Beauregard, reforming again under their division commander at Hanover Junction. Additionally another brigade from Beauregard's forces, formerly Hoke's now under Lewis, could be brought up to reinforce Early's 2nd Corps division.

Grant's Overland Campaign, the drive by the Army of the Potomac (with Burnside's 9th Corps in support) toward Richmond, had as its main goal the destruction of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in open battle rather than occupation of the southern capital. Grant knew that the movement toward Richmond would force Lee to confront him in battle. So far the Overland Campaign had resulted in bloody battles at The Wilderness (May 5th and 6th) and at Spotsylvania (May 8th through the 19th).

The fighting at The Wilderness had cost the Union heavily, with roughly 18,000 casualties. This was significantly more than the approximately 10,000 Confederate casualties of the battle and therefore normally would have been viewed as a victory for the South. However several factors would go a long way in offsetting that appraisal. The first was the temporary loss of Lieut. General James Longstreet, the Confederate 1st Corps commander and, since the death of Stonewall Jackson at Chancellorsville the previous May, Lee's most trusted remaining senior officer. "Old Pete" had been seriously wounded while examining the positions of his troops following their successful counterattack of the Union forces on May 6th. His services would be denied Lee until his return to duty in October '64. Second, with the North starting the battle with approximately 118,000 men compared to 62,000 for the South, the Confederates still suffered a slightly higher percentage rate of casualties for their forces than the Union. More importantly, with far smaller manpower resources than the North, the South simply could not over the long run continue to replace this level of loss. And finally, the Union had once and for all pierced the Confederate defensive positions along the Rapidan and Rappahannock Rivers. Grant's forces were across and there would be no retreating as done by past commanders of the Army of the Potomac to lick their wounds. His very act of continuing the offensive by sliding around Lee's right flank and moving further south made The Wilderness something of victory at the strategic level for the Union.

For Grant's campaign to bear fruit he still had to neutralize or preferably destroy the Army of Northern Virginia, and at



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Spotsylvania Grant came tantalizingly close to success. There on May 8th his forces very nearly got behind the Army of Northern Virginia before it could establish new blocking positions between Grant and Richmond. Only the timely arrival of troops from Anderson's Confederate 1st Corps (having left his division command in the 3rd Corps to replace the wounded Longstreet as corps commander) prevented near disaster. Hard fighting continued on the 9th (when beloved Union Maj. Gen. "Uncle John" Sedgwick commanding the 6th Corps was killed by a sniper) and the 10th, seeing both sides attack and counterattack up and down the line. But it was on May 12th that the Army of Northern Virginia came closest to destruction at Spotsylvania. Grant launched a concentrated attack of 20,000 men from Hancock's 2nd Corps on a very narrow front, striking at the apex of the Confederate salient known as "the Mule Shoe" jutting north beyond the rest of their defensive line. In savage close range and hand-to-hand fighting the Union troops broke through and virtually destroyed as a fighting unit the 5,000-man division of Edward "Allegheny" Johnson of the Confederate 2nd Corps, who along with a large number of his troops was captured. Hancock's forces, reinforced by troops from (now Wright's) 6th Corps, poured through the gap torn in the rebels' line. Only desperate and daring counterattacks within "The Bloody Angle", lead by Confederate division commanders Rodes and Gordon (temporarily commander of Early's 2nd Corps division while Early temporarily filled in for a sick A.P. Hill as 3rd Corps commander) as well as distinctive leadership displayed by brigade commander Ramseur, halted the Union advance and allowed time for a new defensive line to be drawn across the base of the salient. The days following the exhaustive fighting of the 12th saw fighting at a lesser scale while the Union gradually shifting leftward trying to turn Lee's right flank, countered by the Confederate's extension of their defensive works on that side. Over the almost two-week period that made up the fighting at Spotsylvania another roughly 18,000 Union and 10,000 Confederate casualties occurred.

The last significant fighting at Spotsylvania took place on May 19th when the remnants of Ewell's Confederate 2nd Corps swung out from the rebel left on a reconnaissance to determine where the right of the Union line had been pulled back to. Ewell found that the Union right had been moved much further east than anticipated, with the Federal line now running essentially north to south and facing west. The Union units Ewell encountered where some of the newly arriving Heavy Artillery regiments, former Washington garrison troops brought down to help make good the tremendous Union losses of the last 3 weeks. These units were serving as front line infantry for the first time, and though they put up a moderately stiff resistance to Ewell's probing attack, discovering troops of this inexperienced caliber holding the Federal right helped to give Lee the indication that further Union threats would come from the Union left. He felt that Grant would once again trying to swing around the Confederate right, though how wide a swing Lee had yet to determine.

The day after, Grant wrote "My chief anxiety is to draw the ANV out of its works and fight it in the open". To bring this

about, he directed Meade to issue the following order to Hancock's 2nd Corps: "He will be moved southeast with all his forces...to get as far toward Richmond on the line of the Fredericksburg railroad as he can make....". The plan as originally envisioned by Grant was for the 2nd Corps to move eastward to the RF&P RR in the area of Guinea Station, then follow the railroad line southward toward Hanover Junction where it crossed the Virginia Central RR line. That railroad was the main link of Richmond and Lee's army to the Shenandoah Valley, from where a large part of the supplies and recruits the ANV received came from. Grant felt that the ANV would have to leave it's entrenchments at Spotsylvania to react to this threat, and hoped that the "bait" of the Union 2nd Corps' seemingly isolated move would entice Lee to attack it. But alone the 2nd Corps would not be, as Grant planned to move his other corps in positions of distant support, able to come up and join in any fight. Grant would at last have his decisive battle with Lee in the open before the Army of Northern Virginia could withdraw into the fortifications around Richmond. The 2nd Corps started it's movement the evening of May 20th, but began to encounter the first of a series of delays when forced to wait an hour and a half for a planned joining with a small cavalry detachment along the way.

On this same day Lee contemplated retiring to a defensive position behind the North Anna River just north of Hanover Junction, where Breckinridge's small force of reinforcements from the Shenandoah Valley began to arrive and the brigades of Pickett's former division had been ordered to reassemble. Partly in anticipation of this move and party as he still expected Grant to make some sort of move against the Confederate right flank, Lee extended his cavalry line out to Guinea Station and placed the right of his main defense along the Telegraph Road to block any Union move directly southward along it. That evening Lee ordered Ewell's Confederate 2nd Corps to move from the left of the army to its right, a movement that was begun at 0300 on May 21st, not knowing he was countering the Union 2nd Corps movement only hours after it had begun. This pre-positioning of troops was the key in allowing the ANV to win the race with the AOP to the North Anna River in the following days.

At daybreak on May 21st Lee received a warning from the cavalry, positioned just the day before, of Union forces at Guinea Station. In response he ordered Ewell's 2nd Corps to move further south along the Telegraph Road to Mudd Tavern. During the morning Lee continued to receive reports of Union troop movements, and around noon it became apparent that the Union 2nd Corps was making a bold move southward, likely toward Hanover Junction. But rather than taking the bait and attacking Hancock's 2nd Corps as Grant had hoped, Lee decided to have the ANV move directly to the North Anna River and set up a blocking position. By 1300 he had ordered Ewell's 2nd Corps south along the Telegraph Road toward Hanover Junction.

These Union troop movements Lee received reports on were not going as smoothly or aggressively as planned, causing Grant to change the various Union corps' march route orders several times. Early in the morning Hancock's 2nd Corps



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reached Guinea Station where the RF&P railroad bends around eastward to parallel the left bank of the Mattaponi River. Following the rail line as it again turned southward, 2nd Corps' lead division reached Milford Station. There occurred a small engagement between the lead elements of the Union division and Terry's brigade (formerly Kemper's) from Pickett's division temporarily placed in the Milford Station area as a blocking force. The Confederate brigade retreated across the Mattaponi River to take up a new blocking position further to the southwest along with Confederate cavalry from Hampton's division. By noon the 2nd Corps Union division had crossed the Mattaponi River opposite the station to establish a bridgehead on the right bank. But this encounter proved that Lee's army was receiving reinforcements, and Hancock cautiously decided to stop his corps' bold march southward toward the North Anna, instead choosing to strengthen his bridgehead on the south side of the Mattaponi.

Warren's 5th Corps began its movement about 1000, following some distance behind the 2nd Corps, finally reaching Guinea Station by nightfall of the 21st. The 9th Corps, commanded by Burnside, started in the afternoon on its swing eastward from Spotsylvania, turning south in an attempt to follow the Telegraph Road, but finding its path blocked by the Confederate cavalry of W.H.F. ("Rooney") Lee. This forced Burnside back north again until he could proceed further eastward on the road net, now following Warren. Wright's 6th Corps was the rearguard of the AOP, and followed the 9th Corps to the east in the evening.

That same afternoon the ANV underwent a partial reorganization. A not completely well A.P. Hill returned to duty after missing the fighting at Spotsylvania due to illness. Upon Hill's resuming command of the Confederate 3rd Corps, his temporary replacement Early returned to the command of his own division in the 2nd Corps. This division had in turn had been temporarily and very ably commanded by Gordon, one of Early's brigadiers. Gordon was promoted to major general and given command of a new division in part made up from the remnants of "Allegheny" Johnson's division destroyed in the "Bloody Angle" at Spotsylvania.

In addition to the reinforcements reaching the ANV and the troops of Breckinridge and Pickett assembling at Hanover Junction, the victorious forces under Beauregard in the Richmond/Petersburg area were another source from which the South might draw from to bolster Lee's chances at stopping Grant's main thrust. As early as May 13th Lee requested Jefferson Davis to send Hoke's division to the ANV. Following Beauregard's victory at Drewry's Bluff on May 16th, both he and Lee suggested to Bragg (then the chief military advisor to Confederate president Jefferson Davis) that the majority of Beauregard's forces be brought up to join or coordinate with Lee, and these requests were repeated by one or both generals over the course of the next ten days. But both Jefferson Davis and Bragg squashed the idea of Beauregard personally bringing his troops north, instead attempting to pry troops from him as reinforcements to act under Lee. The net result was that neither Hoke's nor Bushrod Johnson's division were available to the Southern forces at the North Anna River.

Grant too was making plans to bring up major reinforcements. He saw Butler's Army of the James, now uselessly bottled up at Bermuda Hundreds by Beauregard, as a ready made source of divisions to build back up the depleted AOP. In the afternoon of May 21st Grant cabled Halleck, presenting the case that Butler was sealed up and no longer detaining reinforcements from reaching Lee. He asked Halleck to determine if any further offensive action from the Union army at Bermuda Hundreds was possible, and if not, to determine what forces from it could be sent north via river transports to reinforce the AOP.

By 1700 of May 21st Lee was able to confirm with a probing attack by troops of A.P. Hill's 3rd Corps that the Union army was leaving its Spotsylvania entrenchments. He sent Anderson's 1st Corps following Ewell's 2nd Corps to Hanover Junction, specifying that they should march until 0300 of May 22nd before stopping to rest. Hill's 3rd Corps was assigned as the rearguard for the ANV's movement from Spotsylvania. At 2100 he was ordered to take his corps south, but on a more westerly route than the other Confederate corps, using roads distantly paralleling the Telegraph Road. With his corps he would also take the supply train of the ANV, with Brown's brigade (formerly McGowan's) acting as its rearguard.

On the morning of May 22nd, Grant knew that Lee had moved the ANV away from Spotsylvania down the Telegraph Road. As Lee had not as yet taken the "bait" by attacking the Union 2nd Corps, Grant began to feel this was proof of an ANV severely weakened in both numbers and morale by the last two and a half weeks of brutal fighting. But he also feared that this same diminished condition would cause Lee to retreat into the prepared defenses of Richmond, forcing upon Grant the very thing he wished to avoid, siege warfare. Instead of attempting yet another time consuming slide to the left flank and then march down the Pamunky River toward Richmond, Grant became determined to take the more direct route toward Richmond by pursuing Lee across the North Anna River, still hoping to catch the ANV and bring it to decisive battle before it could reach the entrenchments of Richmond.

But with essentially all of the Union Cavalry Corps under Sheridan still away on its independent raid toward Richmond, the AOP was traveling blind. It had neither accurate information on the positions of the ANV forces heading south nor a clear picture of the roads and terrain ahead of the Union army. The further south Grant's army went, the less accurate its maps were proving to be. The Union commander-in-chief continued to hope that Lee might open himself up to attack by assaulting Hancock out in the open, but the lack of information about his opponent's forces and countryside caused Grant to become somewhat apprehensive and uncharacteristically cautious. Another factor weighing on Grant was the fatigue of his forces following the night's march through the little known countryside. As a result, early on the 22nd Grant changed the orders of the various elements of his army, curtailing the pace of his pursuit and closing the distances between the four corps. The 5th Corps under Warren was now to swing back to the west and follow the Confederate forces directly down the



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Telegraph Road. Wright's 6th Corps would follow 5th Corps' path after first pausing to rest in the Guinea Station area. Likewise the 9th Corps of Burnside was to first rest from it's night march before proceeding southward using the back roads between the Union corps going down the Telegraph Road and Hancock's 2nd Corps, which was still cautiously staying in it's bridgehead across the Mattaponi River south of Milford Station.

Without cavalry to screen it's advance, the march of Warren's 5th Corps infantry southwest to and then down the Telegraph Road was wary, fearing a Confederate counterattack or ambush. It had to put out flanking columns on both sides of the road, slowing the movement considerably. At 1500 it stopped for the night, still about nine miles away from the North Anna River. The 6th Corps, which as rearguard of the AOP was the last to leave Spotsylvania, rested several hours at Guinea Station after a grueling twelve-hour night march. Crossing the Mattaponi River at that point to follow the 5th Corps, Wright's troops were still a mile short of reaching the Telegraph Road when they halted their march. The 9th Corps did little better after resting two hours at Guinea Station, marching southeast to cross the Mattaponi further downriver, then marching unsurely southwest using country and plantation roads, stopping well short of their intended goal, still about twelve miles from the North Anna. The marches of May 21st and 22nd had worn heavily on the Union troops, and units and individuals from each corps were badly strung out along the march routes, many not getting to their corps' bivouac position until much later than the official records show. And the distances yet to go were deceptive, as they were measured in a straight line, not the winding and curving paths of all but the Telegraph Road. Hancock, his new orders received that day coinciding with his own earlier decision, was content to stay in his bridgehead awaiting a Confederate assault that would never come.

For the Confederates, the 22nd was the day the race to the North Anna was won. After short rests along the line of march following the previous night's movement, the Confederate 2nd and 1st Corps continued southward along the Telegraph Road toward Hanover Junction. At this important railroad junction the reinforcements of both Pickett's and Breckinridge's divisions, along with a cavalry brigade returning from duty in the Carolinas to Hampton's cavalry division, were already waiting the arrival of the ANV. Gordon's lead division of Ewell's 2nd Corps reached the North Anna River about 0900 followed by Rodes' and Early's divisions, fanning out to protect both the Chesterfield Bridge on the Telegraph Road and the railroad bridge of the RF&P about a half mile downstream. Lee also arrived at Chesterfield Bridge about 0900 and, after watching for a time elements of the 2nd Corps cross, proceeded to Hanover Junction and established his headquarters. The Maryland Line Brigade, a veteran outfit of mixed infantry, cavalry, and artillery which had previously served with the ANV, had been detached in the winter to guard this vital railroad junction and surrounding area from Union cavalry raids. Lee now attached its infantry elements as a third brigade to Breckinridge's small division, now placed in reserve, and parceled out the cavalry and artillery elements of the brigade as reinforcements to like units.



Around 1200 Anderson's 1st Corps arrived at Chesterfield Bridge, with Kershaw's division in the lead. Anderson made corps headquarters at the Fox House a half mile south of the crossing, with Kershaw's division taking over the defensive of both bridges from 2nd Corps units, the divisions of which moved further

south to the Hanover Junction area near the Virginia Central rail line, Ewell setting up his corps headquarters a little northwest of the junction. At 1400 Lee ordered Early's division to move further downstream to cover the ford at the destroyed Maurice Bridge. Field's 1st Corps division crossed last, with it's rearguard of Bratton's brigade on the south bank by 1700. Field's division extended the Confederate line about a mile and a half upstream to Ox Ford. Pickett's division, already waiting at Hanover Junction when Lee arrived, was placed further upstream on the left of Field, temporarily attached to 1st Corps until it would be reassigned by Lee to the 3rd Corps the following morning.

A.P. Hill's 3rd Corps, along with the supply train of the ANV and Chambliss' cavalry brigade as rearguard, had taken a more westerly route to the North Anna as prescribed by Lee, having been the last to leave the Spotsylvania area after protecting the departure of the other two corps. Because of this the 3rd Corps crossed the North Anna River at Butler's Bridge about six and a half miles further upstream to the northwest from Chesterfield Bridge, moving to Hewlett Station west of Noel's Station on the Virginia Central RR and encamping for the night by 1600.

The Confederate cavalry brigades, having harassed the movement of the Union forces and screening the ANV from them, remained on the northern side of the river in order to continue their task the following day. The Confederate troops had marched hard and fast since leaving Spotsylvania, a march which wore hard on them, though they performed it in good order and with little straggling, proving once again that they would "...go anywhere you [Lee] say, even to hell itself" as stated by one group of rebel infantry that Lee had personally encouraged along the way. In consideration for the hardships his troops had endured, Lee did not order them to entrench after crossing to the south side of the North Anna, instead allowing the troops to rest on this the first day in over two weeks out of direct contact with their Union adversaries.

That night Grant established his headquarters in the Bethel Church area several miles behind the lead elements of Burnside's 9th Corps. There he received reports that reinforcements, including the forces of Breckinridge and Pickett, were joining the ANV somewhere further to the south. During the 22nd tension rose between Meade, the official commanding general of the AOP, and Grant who was the general-in-chief of all Union armies but traveling directly with the AOP on this campaign and in reality in charge. Meade objected to the army marching directly across the North Anna River, instead proposing to cautiously flank any Confederate forces there by swinging around them either to the east or the west. But Grant, even though he still did not have accurate information as to the location of the ANV, overruled Meade. Grant was now convinced that Lee would not stop



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his retreat until reaching the South Anna River. It was there that Grant thought Lee would take up new positions behind the river in an attempt to stop the Union thrust southward. At 2000 he sent a dispatch through Halleck ordering Butler to detach as large a force as possible under the command of "Baldy" Smith to reinforce the AOP on the North Anna prior to its push further south.

The orders issued to the AOP for the following day would have it approach the North Anna River on a broad front, crossing at and to the west of the RF&P RR bridge. Their purpose was to have the Union army seek out Lee's forces and attack them wherever they might be found. Hancock, his 2nd Corps currently positioned on the Federal left, was to march southward from his Milford Station bridgehead, advancing toward Chesterfield Station on the RF&P and Mt. Carmel Church on the Telegraph Road. From there he was to proceed to and cross at what the inaccurate Union maps showed as a ford where the Telegraph Road meet the North Anna River (actually the Chesterfield Bridge, a.k.a. Telegraph Bridge and Fox Bridge). Warren's 5th Corps on the Union right was to advance south down the Telegraph Road to Mt. Carmel Church, and from there swing southwestward to what the Union maps showed as a bridge at Jericho Mill (really only a deep ford) to cross the North Anna. The 9th Corps, in the center of the wide Union advance, was to march south and southwest along plantation and other back roads in between Warren and Hancock as best as it could, a path that would result in a very slow approach. Finally, Wright was to initially follow the 5th Corps with his 6th Corps, though his orders might be changed to cross the North Anna at Butler's Bridge about two and a half miles above Jericho Mill. Grant would move his headquarters to Moncure House, several miles to the northeast of Mt. Carmel Church. To Grant these planned marches should be easily enough executed on the 23rd, as he thought his force must be relatively rested, in his eyes 2nd Corps having spent the entire 22nd in the Milford bridgehead and the other three corps having managed only short marches that day. But the army was more tired and strung out along the march routes than Grant knew, and many of the troops in the rear of each corps had to march up to twelve fatiguing hours to catch up to the positions the front elements had bivouacked at.

At Lee's own headquarters at Hanover Junction, he received belated reports from Hampton's cavalry screen that the bulk of the Union forces were marching to join Hancock's 2nd Corps already at Milford Station. From this almost day old intelligence Lee concluded that Grant was moving the AOP behind the barrier of the Mattaponi River, where it would rest and have reinforcements brought up to it. Though Hampton indicated in his reports that he felt the Federals would still likely advance on Hanover Junction, Lee expected Grant to pause and recover the strength of his army as every other previous Union commander had done. Still not ordering his own forces to dig in along their current positions south of the North Anna, Lee did instruct his chief engineer to begin planning and laying out possible defensive lines during the night and early morning hours of May 23rd. He did however order A.P. Hill to bring his 3rd Corps from Hewlett Station southeastward along the axis of the Virginia Central RR to Anderson's Station. Once there, Hill was to temporarily

attach to his corps Pickett's division which was operating in that area.

Early the morning of May 23rd word came from the Confederate cavalry force that had ridden to the Richmond area under Stuart's command to counter the raid by Sheridan's Federal troopers. They had bivouacked overnight at Atlee' Station some miles south, and would during the morning move to Hanover Junction to rejoin the ANV. This cavalry consisted of the two brigades of Fitz Lee's division plus a third detached from W.H.F. "Rooney" Lee's division now under Barringer (formerly J.B. Gordon's). Fitz Lee was in overall command of the force following the death of Stuart on May 11th at Yellow Tavern.

About 0600 Hill's 3rd Corps moved off from Hewlett Station with Heth's division in the lead, followed by Mahone's, with Wilcox's division bringing up the rear and protecting the army supply train wagons. By noon that day almost all of the 3rd Corps would be resting bivouacked in the Anderson Station area. The exception was Brown's brigade from Wilcox's division acting as rearguard, still in position near Noel's Station about three miles up the railroad line.

Kershaw's 1st Corps division, defending south of the Chesterfield and railroad bridges, was ordered in the morning to move Henagan's brigade back across the North Anna River to occupy the redoubt just north of the Chesterfield Bridge. This and other redoubts in the area had been built there during the winter to protect bridges against Union cavalry raids. The brigade was to withdraw back to the south side again and destroy the bridge once the last stray wagons of 1st Corps had crossed. Also still on the north side of the river were Young's and Rosser's cavalry brigades of Hampton's division, screening the ANV and delaying the Union advance from the Telegraph Road eastward as they had been for the last two days. The division's third brigade under Butler, only yesterday having arrived as reinforcements from the Carolinas and reattached to Hampton, was back on the south side near Hanover Junction.

The previous day Lee had Early deploy his division from the Hanover Junction area to the southeast in order to guard against any Union flanking movement to the right of the army. That division, now positioned near the destroyed Maurice Bridge crossing of the North Anna, was the only unit in the ANV to have already entrenched that day. The other two divisions of Ewell's 2nd Corps remained just north of Hanover Junction. Still concerned about a Union flanking movement, Lee around noon also detached Breckinridge's small division (now with the Maryland Line Brigade attached) even further southeast, arriving about 1930 in the Hanover Courthouse area along the Pamunky River.

At 0500 the four Union corps departed their overnight bivouac areas, following their ordered march routes southward to the North Anna River. The Union 2nd Corps advanced from its Milford Station bridgehead with Birney's division in the lead, followed by Tyler's ad hoc division of former garrison troops and then the divisions of Gibbon and Barlow. Each division had repacked its entrenching tools after use at the bridgehead, sending them with the corps



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supply wagons, which followed in the rear of the long column. This had become something of a standard procedure for all the corps, as none of the army's divisions were carrying their own entrenching tools in the southward advance, it being far more convenient to have them carried in the numerous wagons that made up the long Union logistics tail.

At 0900 the scouting parties of Warren's 5th Corps reached the Mt. Carmel Church on the Telegraph Road, with the four divisions of the corps and supporting elements not far behind after a hard morning's march. His orders called for him to cross the North Anna on a bridge at Jericho Mill, but information learned from local slaves made him aware that the Union maps were completely unreliable. There was only a ford at that location, and the Telegraph Road crossed the river over Chesterfield Bridge, where his orders and maps indicated only a ford. Warren decided to put his corps across the North Anna using this newly discovered bridge, but at 1100 learned that elements of the Union 2nd Corps were swinging westward and about to arrive at the Mt. Carmel Church crossroads. As the 2nd Corps orders were to advance to and cross over the river via the Telegraph Road and RF&P rail line, Warren saw the need to revert back to the original orders for 5th Corps, and ordered Griffin's division to move from the Mt. Carmel Church area to cross the North Anna at the ford now known to be at Jericho Mill. However, due to the map inaccuracies and a massive traffic jam caused by the two Union corps crossing paths at Mt. Carmel Church, any movement into and out of that area was much delayed. The other divisions of the 5th Corps, along with the corps supply wagons and those carrying two pontoon bridges, remained stuck there for several more hours, further clogging the roads and slowing down the 2nd Corps which began trying to pass through the crossroads about 1130.

Union cavalry scouts moving in advance of Griffin's march to the North Anna were spotted by their Confederate counterparts at Jericho Mill Ford. These Confederate troopers were from Chambliss' cavalry brigade of W. Lee's division, which had on May 21st and 22nd screened the rear of the retreating ANV along the Telegraph Road and further west, and were now thinly spread out guarding both the rear of the 3rd Corps march down the Virginia Central and the fording points across the North Anna above Ox Ford. They sent back the first reports of Union activity this area.

At midday Lee sent a letter to Jefferson Davis, stating the current positions of the ANV, and once again urged that Beauregard be sent with as large a part as possible of the Confederate troops in the Richmond area to join with Lee against Grant, stating "...it seems to me our best policy to unite upon it [AOP] and endeavor to crush it". At about this same time of the 23rd, Lee began to become ill, suffering from what would be an acute intestinal disorder that would become worse over the next two days.

About 1300 the first elements of Hancock's corps, led by Birney's division, advanced down the Telegraph Road from Mt. Carmel Church and approached what was thought to be the North Anna. The 2nd Corps, not having learned yet that a bridge existed where the Telegraph Road crosses the river and further confused by the bad maps used, had mistaken

Long Creek for it's goal. Running into Confederate infantry skirmishers north of Long Creek later in the hour, Hancock deployed Birney's division in line west of the Telegraph Road, and likewise deployed Barlow's between that road and the RD&P rail line. This, along with the inaccurate information that the North Anna had been reached, was reported back to Grant, who about this time was just setting up new headquarters at Mt. Carmel Church. The increasing resistance being met by the Union advance gave some indication to Grant that perhaps the ANV intended to defend the North Anna, but he felt it much more probable that this would at most be a holding action by Lee on his way to the South Anna River. Grant ordered the 2nd Corps to bivouac from the day's march, but first cross over the North Anna at the Telegraph Road and RF&P railroad bridge if possible. If it was found that these crossings were held in strength, Grant was sure that the crossing upstream of the 5th Corps at Jericho Mill would force Lee to give up the North Anna.

Sometime after 1400 Hancock learned what Warren had over four hours earlier; that there was a bridge rather than only a ford where the Telegraph Road crossed the North Anna. He decided to capture both bridges at once. The 2nd Corps artillery was deployed to probe the Confederate defenses, and a minor artillery exchange occurred between these and some Confederate guns positioned to the south. But somehow Long Creek was still mistaken for the North Anna River. Then around 1500 Birney began his advance to cross the water obstacle to his front, forcing the Confederate cavalry and infantry skirmishers back. About this same time he detached Mott's brigade toward the Ox Ford area to cover the right flank of the corps.

Since noon Confederate scouts had been reporting Union forces north beyond Long Creek to be advancing southward. Lee monitored the incoming reports of the Union advance from 1st Corps headquarters at the Fox House about a half mile south of the Chesterfield Bridge across the North Anna. He responded to the Union 2nd Corps advance by ordering Young and Rosser to delay the Federals, and additionally ordered artillery to be deployed along the south side of the North Anna near the Fox House and also in the Ox Ford area. Rather than allow Henagan's brigade occupying the redoubt north of Chesterfield Bridge to withdraw back to the south side of the river after the last straggling wagons of 1st Corps supply train had crossed at 1200, they were now ordered to hold the bridge. Lee did not really expect the Union to advance in force down the Telegraph Road, thinking it only to be screening the movement of the Union army somewhere to the north and northeast. Though some other brigades of the 1st Corps also began to be positioned for respond to any Union move south, most of the ANV was allowed to remain in their encampments, Lee assuming the Union actions to be only a feint. Then at 1500 Union infantry in line began a sudden advance on both sides of the Telegraph Road, causing the Confederate skirmishers and both Young's and Rosser's cavalry brigades to fall back from their positions along Long Creek to near the redoubt north of the North Anna.

It was 1600 when Hancock realized his corps has reached Long Creek, not the North Anna. He pushed Birney's and



## ***The Battle of North Anna's Place (Cont.)***

Barlow's divisions across the stream and onward toward the Chesterfield and RF&P RR bridges on the North Anna. As a consequence of the Union advance, the Confederate cavalry brigades still on the north side rapidly withdrew to the south side. This left the elements of Henagan's brigade, positioned in infantry trenches and behind the five foot ditch and ten foot high parapet of the redoubt, alone on the north side to face the Union attackers. The remainder of the brigade, about half, was just south of the Chesterfield Bridge. Twice Henagan's brigade repulsed attempts by a strong Union skirmish line to force them back, the Union troops halting their advance while waiting for artillery to be brought up. These were needed to silence Confederate guns on the southern bank, which were firing in supporting the isolated rebel infantry. The Union batteries of 2nd Corps took some time to get into position, having been much delayed in their advance earlier in the day by the traffic jam around Mt. Carmel Church. By 1700 twelve Federal guns began to fire at the troops of Henagan's brigade on the northern side, joined by twenty more a little further north, bringing counter battery fire on the Confederate guns south of Chesterfield Bridge.

Lee responded by concentrating the remainder of Kershaw's division into a line protecting the south side of Chesterfield Bridge, and having Field's division march quickly east to form a line defending the south side of the railroad bridge. Both Confederate divisions were able to take advantage of the infantry trenches and redoubts already built to the south of each bridge as, like the redoubt north, part of the winter's effort to strengthen the bridge defenses against Union cavalry raids. They also began to build hasty breastworks while extending their lines. The 1st Corps deployed another 31 guns to support the new infantry line. Other artillery was sent to Ox Ford to join guns already positioned there. As for the Confederate 2nd Corps, Lee had its divisions remain near Hanover Junction and the former Maurice Bridge as a precaution against any Union move further downstream.

Finally at 1800 Hancock assaulted with the reinforced brigades of Egan and Pierce from Birney's division, with Brewster' brigade in reserve. As the assault began, a "furious" rainstorm hit the area, and the Union brigades advanced under cover of it to storm the Confederate redoubt and infantry trenches. Most from the overwhelmed regiments of Henagan's brigade holding these positions broke and ran for the bridge or swam across the North Anna to the south side. Some chose to resist, resulting in hand to hand fighting north of the Chesterfield Bridge, these all becoming casualties or prisoners. The fighting capacity of Henagan's brigade was greatly diminished until the remaining troops from these regiments could be restored to order. Caught up in the rush of their little victory, some of the Union troops attempted to next storm across Chesterfield Bridge but were driven back by the intense fire brought upon them from the south side. Now disorganized, the Union brigades paused to reform. They threw up light defensive works to protect themselves at the north end of the bridge, and to contest any Southern attempt to destroy the bridge.

Four miles to the northwest Griffin's 5th Corps division had continued advancing toward Jericho Mill Ford with no



opposition along his route. At 1300 the first elements arrived on the ford's north side, and within half an hour Sweitzer's brigade of the division began to cross. The chest high depth, a rough uneven bottom, and the steep banks on both sides made for a difficult fording by the infantry, and would prohibit the crossing of any artillery or wagons until a pontoon bridge could be built. Each regiment that would cross this ford, after having climbed to the high ground on the opposite bank, was in some disorder and needed time to physically recover and reassemble before being able to move out further south of the ford. Warren's other three divisions, along with one of the corps pontoon bridges, finally began their movement from Mt. Carmel Church at 1400 to follow Griffin's division to Jericho Mill Ford. Not until all the infantry and artillery had left the area did the second pontoon bridge unit and corps supply train depart, the later not until 1800.

By 1330 both Lee and A.P. Hill received reports at their respective headquarters of Union infantry movements on the north side and upstream on the North Anna, in the area of both Jericho Mill Ford and Ox Ford. Hill's response was to consider deploying his 3rd Corps, now with Pickett's division attached, to met these potential threats. Lee, now feeling ill, made a personal reconnaissance in a carriage to Ox Ford and further upstream toward Jericho Mill. His evaluation of the situation was that this Federal activity upstream was a feint, and sent an aide with a verbal message to Hill not to disturb the resting of the 3rd Corps by moving it out of the recently arrived at bivouac near Anderson Station. "Go back and tell General A.P. Hill to leave his men in camp. This is nothing but a feint. The enemy is preparing to cross below". It was 1400 when Hill received further reports from Chambliss' screening cavalry detachments of Union infantry in unknown strength crossing Jericho Mill Ford, and at that point he became determined to attack them. But immediately following this decision the aide arrived with Lee's message, and Hill acquiesced. Instead Hill sent several officers to make a reconnaissance of the Jericho Mill crossing, and dispatched pickets to Quarles' Mill Ford and Island Ford as well as Jericho Mill to avoid surprise.

Except for Brown's brigade from Wilcox's division, Hill's corps remained around Anderson's Station and Tavern along the Virginia Central RR line as directed by Lee. That one brigade was still acting as rearguard for the entire 3rd Corps, positioned around Noel's Station. It had remained there waiting for the last of 3rd Corps supply train wagons to pass southeastward along the axis of the Virginia Central. At 1400 Brown had himself directly received a cavalry picket report about a Union crossing at Jericho Mill, and sent the 1st South Carolina Regiment (also known as Orr's Rifles) to further investigate it's strength and possible intent. Hidden in the trees about halfway between the ford and the station, the Confederate regiment observed more Union troops moving across the river to the south side. Ayres' Union brigade of Griffin's division was now crossing after Sweitzer's, elements of which were advancing south from Jericho Mill Ford bumped into Orr's Rifles. When the entire brigade was up, Sweitzer advanced into the woods to drive the rebels out. Orr's regiment was forced to retreat against overwhelming



## *The Battle of North Anna's Place (Cont.)*

odds, falling back to rejoin the rest of Brown's brigade near Noel's Station. The brigade defiantly stayed in its position until the last of the supply train had passed to the east after 1530, then withdrew down the road and railroad line toward Anderson's Station and the rest of Wilcox's division.

Questioning of several prisoners taken from the South Carolina regiment lead Warren to believe that there was an entire Confederate division under Wilcox waiting just beyond the trees. This stimulated Warren into getting the rest of Griffin's division to the south bank as rapidly as possible. Sweitzer's and Ayres' brigades formed a defensive line on both sides of the country road running southward toward Noel's Station and Turnout. Bartlett's brigade crossed at 1500 and went into reserve on the high ground of the southern bank. Though Warren was concerned and had engineers begin marking possible positions for entrenchment, only Ayres' troops began any work building breastworks. Having driven off Orr's force, the rest of the Union 5th Corps did not expect a further encounter with the Confederates that day. Around 1530 the wagons carrying the first of the 5th Corps' canvas pontoon bridges arrived and engineers immediately began to deploy it across the ford. At the same time Crawford's division began to cross Jericho Mill Ford, one brigade at a time, until by 1630 all three were on the south side extending the Union line from Griffin's left back to the banks of the river. Warren, his corps split with half its infantry strength but none of its artillery on the south side, knew that his force was in a very vulnerable position to a determined Confederate attack.

As Brown's Confederate brigade was withdrawing toward its parent division, Wilcox himself went to A.P. Hill's 3rd Corps headquarters at Anderson's Station. There he informed the corps commander of reports received from Brown's brigade in division strength. Hill, regretting the cancellation of his earlier considered strong move to Jericho Mill by Lee, hoped he still had an opportunity to pin the already crossed Union forces up against the south side of the river, there to isolate and destroy them. The 3rd Corps commander, on his own initiative, immediately (1600) sent Wilcox's division with 16 guns marching northwest from Anderson's Station along the road and railroad line toward Noel's Station to assault the Union forces. The division met Brown's brigade midway between Noel's Station and Anderson's Station, and the brigade turned around to join in the march to the northwest. At 1700 Wilcox's four brigades formed into battle line outside of Noel's Station and, after pushing through without finding any Union forces there, wheeled northward toward Jericho Mill Ford.

A little after 1630 the 5th Corps' first pontoon bridge was completed at the ford. Warren had 24 artillery pieces ready to immediately cross the bridge and rush to predetermined positions on the south side to protect the bridgehead. His remaining 24 guns were deployed along the north bank in more distant support. At 1700 Cutler's division began crossing over the new pontoon bridge and halted after ascending the high south bank. Now with most of his infantry and some of his artillery on the southern side of the North Anna, Warren felt quite secure as the end of the day

approached. As his corps had not meet with any resistance stronger than the single Confederate regiment encountered in the woods south of Jericho Mill Ford, he assumed that there were not any strong enemy forces nearby to threaten his position. Because of this he allowed Cutler's division to remain at the southern riverbank near the ford rather than move to Griffin's right. Such a move would have filled the gap in the Union line, firmly anchoring the corps' right flank back on the river. Warren also left the two independent brigades attached directly to his corps, Kitching's brigade of heavy artillery and the Maryland Brigade under Dushane, on the north side of the North Anna, planning to bring it over the following morning. The men of the 5th Corps felt a lessening of any tension they might have had about their situation. Not sensing any impending threat, most of them calmly stacked arms and began to forage and cook their evening meals. The corps was settling down for the night, with combatants and non-combatants from support units mixed together in a hasty encampment. Unexplainably and unknown to Warren, most of the posted Union pickets returned to their camps without orders to join in the evening's relaxed mood.

There was a sense that the entire Union situation was becoming more secure as other units of the AOP arrived in the general area of the North Anna some distance behind the 2nd and 5th corps positions. At approximately 1700 the Union's rearguard on the move from Spotsylvania, Wright's 6th Corps, began to arrive at Mt. Carmel Church where it assembled awaiting further orders.

It was 1730 when Wilcox's Confederate division of nearly 6,000 veterans approached the 5th Corps position from Noel's Station, ready to launch the assault. Wilcox had positioned three of his brigades forward in line of battle, with Lane's on the right to the east of the country road, Brown's in the center along the road axis, and Thomas' on the left. Wilcox positioned Lowrance's brigade in column behind the left end of Thomas' brigade, ready to rapidly form line and sweep around the left flank of the division, hoping thus to be able to strike the Union's open flank and thrust into the rear toward Jericho Mill Ford. This plan was based on Wilcox's understanding that the Union forces he was about to attack were in division strength only, not the majority of a large Union corps which now occupied the bulge formed by the curve of the North Anna River south of Jericho Mill.

As the Confederates approached closer to the Union camps they were finally sighted. Now alerted, Warren ordered Cutler's division to fill the gap on the Union right to the river. However the division, not having caught on to the urgency of the situation, slowly and reluctantly moved out of its bivouac, many men carrying pots and pans with coffee and half cooked meals in them.

It had become apparent how dangerously incomplete the Union 5th Corps' defensive position was to receive an attack. The corps was in a loose semicircle across the fat neck of a loop in the North Anna River, a position that could have been quite strong if properly organized, despite having a river in the immediate rear. Crawford's division, with its left resting on the river, formed the Union left. Griffin's division occupied the center position. His brigades of Ayres and Sweitzer were





## ***The Battle of North Anna's Place (Cont.)***

forward, with Bartlett's further north in reserve. Only Ayres' brigade of Griffin's division among the entire corps was prepared to fight, having set up a reasonable defense behind the breastworks they had built. But Griffin's division lacked the men necessary to stretch the line fully across the neck to rest the Union right on the river. Cutler's division had been called up to plug the gap, but was doing so complacently. Thus only Robinson's Iron Brigade would be just arriving and going into line at the gap on Griffin's right when the Confederate attack occurred. The two remaining brigades of Cutler's division were still just coming up in column.

The surprise Confederate attack by Wilcox's single division fell on the center and right of the Union 5th Corps. It hit especially hard at Cutler's division, coming up piecemeal into the gap on the Union right. As Thomas' brigade was just starting to hit Sweitzer's dangling right, the Iron Brigade came up to hit Thomas hard. After exchanging fire with their new opponents briefly, most of Thomas' regiments fell back in disorder toward the rear. However Lowrance's brigade, swinging like a gate around the left end of the Confederate line into the open Union right flank, in turn hit the Iron Brigade heavily, inflicting a large number of casualties in a short time. This famous Union brigade was no longer the elite unit it once was, its renown fighting prowess having been thinned by the many lesser replacement troops it had taken in that spring. As a consequence Lowrance's flank attack drove it from the field, broken and scattered to the rear. Seeing the famous Iron Brigade in full flight caused panic in other Union brigades. Bragg's was the next of Cutler's brigades coming into the gap. It too was attacked by the advancing Lowrance, routing the Pennsylvanians to the rear. The third brigade under Hoffman also was forced back, though they did so in relatively good order, and formed up again nearer the river.

Lane's brigade, the rightmost in the Confederate line of battle, at first advanced well, but upon starting to feel the stiffening resistance of Ayres' brigade, one of Lane's regiments twice fell back, disrupting the advance of the entire brigade. Lane's brigade began to fall behind the advance of the brigade on its left. That brigade under Brown, in the center of the Confederate assault, swept Sweitzer's brigade back in severe disorder and then went on to pressure the right side of Ayres' brigade. However Ayres' stout Union brigade, though giving some ground, refused to be pushed entirely out of their position. Warren responded by ordering the brigades of Kitching and Dushane to cross to the south side and take up positions on the broken Union right flank. However, many of the Union infantry that routed had run back to the North Anna River and were streaming across both the ford and pontoon bridge at Jericho Mill to the north side. The two Union brigades trying to move to the south side had to push, shove, and fight their way across against this human tide going in the opposite direction.

About 1800, Burnside's 9th Corps began to arrive at army headquarters near Mt. Carmel, replacing the 6th Corps as the army's reserve. Grant and Meade were able to order Wright to immediately march the four miles from the army headquarters at Mt. Carmel to Jericho Mills Ford in support of Warren. Traveling with 6th Corps was the 5th Corps supply train, which had been held near army headquarters

until now. Though help was on the way to Warren, it would be a considerable time before Wright could intervene. The greater part of the three Union 5th Corps divisions that had crossed to the south side of the North Anna were at that moment in danger of being driven back into the river by Wilcox's single Confederate division. With additional rebel forces the very existence of Warren's corps would surely be threatened.

And those forces were starting to take shape. Hearing the sound of battle from the direction of Jericho Mills, A.P. Hill at 1800 ordered first Heth's and then Mahone's divisions to move from Anderson Station to the battle and support Wilcox's attack. The divisions formed up quickly into column and moved at the double quick toward Noel's Station two miles away. Six artillery pieces were rushed ahead of the infantry to reinforce the guns already with Wilcox, the remaining 3rd Corps guns advancing with the two divisions.

But the Union 5th Corps was beginning to recover from the initial shock of the Confederate attack. Warren rushed forward 12 guns to block the rebel advance, and a new defensive line began to form up as many of the disorganized and panicky Union infantry began to rally around them. This artillery blasted the advancing brigades with heavy canister fire. Bartlett's brigade, positioned in reserve between Jericho Mills Ford and the other two brigades of Griffin's division in the front line, came up into the center of the Union line, hitting Brown's and Lowrance's rebel brigades in the flank, and in conjunction with the artillery forcing both back in disorder toward Noel's Station. Other Union guns, some still on the north side of the river, engaged the Confederate artillery on the right of Wilcox's line with counter battery fire, forcing them to withdraw. Wilcox's remaining brigade under Lane again attacked Ayres' defenders, its rebel officers spurring the men on with shouts of "Once more and we will drive them into the river". But it too was forced into an orderly retreat once the other three brigades had all been forced back. Only minor elements of the Union 5th Corps attempted a brief pursuit of the withdrawing Confederates.

As Wilcox's division was falling back, the reinforcements of artillery and infantry of Heth's division began to arrive. His brigades were placed to cover Wilcox's right, and with the guns drove any Federal pursuers back to the main Union defensive line. But by now it was 2000, and with the coming darkness there was no further advance. Mahone's division came up after dark, stopping short of the new Confederate line, but within easy supporting distance. These divisions of the Confederate 3rd Corps began to hastily entrench. Some of the Union 5th Corps units also built limited breastworks or earthworks in their defensive positions after the battle, but most of the tools with which they were accustomed to utilizing for this purpose were packed away in their corps supply train. Little was done.

Shortly after dark around 2030, with the crisis south of the river passed, the first brigade from Wright's 6th Corps arrived on the north side of Jericho Mills Ford. The first full division was there by 2300, and the remainder of the corps after midnight. Wright stated at 0100 that a third of the corps had straggled out during the hard marching of May 23rd.



## The Battle of North Anna's Place (Cont.)

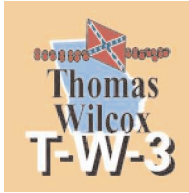
Exhausted, the entire corps went into bivouac, staying on the northern side of the North Anna River for the night.

Thus ended the engagement of May 23rd at Jericho Mills. Each side lost approximately 1,000 men killed, wounded, or captured. Though his forces had repulsed the Confederate attack, Warren had been shaken by the near disaster that almost befell his corps. Crawford had acted poorly, failing to make much of a contribution with his division to the battle. Cutler's division was badly mauled, not so seriously in actual casualties as by the loss of morale and resultant straggler losses of the fleeing troops. The artillery of the 5th Corps performed stoutly, not only by acting as a breakwater to blunt the Confederate attack and cause most of their casualties, but also their stand provided the necessary rallying point for the disrupted Union infantry.

The Confederates needed additional troops to carry the counterattack through. These would have been available had any one or more of Heth's, Mahone's, or Pickett's divisions been initially ordered by A.P. Hill to follow Wilcox's division and participate in and support the counterattack, or as finally ordered, if Heth's division had been faster at moving up from Anderson Station. Wilcox had gone rapidly from the march into assault with admirable speed, but he was overconfident of victory, not knowing he was going against the bulk of an entire Union corps. Because of all these elements, the Confederate attack would not be reinforced in time to take advantage of its initial success. Reinforcements on both sides arrived too late to significantly participate in the battle.

With the coming of night, Lee reflected on the outcome of the day's events and the difficult problem he was now faced with. Union forces had already pierced the North Anna River. South of Jericho Mills Ford the Federals had taken up strong positions after having been roughly made aware of the Confederate's presence. To the east Union troops held the dominating high ground of the north river bank near the R.F.&P. RR bridge and the Chesterfield Bridge where the Telegraph Road crossed the river. Whatever he had previously thought of Grant's original intentions at the North Anna, Lee was sure that Grant would aggressively press the attack the following day. If Lee gathered the army to resist a crossing in the area of the bridges, the high ground the Union possessed north of the bridges would allow them to gain dominance with their fine artillery, and the Union forces already south of the North Anna near Jericho Mills would sweep eastward down the south side of the river and hit the Confederates in the left flank. If instead Lee chose to concentrate his forces in an attack upon the Union forces in the Jericho Mills bridgehead to drive them back across the river, the Union forces in the bridges area would surely cross and hit him in the rear. The North Anna had lost the traditional advantage a river defensive line normally conveys.

But Lee was unwilling to withdraw further south, perhaps to the South Anna River, to form a new defensive line. One consideration was continuing the Confederate control of the important rail connection of Hanover Junction; but of greater importance was avoiding the loss of any more invaluable



maneuver room between the advancing Union forces and Richmond, maneuver being an absolute necessity for the Army of Northern Virginia. And so Lee called a meeting of his staff and corps commanders at army headquarters near Hanover Junction.

After Lee made known his decision not to withdraw, he opened the meeting to suggestions by the various subordinates as to the placement of a new defensive line. As the higher northern bank made defending at the bridges untenable, alternatives for the positioning of the Confederate right included the higher ground around the Fox House, behind the marshy area near the Doswell House, and along the Virginia Central Railroad. The positioning of the center and left would necessarily be dependent upon what was chosen for the right of the line, though it was desirable that the left be anchored somewhere on the Little River.

After considering the options put forth, Lee developed his own masterful plan for the new defensive line. The only point along the river where the army would defend would be at Ox Ford. Here the terrain on the south bank of the river dominated that on the opposing bank, being both higher and very steep behind the river. This would be the formidable point of an inverted "V" or wedge, to be held by part of Mahone's division as the right of A.P. Hill's 3rd Corps.

The remainder of Mahone's division as well as Wilcox's and Heth's divisions would be swept back to the southwest near Anderson's Tavern and anchoring the corps left on the Little River, forming the left or west wing of the inverted "V". All of these troops were to rapidly construct stout entrenchments and, the line studded with artillery, be ready to give a hot reception to the expected advance by the Union forces from the Jericho Mills area in the morning. Pickett's division, attached to 3rd Corps, was placed in reserve on the south end of the line behind Heth.

Anderson's two 1st Corps divisions of Kershaw and Field, to be reinforced with Breckinridge's division now ordered back from Hanover Court House, were to form a line first sweeping back southeast from below Ox Ford and then directly east behind the marshy Bull Run to the R.F.&P. rail line. From that point Rodes' division from 2nd Corps would form line southward to Hanover Junction, paralleling the rail line. These four divisions, reinforced with artillery, together would make up the right or east wing of the inverted "V". These too were to heavily entrench as rapidly as possible.

The balance of Ewell's 2nd Corps, Gordon's and Early's divisions, would be in reserve between the two wings, somewhat behind the "angle" where the right wing of the "V" jutted out in front of Hanover Junction behind the swamp, but within easy striking distance of either wing by way of the advantageous road net within the "V". And finally, strong skirmish lines of sharpshooters would be placed in front of each wing to conceal the new Confederate position. Thus the Army of Northern Virginia would be in an exceptionally strong position, deeply entrenched along lines utilizing the cliffs, rivers, and swamp to anchor the critical center and two ends of the "V", with good interior lines and communications.



## ***The Battle of North Anna's Place (Cont.)***

What made Lee's plan truly deadly was that this formidable defense was to be used as the shield from behind which a powerful attacking thrust could develop. In doing this Lee planned to take advantage of Grant's own propensity to aggressively attack. By not opposing (except by some skirmishers and long range artillery fire) the expected attack on the bridges by the Union left the following morning, Lee hoped to embolden the Federals to advance well south of the North Anna toward Hanover Junction. Further, with A.P. Hill's 3rd Corps being pulled back from the positions it had taken near Noel's Station after Wilcox's failed counterattack, the forces of the Union right south of Jericho Mills Ford were being enticed to advance southeast toward Hanover Junction as well. But Ox Ford, the best crossing point for the Union center, was to be powerfully defended, keeping those Union forces on the north side of the North Anna River. Thus the Union Army of the Potomac would find itself divided into three segments, either end of which would have to march long distances and cross the North Anna twice to come to the support of the other end. The prospects of reinforcing from the Union center would be no better if those troops were unable to force a strongly opposed crossing, as the middle ground between the two Union ends must continue to be held for fear that the Confederates might themselves attack across to the northern side of the river.

Lee hoped to defend one wing of his inverted "V" line with only a small portion of the Confederate force, allowing him to concentrate the majority of the Army of Northern Virginia in a massive strike against the Union segment opposite the other wing of the "V". Which end segment of the Union army would be attacked would depend upon the actual movements of the Union forces and the opportunities presented. Lee stated of Grant "If I can get one more pull at him I will defeat him".

With these orders from Lee, the officers and engineers spent the remaining time until the dawn of May 24th selecting the exact locations for the new positions and moving the troops and artillery into them. During the night and pre-dawn hours the officers spurred the Confederate troops furiously on in digging their fieldworks, fearing Grant would make one of his pre-dawn attacks around 0400 before all the units would be safely entrenched. During the night attempts were made to burn both the Chesterfield and railroad bridges, a move that would be expected by the Union whether the Confederates chose to defend them or withdraw. However, while the railroad bridge was destroyed, the Chesterfield Bridge was only damaged.

Soon after sunset Grant too was making his plans for the following day at his and Meade's headquarters at Mt. Carmel Church. Grant thought it possible that Lee might retreat further southward, but if Lee did not or the Union forces could act before such a retreat, Grant hoped to trap the Army of Northern Virginia in a double envelopment and force it into a final war ending fight before it could retreat into the Richmond fortifications.

Grant half expected that if Lee chose to give resistance at the North Anna, the Confederates would likely try to assault the Union 5th Corps south of Jericho Mills Ford in the early morning in an attempt to drive them back across the river.

Warren's 5th Corps was to be ready for this possibility. But if not attacked or after beating it off, Warren's orders were to advance on the southern bank of the North Anna River to the southeast toward Hanover Junction. Hancock's 2nd Corps was to attack across the river at first light in the area of the Chesterfield and railroad bridges and then advance south toward Hanover Junction. Wright's 6th Corps was to cross the North Anna at Jericho Mills Ford in the rear of Warren's 5th Corps and extend Warren's right from where it ended near the Virginia Central RR line southward toward Little River. It was felt that this alignment of the two corps would surely overlap any resistance on the Confederate left and overwhelm it.

The march of Burnside's 9th Corps to the North Anna River had been slow on May 23rd, its route being on backcountry and plantation roads between the advances of the 5th and 2nd Corps. It had previously been directed to move to Ox Ford to relieve Mott's brigade from the 2nd Corps, and had started southward from the Mt. Carmel Church area about 1800. Only at sundown and after dark was Willcox's division of the 9th Corps reaching the Ox Ford area, where they built breastworks on the north side of the ford. The trailing divisions of Crittenden and Potter, as well as the supply train of the Army of the Potomac, would go into bivouac just in the rear of Willcox's position. Grant expected the 9th Corps to be fully "up" by first light, and desired it to force a crossing of the North Anna River at Ox Ford, pressuring any Confederate force in the center and tying the Union left and right south of the river together. These instructions were sent to Burnside at his corps headquarters near Potter's division. With the set of orders he had just issued, Grant unknowingly would be sending the Army of the Potomac into Lee's trap.

Sometime after midnight Grant gave orders for roughly 15,000 troops from Butler's command trapped in the Bermuda Hundreds to take transports up the York River to reinforce the AOP at North Anna. Grant had first requested this of Halleck back on May 21st and again on May 22nd, but then after each had hesitated, waiting to see where the Confederates would be brought to a general engagement. He now thought that perhaps that time had come.

In the hour before dawn Warren's men waited for a possible Confederate counterattack. Wright's 6th Corps began crossing the pontoon bridges at Jericho Mills Ford to support Warren's defense and ultimate advance toward Hanover Junction. The 2nd Corps under Hancock was preparing for its ordered assault across the bridges at first light, but Hancock was concerned that the southern banks of those bridges were now heavily defended, based on the resistance his corps had encountered at the redoubt the previous evening. This caused him to send patrols out at dawn looking for an easier area to cross the river. If one could not be found, Hancock contemplated waiting for Warren's 5th Corps to sweep down from its bridgehead and attack the expected Confederate defenses in the flank, easing the crossing of Hancock's corps. Burnside also was having great apprehension about his orders to force a crossing at Ox Ford, feeling the ford too strongly held by the Confederates, remarking that "...the prospects for success are not at all flattering, but...we may possibly succeed".



## *The Battle of North Anna's Place (Cont.)*

By 0600 the expected rebel counterattack in the Jericho Mills area had not developed, and Warren sent out skirmishers to determine the location of the Confederate positions. They would report back that the enemy positions occupied by the CSA 3rd Corps the previous evening were empty. Wright by this time should have had his corps on the south side of the North Anna, but only one division had moved into support of the 5th Corps with another division massing behind it on the south side of the river. The rest of the corps was strung out along the road north of the river approaching the ford. And at 0630 Burnside canceled the early morning attack ordered for 9th Corps by Grant. In its place Burnside ordered only a demonstration at Ox Ford as a diversion to assist the planned crossing of the Union 2nd Corps further downstream. Nothing seemed to be going as ordered by Grant.

Dawn of May 24th found the Lee's Army of Northern Virginia deeply entrenched within the new defensive line. Massed artillery batteries and supporting infantry, dug in on the high southern bank at Ox Ford, covered the point of the inverted "V". The troops and guns on both wings of the "V" were almost entirely in place within their entrenchments, with Breckinridge's division still moving into already prepared positions until 0700.

Ewell and Anderson meet Lee early for breakfast at the army headquarters near Hanover Junction to discuss the situation. While there Lee received a message that the cavalry force under Fitz Lee (the brigades of Lomax and Wickham of his own division plus Barringer's brigade) would arrive at Hanover Junction later that day. After breakfast Lee left headquarters to inspect the new Confederate defenses, but by now his illness had worsened again. About 0630 he arrived at A.P. Hill's 3rd Corps HQ near Anderson Station and discussed with Hill the engagement around Jericho Mills of the night before. Much regretting the lost opportunity of Hill's corps to smash the Union 5th Corps while it was vulnerably alone crossing the North Anna, Lee angrily rebuked his Lieutenant General by asking Hill "Why did you not do as Jackson would have done - thrown your whole force upon those people and driven them back?" Hill, himself not entirely well and near exhaustion, could say nothing. But in fairness, the reader should recall that Hill had been about to initiate such a move at 1400 the previous day when he received Lee's evaluation of the situation that the Union moves were only a feint. Lee seems to have forgotten this, and to have lost confidence in A.P. Hill for the remainder of the war.

Around 0700 Warren, following Grant's orders received during the night, cautiously pushed his 5th Corps south toward Noel's Station. The corps met with no real resistance, Warren sending back reports of this to Grant and Meade. About the same time, two slaves that escaped from the Doswell plantation and made their way to the northern bank of the North Anna were brought to army headquarters by one of Hancock's patrols. They stated during questioning under Grant and Meade that Gordon's rebel division was marching back to Richmond, and that their master had indicated that the entire Confederate army was falling back toward the Richmond defenses. Grant and Meade both thought this

information, along with the reports of no opposition from Warren, indicated that it was now likely the Army of Northern Virginia was attempting to fall back, whether to the South Anna or closer to Richmond was unknown. Yet another element seemed to be falling into place shortly afterward when a message was received at army headquarters from Sheridan, stating that his Union Cavalry Corps of approximately 11,000 troopers would rejoin with the Army of the Potomac sometime on the following day, May 25th. Perceiving a great opportunity, the Union high command felt an even greater sense of urgency to force an encounter with the Confederates. Grant had Meade ride over to the 2nd Corps headquarters and order Hancock to immediately attack across the North Anna River.

Now disregarding his earlier caution, Hancock began his 2nd Corps' assault across the North Anna to establish bridgeheads after 0800. Gibbon's division was near the destroyed railroad bridge, and his scouts had determined that the river at that point was too deep for fording. Instead several huge trees, having some of their limbs trimmed off, were cut down to fall across the North Anna River near the rail crossing, acting as rough foot bridges. Over these Smyth's brigade of the division began to slowly cross, one regiment at a time. Simultaneously Egan's brigade of Birney's command attacked across the largely intact Chesterfield Bridge to the division front, as well as cutting down trees to act as footbridges of their own. Only harassing fire from a few sharpshooters left between the bridges and the new Confederate lines, along with some light long-range artillery fire, was encountered by the troops as they crossed. Hancock, still worried that a Confederate counterattack could crush his two brigade size bridgeheads across the North Anna, began the deployment of the 2nd Corps' two canvas pontoon bridges just east of the destroyed railroad bridge. While these were building, the remaining brigades of both Birney's and Gibbon's divisions slowly crossed into their respective bridgeheads between 0830 and 0930, one brigade at a time.

Having reached the Noel's Station area, Warren pivoted his 5th Corps southeastward at 0830 and began advancing toward Hanover Junction, it's right along the Virginia Central RR and stretching back northeast toward the North Anna River. The further he advanced southeast the more stubborn became the Confederate skirmishers to his front.

At about this same time, the optimism at the Union army headquarters continued to grow as the reports of Warren's progress and Hancock's successful crossing arrived. Looking back over the events of the last several days, Grant felt that the Army of Northern Virginia was nearly beaten. Lee had passed up the opportunity Grant had dangled in front of him to strike the Union 2nd Corps while it appeared alone and unsupported at Milford Station on May 21st. Lee seemed unwilling or unable to put up much of a fight at the North Anna, the river line being pierced the afternoon before at Jericho Mills Ford and now with the two bridgeheads being established by Hancock's men. It was with these events in mind that Grant sent a message to Halleck, "The enemy has fallen back from North Anna; we are in pursuit". Further, Grant suspended yet again the movement of "Baldy" Smith's



## ***The Battle of North Anna's Place (Cont.)***

18th Corps to join the Army of the Potomac, stating "Hold Smith in readiness to be moved...but await further orders".

Though both the Union left and right were successfully carrying out Grant's orders, the middle was not. Again at 0900 orders were issued to Burnside to attack across the North Anna at Ox Ford with his corps and connect the two converging Union wings. In accordance with this, Willcox's division of 9th Corps was designated to make the initial assault with the support of the corps' artillery on the northern bank. With the attack elements in place, the Union started to shell the southern bank at 1000, the Confederate artillery returning the fire. But just a half hour earlier Burnside had learned, from the report of a scouting party, the existence of a ford at Quarles' Mill less than two miles upstream between Ox Ford and Jericho Mills Ford. This information, combined with his continued reluctance to assault across the river, caused him to once again call off the attack, stating that to attack the Confederate infantry and guns entrenched on the high southern bank of Ox Ford would be "...almost, if not quite, impossible; certainly not without very severe loss". Instead he orders Crittenden's division to march to Quarles' Mill and cross to the south bank of the North Anna there.

By 1030 Hancock's 2nd Corps had a firm bridgehead on the southern bank of the river. All of Gibbon's and Birney's divisions were across. With the completion of the two pontoon bridges near the destroyed railroad bridge, the corps artillery and Barlow's division began to cross. Tyler's 2nd Corps division was held in reserve just west of the Telegraph Road between Long Creek and the North Anna River, with elements occupying the Redoubt and infantry trenches taken from the Confederates on the northern bank near Chesterfield Bridge the evening before.

The Union 5th Corps, with 6th Corps on its right in support, continued to advance to the southeast, though meeting increasing resistance by Confederate skirmishers which were slowly falling back toward Anderson Station. This resistance was interpreted by all levels of the army to be only the rearguard force left behind by the Confederates to cover their retreat to the south side of the South Anna River. Warren directed Crawford's division, which was the closest to the south bank of the North Anna, to advance forward of the rest of the corps to connect with Hancock's 2nd Corps.

While all this Union activity was going on, the Confederate main defensive lines waited. At 0900 Lee sent scouts to verify that Hancock's corps had crossed the North Anna in force, and when reports confirmed it, Lee felt confident that Grant had taken the bait and was stepping into the trap. But Lee waited before beginning to mass troops for the desired counterattack on Hancock, and that pause would become crucial.

Though Hancock's headquarters was at Chandler House north of the river and Tyler's division nearby, the remainder of the Union 2nd Corps was on the southern bank of the North Anna River by noon. Birney's division was near the Fox House, Gibbon's was formed up on both sides of the railroad, and Barlow's was just taking up position between



Birney and Gibbon with Brooke's brigade forward and the remaining brigades to the rear as a local reserve. Hancock himself was at the Fox House shortly after noon and stayed there most of the day. The strengthening of Hancock's bridgehead, along with Warren's 5th Corps continued eastward advance down the railroad line, contributed to "...an optimistic fever infecting the Union army headquarters".

In the center of the Union army's long line, Crittenden's 9th Corps division reached the northern bank of the ford at Quarles' Mill shortly at 1300. The ford had steep banks leading to the river, and the crossing was deep and swirling with treacherous eddies and underwater rocks, both combining to make fording extremely slow in normal conditions and unfordable during rainstorms. At the same time, Crawford's 5th Corps division reached the south side of the same ford, enabling Crittenden's troops to begin crossing from the north bank of the ford unopposed at 1330, Ledlie's brigade crossing first. Crawford however halted his division at the ford, mistakenly thinking he had arrived at Ox Ford and had accomplished his mission of helping Burnside's 9th Corps to cross the Ox Ford. Events were still not going well in the middle for the Union.

Grant, still at his Mt. Carmel Church headquarters, began to get anxious to have all the corps of the Union army on the south side of the water barrier. Frustrated by the difficulty of getting Burnside to act aggressively, Grant changed his orders to Burnside. These allowed Burnside to attack Ox Ford directly or cross the North Anna further upriver to take Ox Ford from the south side, but regardless of which method get cross! In part they read "You will cross your entire corps, with trains, to the south side of the North Anna this afternoon.... the ford must be opened up by the time this reaches you.... you must get over and camp tonight on the south side." To help ensure this, Grant also sent orders to Hancock to send a brigade upriver to hit the Confederates at Ox Ford from the southeast, and further orders to Warren to again get a force moving downriver to hit Ox Ford from the southwest. Despite the delay in possessing the vital ford, the Union headquarters was still optimistic, Lincoln's observer with the Army of the Potomac, Charles Dana, telegraphing Secretary of War Stanton, "Everything going well.... Hancock and Warren will reach the South Anna by nightfall."

Warren became aware that Crawford had halted about the same time as Grant was issuing his orders, and on his own initiative ordered Crawford to continue downriver seeking a "junction with 2nd Corps". But the leading element of the division, Hardin's brigade, became dangerously engaged with the increasingly resisting Confederate forces in the area, requiring the entire division to come to their assistance to pull them out of trouble.

Upon receiving his new orders, Hancock ordered Miles' brigade of Barlow's division to advance upriver, drive off the rebel "rearguard", and uncover Ox Ford so Burnside's corps could cross. He also had the 8th NY Hvy Regiment of Tyler's division cross to just south of Chesterfield Bridge. But latter in the afternoon, when Hancock learned from army headquarters of Crawford's advance downriver toward Ox Ford



## *The Battle of North Anna's Place (Cont.)*

from the opposite direction, he would halt Miles, fearing the two forces might get tangled up in a fight with each other, mistaking each for the enemy.

Grant mulled over the situation on each of the Union corps' fronts. The 5th Corps and the 2nd Corps had faced only weak resistance. However Ox Ford in front of the 9th Corps continued to be held by strong Confederate forces, keeping the two wings apart. The overall advance southward past the Little River to the South Anna River would have to wait until the Union forces were somehow connected in the center south of the North Anna.

But, at the time Grant still wanted the two separated wings of his army to continue advancing forward to take control of the roads leading southward to the South Anna River. Anticipating success in this, he began to plan the army's movements for the next day. The 2nd and 9th Corps would advance southward along and east of the Telegraph Road axis and cross over the Little River where both the road and the R.F.&P. rail line spanned it, as well as the Virginia Central rail line almost two miles to the east. At that point the South Anna River was only a mile further south of the Little River. To the west of those two formations, the 5th and 6th Corps would advance southward along other secondary roads between the Little River and the Telegraph Road, perhaps to cross the Little River at Winston's Mill Ford and any other fordable spots that might be found on the way to the South Anna River. Also the following day Grant would have Sheridan's Cavalry Corps available

Around 1400 Hancock decided to wait until morning before conducting a general advance with the Union 2nd Corps, but he ordered Birney's division to send out a brigade to advance down the Telegraph Road, drive back any rebel skirmishers and probe for any Confederate position to his front. In doing this, Pierce's chosen brigade received heavy fire from a newly discovered and seemingly heavily entrenched rebel position to its front, halting its advance. Hancock continued to probe by sending out Smythe's brigade (of Gibbon's division) on a reconnaissance southward down the east side of the railroad line around 1500. This force too met with stiff resistance. Miles' brigade of the 2nd Corps had not yet been able to link up with Burnside's or Warren's corps to the west due to reportedly firm rebel lines, and by 1600 Hancock began to suspect the Confederates to the south of him were there in strength also. To determine if this was true, Hancock ordered Barlow's division to attack the Confederate positions to the south.

On the far Union right of the Union army at about 1530, Warren had Griffin's 5th Corps division advancing southeast down the Verdon Road and the rail line running parallel to it toward Anderson's Station to find if the enemy was there in any force. Two other divisions of the corps were also slowly advancing to the southeast on a long front that rapped back toward the north between Griffin's position and that of Crawford's division halted near Quarles' Mill Ford. In the sluggish middle of the Union army, only Ledlie's brigade was at 1600 slowly advancing through rugged terrain along the south bank of the North Anna River to uncover Ox Ford for the rest of Burnside's 9th Corps. Ledlie had chosen (against

orders) neither to wait for the remainder of Crittenden's division nor to be joined by Crawford's 5th Corps division.

The Union army's headquarters had by 1600 moved from Mt. Carmel Church to the south bank of Jericho Mills Ford. It is from here that Grant, having lost patience with Burnside's total failure to take Ox Ford from either bank, at 1630 again changed Burnside's orders. The 9th Corps was to halt passage of the corps' supply train to the south side. Willcox's division would be left on the north side to demonstrate against Ox Ford and to hold the connection between both Hancock's and Warren's corps. Potter's division would march to the Chesterfield Bridge, cross to the south side of the North Anna, and report to Hancock as reinforcement. Likewise Crittenden's division, already on the south side between Quarles Mill Ford and Ox Ford, was to reinforce Warren.

During that entire fateful afternoon of May 24th the Confederate troops had been waiting in their strong entrenchments as the Union troops advanced deeper into Lee's trap. Hancock's Union 2nd Corps was particularly in serious jeopardy. With two Confederate corps, Anderson's 1st Corps and Ewell's 2nd Corps, to Hancock's right and front, his troops had their backs to the North Anna River and were isolated from the other three corps of the Union army. Certainly by 1600 Lee should have sprung his trap and attacked the isolated Union corps, preferably earlier. Because of the immense importance that the Confederate assault succeed in delivering a crushing blow to the Union army, Lee had planned to personally direct the attack by Anderson's and Ewell's corps against Hancock's 2nd Union Corps. But sometime midday Lee became violently ill with an intestinal inflammation. This greatly restricted his abilities, confining him to a cot in his tent, too sick to execute his planned trap into which Grant had obligingly stepped.

With Lee incapacitated, no one else was able lead the assault in his place. Lee had not taken his three corps commanders into his confidence on the plan to turn the unique inverted "V" defensive position into a decisive counterattack upon the divided Union corps. Lee seems to have lost confidence in A.P. Hill for what he perceived to be Hill's earlier failure to move decisively against Warren's 5th Union Corps near Jericho Mill Ford on May 23rd. Anderson he considered too new to command at corps level to effectively lead the entire army in the attack. And Ewell's health, both physical and mental, was at a fragile point, especially after the heavy blow Ewell's 2nd Corps had received at Spotsylvania. Lee would resolve this problem by relieving Ewell from corps command in less than a week. As stated by Lee's aide Charles Venable, "Lee would gladly have compelled battle in his position there [at the North Anna]. He was anxious now to strike a telling blow, as he was convinced that General Grant's men were dispirited by the bloody repulses of their repeated attacks on our lines." As it was, attack orders were never issued. The chance for the victory that Lee had sought for three bloody weeks was slipping from his grasp. Instead Lee continued to lay sick on his cot, repeating over and over "We must strike them a blow - we must never let them pass us again - we must strike them a blow."



## ***The Battle of North Anna's Place (Cont.)***

Now, instead of what may have been the decisive battle of Grant's 1864 Overland Campaign in which a smashing victory by the Army of Northern Virginia might have had a far reaching impact on the outcome of the war, the day's events would be marked by two violent but brief and relatively small combats. These occurred during the late afternoon and early evening at two points along the Confederate's inverted "V" defensive line as the Union forces blindly pushed further into Lee's trap.

In what became known as the engagement of Doswell House, the elements of the Union 2nd Corps that Hancock sent probing down the R.F.&P. rail line axis toward Hanover Junction became hotly engaged with a strong rebel skirmish line reinforced by Ewell's 2nd Confederate Corps. This fierce firefight was in front of the Confederate entrenchments a little south of the Bull Run stream, which is about a mile south of the North Anna River. It had grown from the stalled advance of Pierce's brigade of Birney's division, followed by the rebuff of Smythe's brigade and the rest of Gibbon's division, then the entanglement of Barlow's division, primarily Brooke's brigade, accompanied by a fairly heavy passing thunderstorm, lasting into the night and ending inconclusively. This encounter showed Hancock that two Confederate corps were to his front and right in strength. He realized that, because of his isolated position from the rest of the Union army, his own corps was precariously poised for destruction despite being the best and most reliable corps in the Army of the Potomac.

At the same time as the above Union advances and rebuffs, Ledlie's brigade of Crittenden's 9th Corps division had moved down the south bank of the North Anna River toward Ox Ford and bumped into a portion of A.P. Hills Confederate 3rd Corps. This was Mahone's division, which was very heavily entrenched on the west side of the inverted "V" defensive line near its apex. Ledlie's solitary advance was unauthorized and his men, like so many troops under leaders promoted for political reasons rather than military ability, would pay a stiff price in blood. Ledlie sent back a message to his division commander Crittenden that he would continue forward in the attack. Crittenden's response via courier ordered Ledlie to restrain from making an impulsive attack, and to stay put until at least the rest of the division was up. But about 1800 the drunken Ledlie, recklessly and without any support, ordered the advance anyway, his brigade charging through the heavy thunderstorm into very intense fire from Mahone's men and artillery in the Confederate entrenchments. Mahone's men goaded the Union troops to keep advancing into the deadly fire with taunts of "Come on, Yank, come on to Richmond!" Ledlie's brigade fought bravely but paid dearly for his incompetence and dereliction of duty. Ultimately it was shattered with heavy losses, and fell back all the way to the south side of Quarles' Mill Ford where the rest of Crittenden's division was in position.

With these two failures proving that the Union forces were up against heavily entrenched Confederate forces, Grant finally began to realize the predicament in which the Union army found itself. After the fighting in the Doswell House area, Hancock sent reports to Grant about 2000 that he had encountered troops from Anderson's and Ewell's

Confederate corps, and that the entire Army of Northern Virginia likely was in force around the Hanover Junction area. Further, the destruction of Ledlie's brigade showed that the Ox Ford area was very strongly held. In a classic understatement, Grant commented that "...the situation of the enemy...[was] different from what I expected". Lee had not fallen back behind the South Anna River.

But Grant, having realized his error, acted quickly. By 2020 he had ordered Hancock to entrench in his current position. Tyler's division of former heavy artillery regiments, still on the north side of the North Anna, was to move to the south. Warren's 5th Corps was ordered to probe forward at daylight of May 25th and "fix" the Confederate positions. The 6th Corps under Wright was ordered to protect Warren's right flank and rear. Burnside's orders remained the same as stated previously at 1630, with the additional requirement to find or create roads on the north side of the river that would allow for better routes of communications between the widely separated wings of the army. And all remaining pontoon bridges of all the corps where ordered to be erected to connect the army's separate wings as best as possible. Without these improvements the Union army would have found it necessary for reinforcements coming from one wing to march approximately twelve miles to reach the other wing, while the greatest distance the Confederates would have to send units from one side of the inverted "V" to the other was less than four miles. Grant's orders resulted in a frenzied building of entrenchments by all the Union formations. Shortly before midnight Grant reissued orders to Warren to have the 5th Corps attack at 0400 of May 25th to envelop the Confederate lines, not yet realizing their line was anchored on Little River.

The only movement of positions within the Confederate lines was some minor shifting by divisions of Ewell's 2nd Corps behind the main defensive fortifications. Also the Army of Northern Virginia headquarters relocated from Hanover Junction to Taylorsville just north of where the R.F.&P rail line crosses the Little River.

First light of May 25th found the Union army emplacing itself behind entrenchments and with new pontoon bridges in place to allow easier movement across the North Anna River, allowing better lines of communication between the widely separated Union corps. The opportunity presented to the Army of Northern Virginia on May 24th was no more.

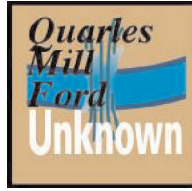
Soon after dawn the four divisions of Warren's Union 5th Corps began cautiously pushing to the southeast to better determine the rebels' position and strength in front of them. First to encounter strong Confederate skirmishers was Griffin's division in the Anderson Station area. As the other divisions of the corps pushed on they too bumped into very active rebel skirmishers stretching from the bend of the Little River all the way to Ox Ford. Upon further costly probing with their own skirmish lines, the Federals became aware of the strength and extent of the continuous line of rebel fortifications that made up the left side of the inverted "V".

With the information derived from Warren's advance up to a line paralleling that of the Confederates, the great strength of Lee's imaginative dispositions was fully revealed. For a time



## The Battle of North Anna's Place (Cont.)

there was much communication between Grant, Meade, Warren, Wright and their respective chiefs of staffs, questioning whether the Confederate left could be turned by crossing the Little River. But the rebels were found to have some fortifications and forces (actually only cavalry) on the southern side of the river, and this seems to have discouraged pursuit of this idea.



Having failed to deliver Lee's planned attack upon the unsuspecting and isolated Union corps the day before, the best hope of the Army of Northern Virginia now lay with Grant's ordering attacks upon its defensive lines. If this had occurred the South still would have held key advantages, as the Union corps were only slightly less isolated from one another than they had been the day before, and coordinating necessarily widely separated attacks against such strongly fortified positions would have been difficult. Correspondingly the rebels stayed put in their defenses and brought deadly fire down upon any probing Union troops. But it was not to be.

Around 1400 Grant moved the headquarters of the Army of the Potomac to the north side of Quarles' Mill Ford. Sometime after that he called a council of war at which he and his commanders determined that Lee's defensive position was too strong to attack. Even if an attack were successful in forcing Lee out of his position, the cost in casualties would be too great. Having decided not to bring on a general engagement at the North Anna River, the commanders debated on which direction to swing the army around Lee's position in order to bypass it. Ultimately Grant would be decided to once more slide the army eastward to its left as he had after both The Wilderness and Spotsylvania, going around Lee's right before again heading south toward Richmond. Over the course of that night and the following of May 26th-27th, Grant expertly brought the Army of the Potomac back in phases to the north side of North Anna River, completely disengaging and withdrawing without interference from the Confederate forces. Lee was forced to follow, attempting to stay between the Union forces and Richmond. The two armies would clash again beginning just four days later at Cold Harbor.

### Epilogue:

What might have been the outcome of a full-blown battle at the North Anna River? Once the encounter began, both commanding generals thought that the climatic engagement of what later became known as the Union's Overland Campaign of '64 could and should be fought in the area between the North Anna and South Anna rivers. Grant saw a great opportunity to gain a crushing victory over the Army of Northern Virginia before it could reach the extensive fortifications surrounding Richmond. Lee knew the North Anna would likely be his army's last chance to cripple a large part of the AOP with a strong counterblow, perhaps stopping Grant's summer campaign in Virginia. If unable to do so, Lee knew the ANV would run out of maneuver room and be forced to take up static positions within the Richmond defenses, after which it would be only a matter of time before surrender.

Of course the consequences of a major Confederate victory at North Anna are speculative. The Union AOP had suffered losses of approximately 36,000 at The Wilderness and Spotsylvania in the first half of May. Yet another heavy expenditure of men in a one-sided defeat just a week later may have caused a halt to the Union offensive. This might have

occurred in one of several ways, such as the suspension of the offensive by Grant (not likely), or perhaps the suspension being imposed "from above" by discord in the government (and the "loyal opposition"), or "from below" with a public outcry over the heavy losses. But this would require a Union defeat of a greater magnitude than that which occurred historically at Cold Harbor the week following North Anna. Given that a sweeping victory might have been won by the Confederates at the North Anna, the end of the Union's Overland Campaign of '64 certainly would have given the CSA time to build back up, and would have done significant damage to Lincoln's re-election chances that fall, with all that a potential election loss implies.

Had it been the Union instead that gained a decisive victory at the North Anna, the consequences would have probably been the rapid end of the war in Virginia, and likely throughout the rest of what remained of the Confederacy. An earlier than historical Confederate collapse would have spared both sides much, considering the harshness of the final campaigning, including Sherman's then just beginning advance on Atlanta and follow-on drive to and up the Atlantic coast.

In consideration of all the above, that neither side could gain such a victory at the North Anna River was a bitter lost opportunity for each. Any lesser level of victory there would not be a strategically decisive event and the war would drag on for another year, with all the casualties and horrors of trench warfare resulting from the Confederate withdrawal into the fortifications around Richmond and Petersburg and the subsequent Union siege.

Historically the losses from the various engagements that made up the encounter at the North Anna were relatively small and about even, each at about 2500-3000 men. The Union gains made south of the river were meaningless and abandoned. Both sides failed to smash the opponent and avoid entering into the trench warfare that followed. The result was a strategic stalemate. Because of Grant's withdrawal back to the north side of the river after May 26th, the affair at the North Anna is often viewed as a Confederate tactical victory, but at that stage of the war such an outcome was irrelevant.