

# The Wilderness Campaign of 1864

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### The Wilderness Campaign of 1864

During the American Civil War's May 1864 Wilderness Campaign, the terrain decisively negated any advantages in troop strength, training, and leadership held by either opposing force, and resulted in neither side gaining significant advantage.

A series of engagements was fought in the Wilderness region of Virginia between 1863 and 1864. In early in May, 1864, General Ulysses S. Grant, led the Army of the Potomac (118,000 strong) across the Rapidan River into the Wilderness, a wild and tangled woodland approximately ten miles west of Fredericksburg. Grant planned to clear the Wilderness before trying to destroy the smaller Confederate Army of Northern Virginia (60,000 troops) under General Robert E. Lee. However, Lee advanced on the Union troops while they were still in that area, causing Grant to face about and order an attack.

The nature of the terrain made the battle of the Wilderness (May 5-6) a disjointed but bloody fight. The Wilderness was a large area of trees and thick underbrush located in Spotsylvania and Orange counties. The trees and underbrush diminished the impact of artillery and made the use of cavalry almost pointless. Badly wounded soldiers on both sides were burned alive as the brush caught fire.

After three years of warfare, many battles of which were fought in northern Virginia, Confederate forces found themselves being pushed back by superior numbers of better fed and equipped Union troops. Attrition in manpower, as well as materiel, began taking a significant toll on the ability of Confederate forces to maintain their hold on all fronts, and the Union began pushing them further. Northern Virginia's Wilderness Region had seen extensive action over the course of the war, the most significant being one year earlier, when Lee's Confederate forces,

under the command of General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson soundly outmaneuvered, outflanked, and drove off a superior Union force.

The Wilderness Campaign of 1864 would find both armies, again, trying to outmaneuver and defeat each other. However, the difficult terrain conditions would effectively hinder each side from gaining advantage over the other.

### The Terrain

Virginia’s Wilderness area saw its start as an American Indian hunting ground, before the Europeans moved into the area. Manahoac, Ontponea, Shackaconia, and Stegaraki Indian tribes lived and hunted these grounds prior to the encroachment of the white settlers (Rhea 12).

During pre-Colonial times, some of the area was cleared by white settlers. After finding few suitable areas for farming, those settlers who remained in the area attempted to establish a small iron industry. This industry failed, and the majority of the remaining settlers left the region. With little, or no, concern for the area, a dense growth of underbrush took over the whole region (Cannan 66).

During the early part of the nineteenth century, the Wilderness area saw a number of smaller roads cut through the brush and forest, which were used as lines of communication between the Fredericksburg area and western and southern Virginia. It was during this time that the area saw busy stage coach traffic and stops. A few small farms, stores, and taverns operated along the routes here, however as coach and horse traffic dwindled – and railroads took over most overland commerce and transport - the majority of these establishments fell into disuse. To bolster the region, a railroad was started through the area, but was left unfinished before the outbreak of hostilities between the north and south (Cannan 66).

The Wilderness area had seen use by both forces during the course of the American Civil War. The heavy growth provided concealment for Confederate soldiers moving throughout the region, in support of various campaigns, while the Union forces occasionally occupied towns on the outlying boundaries of this land. One significant campaign was fought in the Wilderness exactly one year earlier. In late April, 1863, After the Union loss at nearby Fredericksburg, Union forces occupied positions north of the Wilderness area, at the Chancellorsville house. Confederate General Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson was able to skillfully use the dense, thick, and tangled forest to conceal movement of his forces. During the Battle of Chancellorsville, between 1-3 May, 1863, Confederate troops managed to quickly and deftly outflank Union forces in the area, causing a general Union panic and retreat from the region. One demoralizing factor for Union soldiers who returned to the area in 1864 was sight of the bleached skeletal remains of their comrades – lost in battle and left to decompose the previous year. In several instances, Union troops actually found the remains of soldiers from their very own units (Rhea 52).

The Wilderness, an area roughly 25 by 20 miles, had one large Virginia town to its west – Fredericksburg. The area stood in the way of a Union advance on the Confederate capital city of Richmond. Fredericksburg itself served as a transportation hub, through which the large Union force might easily cross the Rappahannock river, and move southwards. This town also boasted a road network, as well as a significant railroad, which ran straight to Richmond.

Smaller settlements bordering the Wilderness include Spotsylvania, to the southeast, which served as an intersection between Washington, Fredericksburg, and Richmond. Other smaller settlements in the Wilderness include Chancellorsville, to the north, and New Verdierville, to the west. By and large, however, the Wilderness contained only a few human populations of farmers, who tried to scratch a living out of the foreboding woodland. The woods were cut in

some areas for small farm fields and clearings. Several buildings were scattered throughout the area, including the Wilderness Church and a few unused taverns. At one time, the Wilderness Tavern was a busy stop for stage coaches. However, by 1864 it was merely a dilapidated shack surrounded by weeds and thick brush.

The woodland, nearly impenetrable, had several tracks cut through it – most of them merely wagon tracks. The Orange Turnpike extended from the town of Orange, in the west, eastward to Fredericksburg. A parallel road ran approximately three miles south of this, called the Orange Plank Road, as it was paved with wooden planks. Further south of this was the Old Fredericksburg/Catharpin Road. The primary north to south road was the Brock road, which led to Spotsylvania, and onward towards Richmond. A number of smaller trails ran through the area, with several of them running from fords over the Rapidan river, north of the Wilderness. The Orange Plank Road was paralleled to the south by an unfinished railroad. This rail cut originated in Fredericksburg, and ran westward, ending midway through the Wilderness (Cannan 67).

The nature of the terrain made it an awful place to fight a battle. Although relatively flat, the region was characterized by a dense growth of underbrush which consisted of low-limbed pines, scrub oak, hazel, and prickly vines. By 1861 the place had taken on a haunted atmosphere, causing one southern writer to say of it, “It is a region of gloom and the shadow of death.” (Cannan 67)

Challenges posed by this terrain stemmed from its thickness, which severely hampered operations by either side of the conflict. The tangled scrub thickets prevented forces from seeing their opponents, and severely restricted – and most often prevented – battlefield commanders from accurately determining the positions of their own troops. The thick undergrowth made

infantry attacks extremely difficult, while rendering artillery all but useless. Soldiers forced to move through the thick vegetation were significantly slowed, while visibility was reduced in some circumstances to just a few feet between opposing combatants. Confederate forces, with its natives of the area, therefore more familiar with the terrain and limited lines of communication, could use this knowledge to their advantage in order to nullify the Union advantage in strength and resources.

### The Confederate Forces

The South had a distinct advantage over the North that clearly stands out even now 140 years later. It was easy to see why the south had this edge they lived off the land hunting, fishing and most of all shooting. Horse back riding and roping was also a plus which made the southern a better initial raw recruit. The most significant part of the Confederate strength was there was of trench warfare. On May 4, the blue divisions began crossing the Rapidan for a campaign that the North expected would win the war within a month or two. Grant intended to move around Lee's right to force his army out of its trenches which was one of the South's strengths. Lee accepted the challenge, but he planned to hit the Yankees in the flank before they emerged from the dense second growth forest known as the Wilderness, where Federals numeric and artillery superiority would count for little. Lee had brought Joe Hooker to grief in the Wilderness exactly one year earlier in the battle of Chancellorsville. He hoped to repeat the performance with Grant.

A Grisly Omen. Skeletons of union soldiers killed at Chancellorsville in may 1863 their shallow graves uncovered by erosion or animals, greeted the living Union soldiers exactly a year later, at the beginning of the Wilderness campaign. The Wilderness promised to turn many of them into skeletons as well. From the Wilderness to St. Petersburg; beginning on the old



Chancellorville battlefield on May 5, 1864 and continuing without a break for six bloody weeks. Grant tried again and again, Lee saw what he was trying to do and managed to thwart him. (McPherson 158).

The struggle continued along a hundred mile crescent before the exhausted armies settled in for a siege at St. Petersburg, southeast of the confederate capital.

Open battlefield is where Grant wanted the battle to take place so that he could use the Unions superior numerical numbers and artillery might from the big guns which could if used win the battle and ultimately the war itself. (Rhea198)

Grant later used is heavy regiments in the fight because they were still strong in numbers. However the Wilderness held the king of battle in a check fire mode for both the North and South for awhile each side managed to place a few cannons along the narrow plank road. In both cases, the cannoneers made clear targets for opposing infantrymen sheltered in the wood line and they sustained terrible losses. At various times during the back and forth fighting one side overran the others guns at will. Neither kept possession long enough to haul them away though. When night fall came each side reclaimed its guns. On May 5, Lee's advance came into contact with Grant's southward marching army. The surprised Federals faced right and attacked, bringing on two days of vicious fighting in woods so thick that the soldiers seldom if ever saw there enemy but fired at he spot where the sound and smoke came from which indicated where they were.

Whole brigades were lost in the forest; officers had little control over the confused movements of their men; muzzle flashes from thousands of rifles set the underbrush on fire; scores of

wounded men were burned to death. Most of the fighting surged back and forth near the intersections of the Wilderness. At the end of the first day, the Union Forces still held the vital intersections that night Grant ordered General Winfield Scott Hancock, commander of the army's crack 2<sup>nd</sup> Corps, to throw everything he had into an assault on the Confederate right at dawn. The Union generals knew that Longstreet's Corps had not come up in time for the first days fighting. They hoped to roll up Lee's flank before Longstreet could arrive.

At first, Hancock's attack on May 6 went well. It drove the Rebels right back a mile to a clearing where his command post had been. On verge of a smashing success, the blue brigades were disorganized by the advance through the tangled woods. At that moment, the leading units of Longstreet's fresh troops doubled-timed into the clearing from the opposite side. Agitated by his brush with disaster, Lee tried personally to lead these troops against the re-forming Yankee line.

But the gray soldiers shouted "General Lee to the rear" and restrained him, while Longstreet directed a counterattack that rocked the Federal troops back on their heels.

Later that morning, Longstreet sent part of his corps along the cut of unfinished railroad, from which they launched a surprise assault on Hancock's exposed flank. Now it was the Confederates' turn to lose all cohesion as they drove the Yankees back through the woods. Riding forward to reconnoiter, Longstreet was shot by his own men in the confusion of smoke and noise. (in a similar accident, Stonewall Jackson had been shot a year earlier less than four miles from where Longstreet fell. Longstreet survived but was out of action for five months.) Thereafter most of the steam went out of the Confederate attack on this flank, as Hancock got

his men behind breastworks protecting the road intersections. There they repulsed a final assault in the late afternoon.

Near twilight, a Confederate attack three miles to the North bent the Union flank back at the right angles and captured several prisoners, including two general officers.

It was a situation reminiscent of Chancellorsville, when a successful rebel assault on the Union right near this same spot had been a prelude to defeat. But Grant was no Joe Hooker. When an overwrought officer rushed up and said, “General Grant, this is a crisis...I know Lee’s methods well by past experience; he will throw his whole army between us and the Rapidan, and cut us off from our communications.” Which he did.

In order for you to better understand the supply line failure during the Wilderness battle you must first understand the supply line operations during the Civil War.

Railroads were the preferred method of transporting men and supplies to the battlefield after 1830. Before then foot and animals were used. Using animals greatly limited the amount supplies that could be provided. The rapid movement of men and material by rail increased the army’s logistical capacity tenfold. Troops and supplies arrived quicker and less fatigued and supplies arrived in better condition. Army’s became larger but still remained combat effective. So the easiest way to stop the supply line was to ambush the railroad which was the key to the battle to include the battle of the wilderness.

## The Union Forces

As the civil war of May 1864 ensued the confederacy was tired and weak, but still undefeated and defiant. The union army was tired of incompetent Generals, heavy casualties and a leadership that had not succeeded in overcoming a numerically inferior foe. President Abraham Lincoln was confident that with General U.S. Grant in command he had at last found a leader who would fight to the bitter end (fury flap)

This battle fought in a tangled forest fringing the south bank of the Rapidan River marked the initial engagement in the climactic months of the civil war in Virginia and the first encounter between Generals Ulysses s Grant and Robert Lee.

The conflict of May 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> 1864 which ended with high casualties on both sides showed no clear victor. The confederates failed to take the steps necessary to delay the Union army's progress and even left their own army in a position of peril. Many Eyewitnesses believe that if the Union army had brought the fight to a more favorable location the result would have been different. (Battle flap).

In this account of what took place, the focus is on the encounters as it unfolded from a Union perspective. The facts presented are in support of the group thesis statement which supports the American Civil wars of May 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> in the Wilderness Campaign addressing the terrain, training, leadership, armies involved and the end result. Here are a few synarios that my research has manifest to support the Union army.

The army of the Potomac failed on a number of occasions to defeat General Lee's army by a attacking them from behind their fortified defenses. General Grant the new commanding general elected to keep Meade in titular command of the army of the Potomac, but literally

pitched his own headquarters tent nearby and all messages; inquiries and order went through him first (Titan 45).

The plan was to outflank Lee's army by marching quickly southward through the forbidding landscape, known as the wilderness (70 miles wide & 30 miles long) of second growth, timber, wiry underbrush, blackish water and barren soil. That was familiar to the Union soldier in a negative way, based on a disastrous defeat exactly one year prior. General Meade along with his Chief of Staff, Major General Andrew Humphrey a prewar engineer and topographer arranged the army's movement. This move consisted of 120,000 soldiers with 4,300 supply wagon and 850 field ambulances within 30 hours based on Lee's army reaction time the previous November.

On May 3<sup>rd</sup>, the men were told to cook three day rations and take extra partials with 50 rounds of ammunition. Most experienced veterans cut the kit down to change under clothing, three pairs of socks, a pair of spare laces, three plugs of navel tobacco, a rubber blanket and a pair of woolen blanket. The decision to move through the eastern route of the wilderness was to make resupply problems less and screening Washington from possible attack. The men were not told of the exact plan to protect the integrity of the mission. On May 4<sup>th</sup> at 0300 hrs the Potomac army started crossing the Rapidan at Germanna Ford. 3<sup>rd</sup> Indiana Cavalry went through a waist deep stream without being attacked. Federal engineer led by William Folwell erected two parallel bridges 40 or 50 ft apart and 220 ft across. By dawn, Major General Goouneur, K. Warren's V Corps cross the river based on the engineer's swift work. Six miles down river Ely's Ford, Major General Winfield Scott Hancock's II Corps crossed the river and the rest of the Potomac continued to cross. Hancock swung his II Corps southwest from Chancellor Ville to Parker store, to link up with Warren V Corps from the north. Sedgwick's VI Corps swung into

place and waited for Burnside's IX Corps. Basically, the Potomac was standing on unfavorable ground where their great numbers, moderns small arms and deadly artillery would be negated based on the wilderness (Wilderness 66).

On the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup> of May skirmishing began, for control Orange Plank Road. Union Scouts reported the approach of a sizable enemy contingent. The surprised Warren as all groups was not yet in place. Warren told Griffin to push a force out against the enemy to see the enemy's strength. Warren was ordered later to pitch into apart of Lee's Army, if the opportunity presents itself. At 1300 hrs after waiting three hours of waiting reluctantly gave the order to move out. Union line advanced across a 2-mile front and was hit by a rebel force lying in wait. On the Union Army right side, north of the turnpike, Colonel George Ryan's 140<sup>th</sup> New York Zouavs made easy targets for the Rebel Marksman. They fell back to the 146<sup>th</sup> New York Zouavs who had the same faith. 529 men were casualties to include almost all the regiment officers of Colonel Ryan in this encounter.

On the southern side Brig Gen Joseph Bartlett's 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade forced Brig Gen John M. Jones' Virginia Brigade backwards in confusion. During these battles the men could not hear their own rifle fire. They only felt the recoil. There were forest fires, men cheering, groaning, yelling, swearing and praying. General Jones of the confederation saw his line waiver as the enemy struck his exposed right flank. He rode to the front to encourage his troops and was cornered by two Pennsylvania privates. He failed to surrender and was killed on the spot. His sword was taken, two soldiers were killed shortly after, and there was no where for them to run. The federal became sitting ducks for a crushing counter attack led by Brig Gen John B. Gordon's Veteran Brigade (Titans 52).

Wadworth's other Brigades fared better as they regrouped and kept fighting. Trying to stabilize and hold off repeated attacks. At times no one could see with all of the powder, smoke and as it cleared men's bodies and limbs could be seen all over. Union soldier's continued to regroup and fired by ear sight. For three hours until well after dark the fighting continued in the flame torn woods. At first the Union, the Confederate Forces crashed blindly into one another. The Union Commander Grant was satisfied that Lee's whole attempt to strike Potomac Flank had failed. On the evening of May 5<sup>th</sup> Federal troops rescued as many of their wounded as they could. Many were burned to death.

To avoid Lee taking the initiative on May 6<sup>th</sup>, Hancock and Wadsworth attacked the enemy at 0430 hrs with one division from Burnside. Hancock and the other two attacked the enemy Flank with Warren and Sedgwick attacking at the same time. The Confederate was disorganized awaiting replacement and reinforcement to no avail. Hills corps was shattered by Hancock and Union Army by 0530 hrs on May 6<sup>th</sup>. They continued to attack and over stretch themselves and running low on ammunition. As time elapsed, the Confederate support arrived. The Union offensive was halted in its tracks. The enemy now stretched unbroken from the Orange Flank road to the Orange Turnpike. The Union was hit on the left from an unfinished railroad which was not on a map. The disaster swept until over 19,000 veterans fled, every man for himself. This failure was short lived as the Confederate had fired on their own troops killing and wounding key commanders giving the Union Army the time it needed to reorganize (Titans 140).

The Union Army fortified the defense position and by 1600 hrs the men were well rested and behind chest high breast work with cleared field of view and fire. The Confederates were persistent, but kept falling. They managed to break through the Union line, but swift counter

attack drove them back. This was the best result of any attack since the 5<sup>th</sup> of May with little casualties on the Union side. The Union was willing to call the battle a tactical draw and called off any more federal attacks (Titans 140).

The Union Army had decided to go for more open country attacks. The union army mathematical calculation was that the more Federal Army's lose and the Union has numbers on their side. The battle of the wilderness had indeed been a hell on earth.

### The Generals

After a long and extremely peaceful winter, both the Armies of the Union and the Confederate were preparing for what would surely be a much more active spring. The Union Army was now under new leadership. President Abraham Lincoln had looked to a fellow Illinoisan to take control of his forces and somehow secure victory over the Confederates. His choice of General Ulysses S. Grant, as the new commander of the Union Army, was seen by many as a much needed change in leadership. Grant had a total different plan to defeat the Confederates. He was going to go on the offensive. Retreat was not an option. (Morris 15)

Confederate Lieutenant General James Longstreet described Grant as a man full of dogged persistence. General Longstreet is quoted as warning that Grant "would fight us every day and every hour till the end of the war." General Grant, a man small of stature but large of heart, was seen by President Lincoln as someone with the right fighting spirit to match that of the Confederate leader, General Robert E. Lee. In earlier attempts to crush the smaller and not as well equipped Confederate Army, the one neutralizer had been the Lee's tremendous ability to anticipate his opponent's next move and counter it in a way to snatch victory right from under



them. President Lincoln had hoped that Grant would be able to match intelligence with his nemesis. (Rhea 42)

General Grant brought with him a different strategy than what was used previously. Grant did not believe in retreat. Under no conditions would Grant retrace his steps. In a special feature entitled Titans Clash in the Wilderness published in April of 1997, Roy Morris Jr. stated, "Grant refused to turn back after he started for a location. Indeed, if he passed a street he was looking for, he would circle the block rather than retrace his steps (47)." He displayed this habit in his war strategy as well. This was new to the Union Army who had previously been accustomed to back-tracking to preclude defeat or victory.

General Grant's recent victories at Vicksburg, Fort Donelson and Chattanooga displayed his determination and catapulted him into the forefront of Union Generals. While in command of forces in the west, Grant earned his reputation as a strategist and leader. He also earned the reputation of being enjoying alcohol, but his victories outshined any negative his drinking created. The Battle of Vicksburg proved his resolve and determination. After several attempts to take Vicksburg, he developed a strategy to have his supply lines delivered by sea and to surprise his opponent by attacking on several fronts. His success caught the eye of President Lincoln and made him the choice to command the entire Union force. (Rhea 49)

Grant's strategy was to take an eastern route so that the supply lines for his troops would not be cut off and separated from the Union Army. This also provided a means of protecting Washington against an attack from the Confederates. He decided to have his troops cross the Rapidan River at the Germanna and Ely Fords, then quickly march down the Germanna Plank Road to the only good road in the area, the Orange Turnpike (Morris 44). This would provide the Army with the maneuverability to head west and draw the

Confederate Army to come out of their defensive positions to protect their capital city of Richmond.

The 70-mile wide and 30 mile long stretch of thick vegetation, known as the Wilderness, was to be avoided if at all possible. The both sides were all too familiar with that area, since the Battle of Chancellorsville was fought there exactly one year earlier. The Confederates had lost a key leader in Stonewall Jackson at Chancellorsville and the Union had lost all advantages it had because of the closeness of the fighting.

The key subordinate leaders for the Union Army were: General George Meade who commanded the Army of the Potomac; General Winfield S. Hancock, Commander of the II Corps; Commander of the V Corps, Gouverneur K. Warren; General John Sedgwick who commanded the VI Corps; and General Ambrose Burnside, Commander of the IX Corps. With so many generals and a recent change of command, communication between the commanders was crucial.

General George Meade had been in command of Union forces prior to Grant's appointment. He had some success but not the kind that President Lincoln was looking for. Lincoln had lost confidence in him. He surprised Grant when he offered step aside so that Grant could appoint one of his own commanders to take over the Army of the Potomac. A noble gesture, this impressed Grant and he felt that if he allowed Meade to remain in command that he would have a loyal subordinate commander. Grant set his command post with Meade's Army of the Potomac and they were a critical part of the plan to cross the Rapidan at Germanna's Ford.

General Hancock's II Corps was described as the army's elite fighting force and Hancock the premier subordinate commander. Assistant War Secretary Charles Dana described Hancock as, "a brilliant man, as brave as Julius Caesar, and always ready to obey orders, especially if they

were fighting orders. He had more of aggressive spirit than almost anybody else in the army (Rhea 38).” A very close friend of Meade, Grant used his force to cross the Rapidan at Ely’s Ford, thus creating an additional threat to the Feds.

Gouverneur K. Warren was the newest of the commanders. He was considered a different type of person and had the ability to rub people the wrong way. But his biggest asset was his extraordinary military mind. He had served under Meade in several positions and was credited with stressing to Meade the importance of Little Round Top at Gettysburg. His V Corps crossed the Rapidan after the Cavalry Division and quickly found themselves in the tangled murkiness of the Wilderness. Following Warren’s V Corps was General Sedgwick’s VI Corps.

An interesting player was General Burnside, Commander of the IX Corps. Burnside had once commanded the Army of the Potomac and now outranked Meade, so putting him under Meade’s control was a grave breach of protocol. Grant decided to place Burnside and his soldiers alongside Meade’s Army rather than under them. This way, Grant would be able to oversee both commanders.

The Confederates, led by General Robert E. Lee, had proven to be a formidable foe for the logistically superior Union. Although not as well equipped and undermanned, they had shown a resilience that had earned the respect of their counterparts. And none was more respected than General Lee. General Lee had earned the adoration and respect of his army and his opponent. Not only was Lee a great strategist, but an even greater leader (Cullen 16).

During the winter of 1863-1864, the Confederate used this time to improve its defensive posture. A small skirmish had shown the Union exactly how impenetrable the works of Lee’s

Army was. With mounting threats in Tennessee and other parts of the south, Lee had to divide his Army to handle them. But his main concern was the protection of Richmond. Despite a lack of rations and very little logistical support, the morale of the men stayed high and Lee used that to his advantage. Lee had constantly shown that he was a leader to be reckoned with, but he now had a new counterpart to trade intellect with. (Rhea 74)

General Lee and the Union Army were constantly fighting the battle of survival. Lee had the confidence of all of his men and the leaders of the Confederacy. He proved time and time again that he was not willing to give in no matter how bad conditions had gotten. He not only had to deal with a better supplied opponent, but internal issues with his subordinate commanders. (Cullen 27)

The Union Army's subordinate commanders consisted of: Lieutenant General James Longstreet's I Corps; Lieutenant General Richard Ewell's II Corps; and the III Corps commanded by Lieutenant General Ambrose P. Hill. Each man had his strengths as well as weaknesses.

General Longstreet commanded Lee's premier fighting unit, which hailed primarily from the Deep South, and was the most experienced of Lee's commanders. Longstreet was described by Major General James E. B. Stuart as, "a man of limited capacity who acquired reputation for wisdom for never saying anything...I do not remember him saying over a half a dozen words beyond yes or no in a consecutive sentences. (Rhea 13)" He was considered by many as being temperamental, inflexible and unbending. But Lee had confidence in him and knew that he could count on Longstreet to hold any position that was ordered to take. But Lee also knew of his shortcomings as well. He stated, "Longstreet is a good fighter when he gets into position and gets everything ready, but he

is slow.” He preferred a defensive posture as opposed to Lee who enjoyed being on the offensive. He was moody and had a tendency to pout when he didn’t get his way. This was evident at Gettysburg when he showed a lethargic attitude after Lee didn’t take his advice (Rhea 14).

General Ewell’s situation was not much prettier. Ewell was chosen to lead the II Corps after the death of Thomas J. (Stonewall) Jackson in May of 1863. Ironically, Jackson was killed in that same Wilderness area. General Ewell was an amputee who had lost a leg during battle. He later married a widowed cousin who seemed to take control of not only his household, but his life as well. An officer under his command wrote, “From a military point of view the addition of the wife did not compensate for the loss of the leg. We were of the opinion that Ewell was not the same soldier he had been when he was whole man... and a single one. (Rhea 15)” Ewell struggled with independent command and often sought the approval of decisions before going forward with them. He also allowed his new bride to manage everything at home and was not seen as a forceful leader.

The commander of the Confederate’s III Corps, A. P. Hill, seemed overwhelmed as the commander of the newest Corps. He earned a reputation as an imposing leader while commanding the “Light Division”, a unit with a reputation for aggressiveness. He didn’t show the same skill as the commander of a corps. Also at issue was his health. He repeated a year at West Point due to illness and had found himself bedridden on occasion. The rigors of high command caused a deterioration of his physical condition. His health and inexperienced division commanders made Hill’s III Corps a weakness at times. (Morris 34)

With this set of commanders, Lee had to constantly be at the top of his game. He had to make up for their shortcomings and keep his chances for victory against a superior force alive. But everyone involved knew that if anyone could do it, Lee could. The Battle of the Wilderness would pit Lee against his latest rival, Grant. Both sides knew that an all out offensive was not the proper move for the Union, but Lee had to figure out the strategy of his new opponent. (Rhea 77)

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