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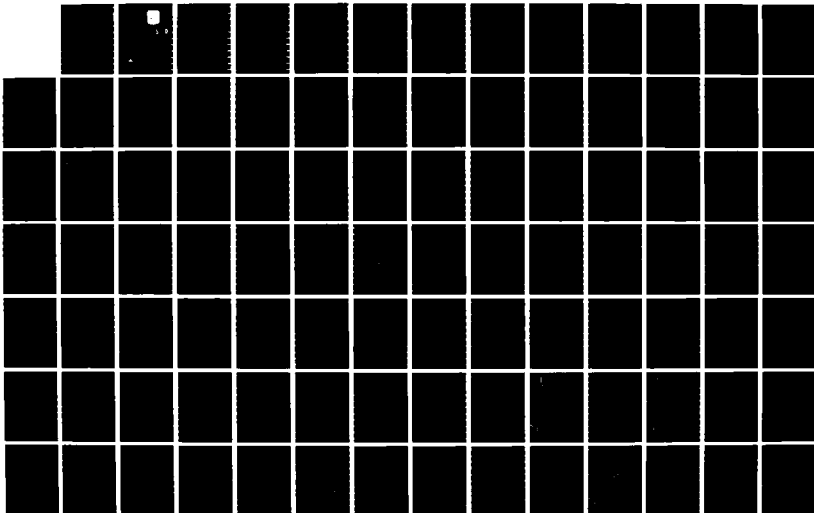
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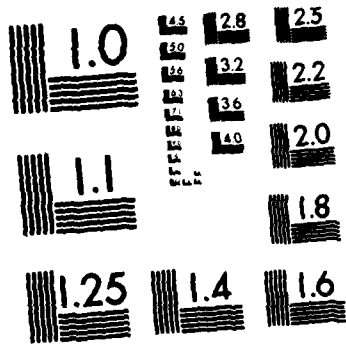
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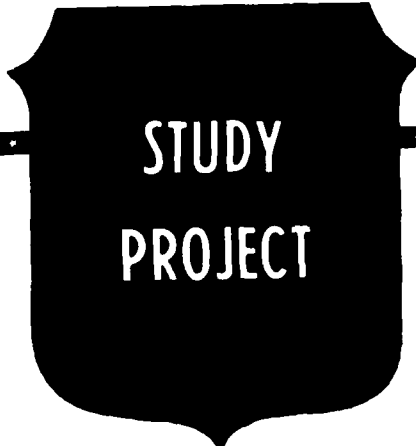




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BATTLE OF LAUREL HILL - MAY 1864

BY

COMMANDER WILBUR F. SHEPHERD, USN

LIEUTENANT COLONEL DWIGHT A. BECK, AR

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Corps and the Confederate First Corps at Laurel Hill, and vividly contrasts the generalship styles and tactics employed by the various commanders.

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USAWC MILITARY STUDIES PROGRAM PAPER

BATTLE OF LAUREL HILL - MAY 1864

A GROUP STUDY PROJECT

BY

COMMANDER WILBUR F. SHEPHERD, USN

LIEUTENANT COLONEL DWIGHT A. BECK, AR

US ARMY WAR COLLEGE

CARLISLE BARRACKS, PENNSYLVANIA 17013-5050

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ABSTRACT

AUTHORS: Wilbur F. Shepherd, CDR, USN
Dwight A. Beck, LTC AR

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PREFACE

This Group Study Project was produced under the direction of Professor Jay Luvaas, Professor of Military History, U.S. Army War College. The scope and general design of the study were outlined by Professor Luvaas. In addition to providing an historical and analytical account of the events that occurred at Laurel Hill in May of 1864, this study project was designed to serve as an automobile/walking tour of that battlefield. The authors elected to undertake this project due to their general interest in Civil War history, and the relative absence of previous scholarly endeavors which focus specifically on Laurel Hill.

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Laurel Hill

8-13 May 1864

Introduction


On May 7, 1864, after three days of savage, inconclusive fighting in the Wilderness, Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant, commanding the Army of the Potomac, moved by his left flank toward Spotsylvania Court House. His intent was to interpose his army between General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and the Confederate capital city of Richmond, some fifty miles to the south of Spotsylvania. Accordingly, Grant set his army in motion late that evening. Lee, having gained intelligence of Grant's movement, initiated the movement of his army to the same destination at nearly the same hour.


Enroute to Spotsylvania early on the morning of 8 May, the Union Fifth Corps, commanded by Major General Gouverneur K. Warren, encountered elements of Major General Richard H. Anderson's Confederate First Corps blocking the road in the vicinity of Laurel Hill; approximately two miles northwest of Spotsylvania. A sharp fight ensued which resulted in Warren being unable to clear the Confederate forces to his front. Throughout the day and into the next, the remainder of both armies arrived and battle lines were established in a great semi-circle to the north of Spotsylvania Court House. For the next ten days, Grant hammered at Lee's defenses. Finally on May 20th, realizing he could not gain a decisive victory, Grant again moved his army to the left towards Richmond with the intent to threaten the Confederate capital and to force Lee from his entrenchments in the vicinity of Spotsylvania.

This booklet analyzes the engagements at Laurel Hill from three levels of war: strategic; operational; and tactical. The analysis is designed to enable the reader to thoroughly understand the events that occurred there, and to place them in perspective with the overall course of the war, the 1864 campaign and the Battle of Spotsylvania. Maps are liberally used throughout to aid in placing Laurel Hill in context with other battles that took place in the vicinity of Spotsylvania, and to graphically represent the more important events that occurred there.

This booklet is also designed to aid the reader to conduct an automobile and walking tour of the battlefield. At each stop, eyewitness accounts are used to reconstruct the events as they occurred, enabling the reader to form his own judgements as to the wisdom of operations, tactics, generalship employed, and the role that the terrain played in shaping the battle. The tour requires approximately four hours to complete if all stops are visited.

A word of explanation concerning designation of units is in order. Federal Corps were numbered in respect to the total armed force of the United States, whereas the Confederate Corps were numbered with respect to the army to which it was assigned. Hence, Grant's army consisted of the Second, Fifth, Sixth and Ninth Corps, while Lee's army was composed of the First, Second and Third Corps. The Union army numbered divisions within corps and brigades within divisions, i.e., First Brigade, Second Division, Fifth Corps. The Confederate army on the other hand, named divisions and brigades for their official commanders, whether actually in command or not. For clarity, where other than official designations are used, the official designation will follow in parentheses and Confederate unit and personal names, except where affiliation is obvious, will be underlined. For example, Denison's Brigade (3/2/V), denotes the Third Brigade, Second division, Fifth Union Corps, while Henagan's Brigade (Kershaw's) would indicate Colonel Henagan was commanding Kershaw's Brigade. In May 1864, many Confederate commanders were no longer commanding their officially designated units. Eyewitness accounts however, generally continued to refer to official unit designations. Though slightly cumbersome, this system used in conjunction with the Order Of Battle provided, should minimize confusion.


Dwight A. Beck
LTC, Armor
U.S. Army


W. F. Shepherd
CDR
U.S. Navy

Order Of Battle

Laurel Hill, Virginia

May 8-13, 1864

Union (1)

Lieutenant General U.S. Grant, Commander, Armies of the United States (present in the field with the Army of the Potomac)

Army of the Potomac - Major General George G. Meade

Second Army Corps - Major General Winfield S. Hancock

First Division - Brigadier General Francis C. Barlow

First Brigade - Colonel Nelson A. Miles

26th Michigan *
61st New York
81st Pennsylvania
140th Pennsylvania
183d Pennsylvania

Second Brigade - Colonel Thomas A. Smyth

28th Massachusetts
63d New York
69th New York
88th New York
116th Pennsylvania

Third Brigade - Colonel Paul Frank

39th New York
52d New York
57th New York
111th New York
125th New York
126th New York

Fourth Brigade - Colonel John R. Brooke

2d Delaware
64th New York
66th New York
53d Pennsylvania
145th Pennsylvania
148th Pennsylvania

* - All units are infantry regiments unless otherwise noted.

Second Division - Brigadier General John Gibbon

First Brigade - Brigadier General Alexander S. Webb

19th Maine
15th Massachusetts
19th Massachusetts
20th Massachusetts
7th Michigan
42d New York
59th New York
82d New York

1st Company, Andrew (Mass.) Sharpshooters

Second Brigade - Brigadier General Joshua T. Owen

152d New York
69th Pennsylvania
71st Pennsylvania
72d Pennsylvania
106th Pennsylvania

Third Brigade - Colonel Samuel S. Carroll

14th Connecticut
1st Delaware
14th Indiana
12th New Jersey
10th New York
108th New York
4th Ohio
8th Ohio
7th West Virginia

Third Division - Major General David B. Birney

First Brigade - Brigadier General J.H.H. Ward

20th Indiana
3d Maine
40th New York
86th New York
124th New York
99th Pennsylvania
110th Pennsylvania
141st Pennsylvania
2d U.S. Sharpshooters

Second Brigade - Brigadier General Alexander Hays

4th Maine
17th Maine
3d Michigan
5th Michigan
93d New York
57th Pennsylvania
63d Pennsylvania
105th Pennsylvania
1st U.S. Sharpshooter

Fourth Division - Brigadier General Gershom Mott

First Brigade - Colonel Robert McAllister

1st Massachusetts
16th Massachusetts
5th New Jersey
6th New Jersey
7th New Jersey
8th New Jersey
11th New Jersey
26th Pennsylvania
115th Pennsylvania

Second Brigade - Colonel William R. Brewster

11th Massachusetts
70th New York
71st New York
72d New York
73d New York
74th New York
120th New York
84th Pennsylvania

Second Corps Artillery - Colonel John C. Tidball

Maine Light, 6th Battery
Massachusetts Light, 10th Battery
New Hampshire Light, 1st Battery
1st New York Light, Battery G
4th New York Heavy, 3d Battalion
1st Pennsylvania Light, Battery F
1st Rhode Island Light, Battery A
1st Rhode Island Light, Battery B
4th U.S. Battery K
5th U.S. Batteries C and I

Fifth Army Corps - Major General Gouverneur K. Warren

First Division - Brigadier General Charles Griffin

First Brigade - Brigadier General Romeyn B. Ayres

140th New York
146th New York
91st Pennsylvania
155th Pennsylvania
2d U.S., 6 Companies
11th U.S., 1st Battalion
12th U.S. 1st and 2d Battalions
14th U.S., 1st Battalion
17th U.S., 2d Battalion

Second Brigade - Colonel Jacob B. Sweitzer

9th Massachusetts
22d Massachusetts
32d Massachusetts
4th Michigan
62d Pennsylvania

Third Brigade - Brigadier General Joseph J. Bartlett

20th Maine
18th Massachusetts
1st Michigan
16th Michigan
44th New York
83d Pennsylvania
118th Pennsylvania

Second Division - Brigadier General John C. Robinson

First Brigade - Colonel Peter Lyle

16th Maine
13th Massachusetts
39th Massachusetts
104th New York

Second Brigade - Colonel Richard Coulter

12th Massachusetts
83d New York
97th New York
11th Pennsylvania
88th Pennsylvania
90th Pennsylvania

Third Brigade - Colonel Andrew W. Denison

1st Maryland
4th Maryland
7th Maryland
8th Maryland

Third Division - Brigadier General Samuel W. Crawford

First Brigade - Colonel William McCandless

1st Pennsylvania Reserves
2d Pennsylvania Reserves
6th Pennsylvania Reserves
7th Pennsylvania Reserves
11th Pennsylvania Reserves
18th Pennsylvania Reserves

Third Brigade - Colonel Joseph W. Fisher

5th Pennsylvania Reserves
8th Pennsylvania Reserves
10th Pennsylvania Reserves
12th Pennsylvania Reserves

Fourth Division - Brigadier General Lysander Cutler

First Brigade - Colonel W.W. Robinson

7th Indiana

19th Indiana

24th Michigan

2d Wisconsin

6th Wisconsin

7th Wisconsin

1st New York Sharpshooters' Battalion

Second Brigade - Brigadier General James C. Rice

76th New York

84th New York

95th New York

147th New York

56th Pennsylvania

Third Brigade - Colonel Edward Bragg

121st Pennsylvania

142d Pennsylvania

143d Pennsylvania

149th Pennsylvania

150th Pennsylvania

Fifth Corps Artillery - Colonel Charles Wainwright

Massachusetts Light, Batteries C and E

1st New York Light, Batteries D, E, H and L

4th New York Heavy, 2d Battalion

1st Pennsylvania Light, Battery B

4th U.S. Battery B

5th U.S. Battery D

Sixth Army Corps - Major General John Sedgwick

First Division - Brigadier General Horatio G. Wright

First Brigade - Colonel Henry W. Brown

1st New Jersey

2d New Jersey

3d New Jersey

4th New Jersey

10th New Jersey

15th New Jersey

Second Brigade - Colonel Emory Upton

5th Maine

121st New York

95th Pennsylvania

96th Pennsylvania

Third Brigade - Brigadier General David A. Russell

6th Maine

49th Pennsylvania

119th Pennsylvania

5th Wisconsin

Fourth Brigade - Brigadier General Alexander Shaler

65th New York
67th New York
122d New York
82d Pennsylvania

Second Division - Brigadier General George W. Getty

First Brigade - Brigadier General Frank Wheaton

62d New York
93d Pennsylvania
98th Pennsylvania
102d Pennsylvania
139th Pennsylvania

Second Brigade - Colonel Lewis A. Grant

2d Vermont
3d Vermont
4th Vermont
5th Vermont
6th Vermont

Third Brigade - Brigadier General Thomas H. Neill

7th Maine
43d New York
49th New York
77th New York
61st Pennsylvania

Fourth Brigade - Brigadier General Henry L. Eustis

7th Massachusetts
10th Massachusetts
37th Massachusetts
2d Rhode Island

Third Division - Brigadier General James B. Ricketts

First Brigade - Brigadier General William H. Morris

14th New Jersey
106th New York
151st New York
87th Pennsylvania
10th Vermont

Second Brigade - Brigadier General Truman Seymour

6th Maryland
110th Ohio
122d Ohio
126th Ohio
67th Pennsylvania
138th Pennsylvania

Sixth Corps Artillery - Colonel Charles H. Tompkins

Maine Light, 4th Battery
Massachusetts Light, 1st Battery
New York Light, 1st and 3d Batteries
1st Rhode Island Light, Batteries C, E and G
5th U.S., Battery M

Army Artillery Reserve - Brigadier General Henry J. Hunt

First Brigade - Colonel J.H. Kitching

6th New York Heavy Battalion
15th New York Heavy Battalion

Second Brigade - Major John A. Tompkins

Maine Light, 5th Battery
1st New Jersey Light, Batteries A and B
New York Light, 5th and 12th Batteries
1st New York Light, Battery B

Third Brigade - Major Robert H. Fitzhugh

Massachusetts Light, 9th Battery
New York Light, 11th and 15th Batteries
1st New York Light, Battery C
1st Ohio Light, Battery H
5th U.S. Battery E

Army Cavalry Corps - Major General Phillip H. Sheridan

First Division - Brigadier General Wesley Merritt

First Brigade - Brigadier General George A. Custer
Second Brigade - Colonel Thomas C. Devin
Reserve Brigade - Brigadier General Wesley Merritt

Second Division - Brigadier General David McM. Gregg

First Brigade - Brigadier General Henry Davies Jr.
Second Brigade - Colonel J. Irvin Gregg

Third Division - Brigadier General James H. Wilson

First Brigade - Colonel John McIntosh
Second Brigade - Colonel George H. Chapman

Horse Artillery - 2 Battalions of 8 Batteries each

Independent Corps **

Ninth Army Corps - Major General Ambrose E. Burnside

First Division - Brigadier General Thomas G. Stevenson
2 infantry brigades / 2 divisional artillery batteries

Second Division - Brigadier General Robert B. Potter
2 infantry brigades / 2 divisional artillery batteries

** - Ninth Corps not attached to Meade's Army of the Potomac, but present at Spotsylvania under direct control of Lieutenant General Grant.

Third Division - Brigadier General Orlando B. Willcox
2 infantry brigades / 2 divisional artillery batteries

Fourth Division - Brigadier General Edward Ferrero
2 infantry brigades / 2 divisional artillery batteries

Corps Artillery - Captain John Edwards Jr.
6 batteries

Confederate (2)

Army of Northern Virginia - General Robert E. Lee

First Army Corps - Major General Richard H. Anderson

Kershaw's Division - Brigadier Joseph B. Kershaw

Henagan's (Kershaw's) Brigade - Col. John W. Henagan

2d South Carolina

3d South Carolina

7th South Carolina

8th South Carolina

15th South Carolina

3d South Carolina Battalion

Wofford's Brigade - Brig. Gen. William T. Wofford

16th Georgia

18th Georgia

24th Georgia

Cobb's Legion (Georgia)

Phillip's Legion (Georgia)

3d Battalion, Georgia Sharpshooters

Humphreys' Brigade - Brig. Gen. Benjamin G. Humphreys

13th Mississippi

17th Mississippi

18th Mississippi

21st Mississippi

Bryan's Brigade - Brigadier General Goode Bryan

10th Georgia

50th Georgia

51st Georgia

53d Georgia

Field's Division - Major General Charles W. Field
Bratton's (Jenkin's) Brigade - Colonel John Bratton
 1st South Carolina
 2d South Carolina
 5th South Carolina
 6th South Carolina
 Palmetto (South Carolina) Sharpshooters
Perry's (Law's) Brigade - Colonel William F. Perry
 4th Alabama
 15th Alabama
 44th Alabama
 47th Alabama
 48th Alabama
Anderson's Brigade - Brig. Gen. George T. Anderson
 7th Georgia
 8th Georgia
 9th Georgia
 11th Georgia
 59th Georgia
Gregg's Brigade - Brigadier General John Gregg
 3d Arkansas
 1st Texas
 4th Texas
 5th Texas
DuBose's (Benning's) Brigade - Col. Dudley M. DuBose
 2d Georgia
 15th Georgia
 17th Georgia
 20th Georgia
Corps Artillery - Brigadier General E. Porter Alexander
Huger's Battalion - Lieutenant Colonel Frank Huger
 Fickling's (South Carolina) Battery
 Moody's (Louisiana) Battery
 Parker's (Virginia) Battery
 J.D. Smith's (Virginia) Battery
 Taylor's (Virginia) Battery
 Woolfolk's (Virginia) Battery
Haskell's Battalion - Major John C. Haskell
 Flanner's (North Carolina) Battery
 Garden's (South Carolina) Battery
 Lampkin's (Virginia) Battery
 Ramsay's (North Carolina) Battery
Cabell's Battalion - Colonel Henry C. Cabell
 Callaway's (Georgia) Battery
 Carlton's (Georgia) Battery
 Mauly's (North Carolina) Battery
 McCarthy's (Virginia) Battery

Second Army Corps - Lieutenant General Richard S. Ewell

Early's Division - Major General Jubal A. Early

Hays' Brigade - Brigadier General Harry T. Hays

5th Louisiana
6th Louisiana
7th Louisiana
8th Louisiana
9th Louisiana

Pegram's Brigade - Brigadier General John Pegram

13th Virginia
31st Virginia
49th Virginia
52d Virginia
58th Virginia

Gordon's Brigade - Brigadier General John B. Gordon

13th Georgia
26th Georgia
31st Georgia
38th Georgia
60th Georgia
61st Georgia

Johnson's Division - Major General Edward Johnson

Stonewall Brigade - Brigadier General James A. Walker

2d Virginia
4th Virginia
5th Virginia
27th Virginia
33d Virginia

Jones' Brigade - Brigadier General John M. Jones

21st Virginia
25th Virginia
42d Virginia
44th Virginia
48th Virginia
50th Virginia

Steuart's Brigade - Brig. Gen. George H. Steuart

1st North Carolina
3d North Carolina
10th Virginia
23d Virginia
37th Virginia

Stafford's Brigade - Brig. Gen. Leroy A. Stafford

1st Louisiana
2d Louisiana
10th Louisiana
14th Louisiana
15th Louisiana

Rodes' Division - Major General Robert E. Rodes

Daniel's Brigade - Brig. General Junius Daniel

32d North Carolina
43d North Carolina
45th North Carolina
53d North Carolina
2d North Carolina Battalion

Ramseur's Brigade - Brigadier General S. D. Ramseur

2d North Carolina
4th North Carolina
14th North Carolina
30th North Carolina

Battle's Brigade - Brigadier General Cullen A. Battle

3d Alabama
5th Alabama
6th Alabama
12th Alabama
26th Alabama

Doles' Brigade - Brigadier General George Dole

4th Georgia
12th Georgia
44th Georgia

Johnston's Brigade - Brigadier General R.D. Johnston

5th North Carolina
12th North Carolina
20th North Carolina
23d North Carolina

Corps Artillery - Brigadier General Armistead L. Long

Hardaway's Battalion - Lt. Col. R.A. Hardaway

Dance's (Virginia) Battery
Graham's (Virginia) Battery
C.B. Griffin's (Virginia) Battery
Jones' (Virginia) Battery
B.H. Smith's (Virginia) Battery

Braxton's Battalion - Lt. Col. C.M. Braxton

Carpenter's (Virginia) Battery
Cooper's (Virginia) Battery
Hardwicke's (Virginia) Battery

Nelson's Battalion - Lt. Col. William Nelson

Kirkpatrick's (Virginia) Battery
Massie's (Virginia) Battery
Milledge's (Georgia) Battery

Cutshaw's Battalion - Major Wilfred E. Cutshaw

Carrington's (Virginia) Battery
A.W. Garber's (Virginia) Battery
Tanner's (Virginia) Battery

Page's Battalion - Major R.C.M. Page
Carter's (Virginia) Battery
Fry's (Virginia) Battery
Page's (Virginia) Battery
Reese's (Alabama) Battery

Third Army Corps - Lieutenant General Ambrose P. Hill*

Mahone's (Anderson's) Division - Brig. Gen. W. Mahone

Perrin's Brigade - Brigadier General Abner Perrin

8th Alabama
9th Alabama
10th Alabama
11th Alabama
14th Alabama

Harris' Brigade - Brigadier General N.H. Harris

12th Mississippi
16th Mississippi
19th Mississippi
48th Mississippi

Weisiger's (Mahone's) Brigade - Col David A. Weisiger

6th Virginia
12th Virginia
16th Virginia
41st Virginia
61st Virginia

Wright's Brigade - Brig. Gen. Ambrose R. Wright

3d Georgia
22d Georgia
48th Georgia
2d Georgia Battalion

Perry's Brigade - Brigadier General Edward A. Perry

2d Florida
5th Florida
8th Florida

Heth's Division - Major General Henry Heth

Davis' Brigade - Brigadier General Joseph R. Davis

3d Mississippi
11th Mississippi
42d Mississippi
48th North Carolina

Kirkland's Brigade - Brigadier General W.W. Kirkland

11th North Carolina
26th North Carolina
44th North Carolina
47th North Carolina
52d North Carolina

* - Replaced due to illness by Early on 8 May.

Mayo's (Walker's) Brigade - Col. Robert M. Mayo

40th Virginia
47th Virginia
55th Virginia
22d Virginia Battalion

Cooke's Brigade - Brigadier General John R. Cooke

15th North Carolina
27th North Carolina
46th North Carolina
48th North Carolina

Archer's Brigade - Brigadier General James J. Archer

13th Alabama
1st Tennessee
7th Tennessee
14th Tennessee

Wilcox's Division - Major General Cadmus M. Wilcox

Lane's Brigade - Brigadier General James H. Lane

7th North Carolina
18th North Carolina
28th North Carolina
33d North Carolina
37th North Carolina

Scales' Brigade - Brigadier General Alfred M. Scales

13th North Carolina
16th North Carolina
22d North Carolina
34th North Carolina
38th North Carolina

McGowan's Brigade - Brig. Gen. Samuel McGowan

1st South Carolina
12th South Carolina
13th South Carolina
14th South Carolina
Orr's South Carolina Rifles (Battalion)

Thomas' Brigade - Brigadier General Edward L. Thomas

14th Georgia
35th Georgia
45th Georgia
49th Georgia

Corps Artillery - Colonel R. Lindsay Walker

Poague's Battalion - Lieutenant Colonel W.T. Poague

Richard's (Mississippi) Battery
Utterback's (Virginia) Battery
Williams' (North Carolina) Battery
Wyatt's (Virginia) Battery

McIntosh's Battalion - Lt. Col. David G. McIntosh

Clutter's (Virginia) Battery
Donald's (Virginia) Battery
Hurt's (Alabama) Battery
Price's (Virginia) Battery

Pegram's Battalion - Lt. Col. William J. Pegram

Brander's (Virginia) Battery
Cayce's (Virginia) Battery
Ellett's (Virginia) Battery
Marye's (Virginia) Battery
Zimmerman's (South Carolina) Battery

Cutts' Battalion - Colonel Allen S. Cutts

Patterson's (Georgia) Battery
Ross' (Georgia) Battery
Wingfield's (Georgia) Battery

Richardson's Battalion - Lt. Col. Charles Richardson

Grandy's (Virginia) Battery
Landry's (Louisiana) Battery
Moore's (Virginia) Battery
Penick's (Virginia) Battery

Army Cavalry Corps - Major General James E. B. Stuart

Hampton's Division - Major General Wade Hampton

Young's Brigade - Brigadier General P.M.B. Young
Rosser's Brigade - Brigadier General Thomas R. Rosser
Butler's Brigade - Brigadier General M. C. Butler

Fitzhugh Lee's Division - Major General Fitzhugh Lee

Lomax's Brigade - Brigadier General Lunsford Lomax
Wickham's Brigade - Brigadier General W.C. Wickham

W.H.F. Lee's Division - Major General W.H.F. Lee

Chambliss' Brigade - Brig. Gen. John R. Chambliss Jr.
Gordon's Brigade - Brigadier General James B. Gordon

Horse Artillery - Major James Breathed

5 Batteries

Opposing Strengths, May 8, 1864

<u>Union [3]</u>	<u>Officers & Men</u>	<u>Artillery Pieces</u>
II Corps	30,382	54
V Corps	27,209	52
VI Corps	23,414	48
IX Corps	19,723	48
Cavalry	20,128	32
Artillery Reserve	5,722	102
Miscellaneous *	<u>19,723</u>	<u> </u>
 Total	 131,225	 334

Confederate [4]

I Corps	10,327	54
II Corps	18,610	73
II Corps	22,891	66
Cavalry	9,173	20
Artillery **	5,074	
Miscellaneous *	<u>652</u>	<u> </u>
 Total	 66,727	 213

* - Includes orderlies, escorts, provost guards, engineer and signal troops.

** - Distributed among Corps in proportion to artillery pieces.

Strategic Overview

"He was to go for Lee and I was to go for Joe Johnston".(5)

That, in the words of Major General William T. Sherman, was the essence of Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant's strategy for ending the war. The first officer to hold that permanent rank since George Washington, Grant, in March 1864, was the new commander of all the Union armies. His charge was relatively simple: defeat the Confederacy before Northern war-weariness caused the war end on terms unacceptable to President Abraham Lincoln. After three years of inconclusive bloodletting on a scale never before witnessed in North America, President Lincoln's political position was precarious. In the coming November elections, he was sure to be opposed by a "peace" candidate. Another summer of stalemate would seriously undermine his chances of remaining in the White House and overseeing the restoration of the Union. "Unconditional Surrender" Grant, the man who had captured two Confederate armies and scattered a third, was both the logical and popular choice to reverse the tide of stalemate and defeat.

From the military perspective, Grant's task was far easier to state than to accomplish. He described the situation thusly:

"When I assumed command... the situation was about this: The Mississippi was guarded from St. Louis to its mouth; the line of Arkansas was held, giving us all the Northwest north of that river. A few points in Louisiana, not remote from the (Mississippi) river, were held by Federal troops, as was the mouth of the Rio Grande. East of the Mississippi, we held substantially all north of the Memphis and Charleston railroad as far east as Chattanooga,... taking in nearly all of the state of Tennessee. West Virginia was in our hands, and also that part of Virginia north of the Rapidan and east

of the Blue Ridge. On the seacoast, we had Fort Monroe and Norfolk in Virginia; Plymouth, Washington and New Berne in North Carolina; Beaufort, Folly and Morris islands, Hilton Head and Port Royal in South Carolina, and Pulaski in Georgia; Fernandina and Pensacola in Florida. The remainder of the Southern territory, an empire in extent, was still in the hands of the enemy."(6)

Grant's principal combat troops, numbering more than a half million soldiers, were organized into six field armies; three each in the East and West, and nineteen military departments responsible for the administration and garrisoning of Federal territory. The Confederates, probably numbering about three hundred thousand troops, had two major armies in the field and lesser forces scattered throughout the South. In the West, Sherman, with three armies, was at Chattanooga, Tennessee. Major General N.P. Banks was operating west of the Mississippi, up Louisiana's Red River with a composite force. In the East, Major General George G. Meade's Army of the Potomac was north of the Rapidan River in Virginia. General Robert E. Lee's Army of North Virginia was entrenched across the river from Meade. Major General Franz Sigel was at Harper's Ferry, West Virginia and Major General Benjamin Butler's Army of the James was being organized and trained around Norfolk, Virginia. (Figure 1 depicts the strategic situation in the spring of 1864.) Grant's strategy hinged on coordinated action to destroy the enemy's ability to continue the war. As he wrote:

"From an early period in the rebellion, I had been impressed with the idea that active and continuous operations of all the troops that could be brought into the field, regardless of season or weather, were necessary to a speedy termination of the war... The armies in the East and West acted independently and without concert, like a balky

team, no two ever pulling together, enabling the enemy to use to great advantage his interior lines of communication for transporting troops from east to west, re-inforcing the army most vigorously pressed... I was firm in the conviction that no peace could be had... until the military power of the rebellion was entirely broken. I therefore determined, first, to use the greatest number of troops practicable against the armed force of the army... second, to hammer continuously against the armed force of the enemy and his resources, until by mere attrition... there should be nothing left to him but submission."(7)

In orchestrating concerted action, Grant regarded the Army of the Potomac as the center; all west to Memphis as the right wing; the Army of the James, which he intended to move against Richmond from the east, as the left; and all the troops south as a force in the enemy's rear.(8)
Concentration became Grant's immediate concern:

"Some (troops garrisoning the coast) were occupying positions from which they could not render service appropriate to their numerical strength. All such were depleted to the minimum necessary to hold their positions as a guard against blockade runners; when they could not do this, their positions were abandoned altogether. In this way, ten thousand men were added to the Army of the James from South Carolina alone.... Officers and soldiers on furlough, of whom there were many thousands, were ordered to

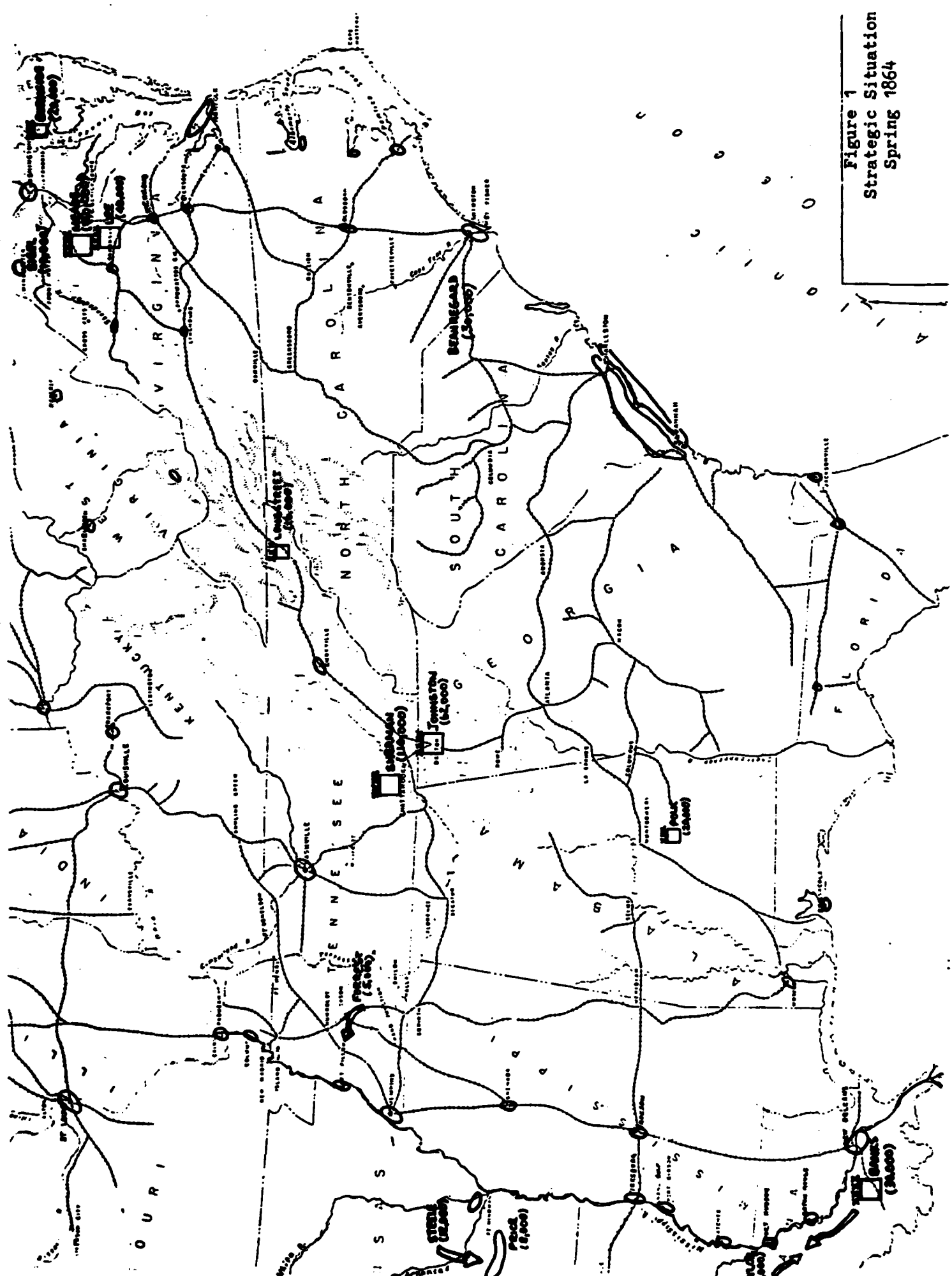


Figure 1
 Strategic Situation
 Spring 1864

their proper commands.... The problem was to accomplish it (concentration) in time to advance at the earliest moment the roads would permit."⁽⁹⁾

In a letter to Sherman on April 4, Grant outlined his strategic plan:

"I have sent orders to Bank's *... to commence operations against Mobil as soon as he can. It will be impossible for him to commence too early...

"Butler... (will) operate against Richmond from the south side of the James River... I will stay with the Army of the Potomac, increased by Burnside's (IX) corps of not less than twenty-five thousand effective men, and operate directly against Lee's army, wherever it may be found...

"Sigel... to move against the Virginia and Tennessee Railroad.

"You I propose to move against Johnston's army, to break it up and get into the interior of the enemy's country as far as you can, inflicting all the damage you can against their war resources".⁽¹⁰⁾

Similar instructions were issued to Meade on the 9th, specifically directing him to make Lee's army his objective.⁽¹¹⁾

Grant's strategy was both far-sighted and bold. It envisioned an immense wheel by the right wing under Sherman through Atlanta and deep into Lee's rear. Meade, in the center, was to fix Lee's army and be the pivot in the wheel. Both Sigel and Butler would assist Meade by operating on Lee's flanks and rear. Lesser forces would isolate

*Bank's Red River campaign became a minor Union disaster. He was unable to disengage in time to participate in Grant's plan.

Confederate forces in the West and hold captured ports. Grant's aim was to seek battle as the most effective method of attriting irreplaceable Confederate soldiers. Not only would these armies hammer the enemy day after day, but as they advanced they would destroy the South's capacity to wage war. Grant's strategy was a break with early nineteenth century preoccupation with territorial objectives and, in its execution, foreshadowed the modern era of war.

On the Confederate side, the strategic options were indeed limited. With the fall of Vicksburg and Chattanooga, the Confederacy had been halved and then halved again. Foreign intervention was no longer a realistic possibility and the Federal blockade was beginning to have a telling effect on imports. Never before had Confederate armies been so scantily supplied with food and clothing.⁽¹²⁾ Most importantly, the South was nearing the bottom of the manpower pool. The appalling losses of the summer before could no longer be replaced. Moreover, Richmond and Atlanta had to be defended. Both were major industrial and transportation centers, and therefore critical to the South's ability to continue the war.

Various plans during the winter of 1863-64 proposed the reinforcement of one or the other of the Confederate armies in order to launch an offensive campaign. The intent of those proposals was to relieve the pressure on the front of at least one of the armies long enough for the Confederates to use their interior lines to support an offensive designed to inflict a major defeat on one of the Federal armies, and force Grant back on the defensive. These proposals, however, were eventually rejected because either Lee or Johnston, or both, objected to each proposal.

Confederate strategy, either by design or default, was purely defensive and centered on holding Richmond and Atlanta. The outlook, however, was by no means hopeless. There was a strong feeling that if the war could be prolonged sufficiently, the peace movement in the north might eventually prevail and the war would terminate on terms acceptable to Richmond. The South still possessed the means to prolong the war. Both Confederate armies were composed of seasoned, battle-hardened veterans and both were ably led. In Robert E. Lee, the South had the war's most successful general. He had demonstrated time and again his army's ability to defeat numerically superior forces. Bold and aggressive, Lee wrote President Jefferson Davis in mid-April, outlining his concept for thwarting Grant's plan:

"... I would propose that I draw Longstreet* to me and move right against the enemy on the Rappahannock. Should God

give us a crowning victory there, all their plans would be dissipated..."(13)

Early in May, the Federal armies began to move in accordance with Grant's plan. Sherman attacked Johnston in northern Georgia, beginning the campaign that would capture Atlanta and end in Johnston's surrender the next spring. In the East, the Army of the Potomac, accompanied by Grant, crossed the Rapidan and began the bloodiest campaign of America's bloodiest war.

* Lieutenant General James Longstreet was then returning from East Tennessee with the First Corps, Army of Northern Virginia.

Operational Overview

The immediate objective of Grant's campaign plan was the destruction of the Army of Northern Virginia. The most successful and powerful of the Confederate armies, and the only one in a position to immediately threaten vital Union interests, its destruction was the key to ending the war. Grant's letter to Meade on the 9th of April emphasized the objective of the campaign in unmistakable terms:

"...Lee's army will be your objective point. Wherever Lee goes, there you will go also." (14)

He underscored his understanding of the importance of this objective to Union war aims when he announced that Army Headquarters, formally in Washington, D.C., would henceforth be in the field with the Army of the Potomac.

Grant's plan hinged on bringing Lee to battle outside the defenses of Richmond since, as he described it:

"Richmond was fortified and entrenched so perfectly that one man inside to defend was more than equal to five outside besieging or assaulting. To get possession of Lee's army was the first great objective. With the capture of his army Richmond would necessarily follow. It was better to fight him outside of his stronghold than in it." (15)

Meade's Army of the Potomac, however, would not act alone. To help weaken the Army of Northern Virginia and restrict Lee's freedom of movement, Grant planned to strike his flanks and rear at the same time Meade confronted him directly. Major General Benjamin Butler's 40,000-man Army of the James was to attack Richmond from the south. Butler's operation would cut Richmond's supply lines from the south and tie down the few remaining Confederate reserves in defending the city. At the same time, Major General Franz Sigel was to move against the railroads connecting Richmond to the Shenandoah Valley and Tennessee. With Lee's major supply lines severed and Richmond threatened, Major General Andrew A. Humphreys, Meade's chief of staff, saw the plan as giving:

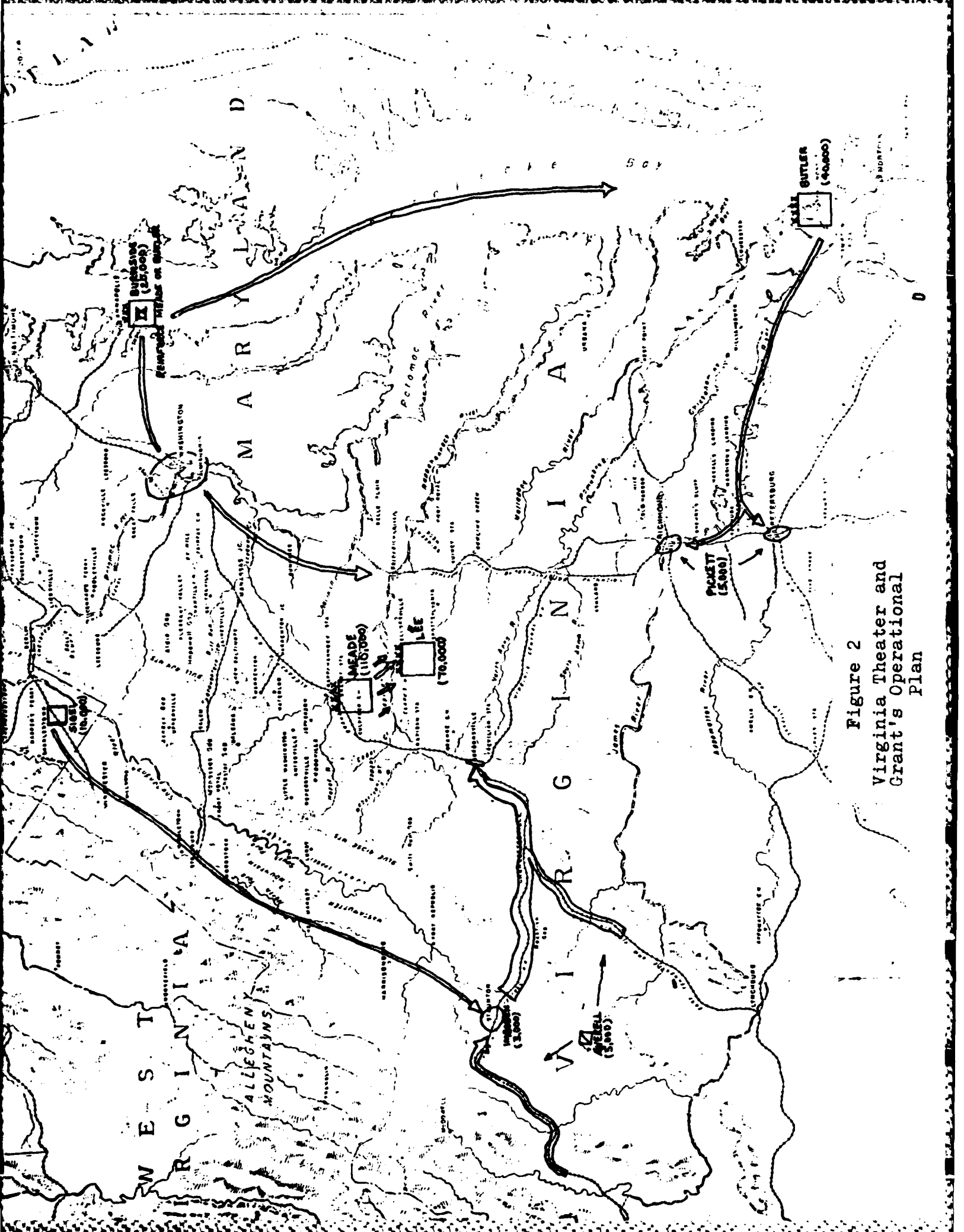


Figure 2
Virginia Theater and
Grant's Operational
Plan

"great opportunities of flanking operations by the whole army...and therefore...more opportunities of success in destroying the power of the Army of Northern Virginia".(16)

The theater of operations and Grant's campaign plan are shown in figure 2.

Before executing the plan, Grant moved to reorganize and strengthen his forces. First, he consolidated the Army of the Potomac from five into three infantry corps. In addition to concentrating the army's striking power and simplifying command and control arrangements, the consolidation enabled Grant to rid the army of those corps commanders he found least fit. The cavalry corps commander similarly did not favorably impress Grant, and Major General Philip H. Sheridan was brought in from the Western Theater to replace him. He confirmed, however, Meade as the Army of the Potomac commander, saying that he intended to give:

"...all orders for the movements of the Army of the Potomac to Meade to have them executed."(17)

Ironically, this arrangement was almost exactly the same as Grant had found intolerable two years before when his operations were overseen by then departmental commander Major General Henry W. Halleck.

Most importantly for long-term mobility and combat effectiveness, Grant encouraged the streamlining of the Army of the Potomac's quartermaster service. Recognizing the area of intended operations was nearly devoid of food and forage, he prepared to supply the army efficiently from its immense train of more than four thousand wagons.(18) Years later, he described the measures taken:

"... With a wagon train that would have extended from the Rapidan to Richmond, stretched along in single file... we could still carry only three days' forage and about ten to twelve days' rations, besides a supply of ammunition. To overcome all difficulties, the chief quartermaster, General

Rufus Ingalls, had marked on each wagon the corps badge with the division color and the number of the brigade... The wagons were also marked to note the contents: if ammunition, whether for artillery or infantry; if forage, whether grain or hay. Empty wagons were never allowed to follow the army or stay in camp. As soon as a wagon was empty, it would return to its base of supply for a load of precisely the same article that had been taken from it... Arriving near the army they (full wagons) would be parked in fields nearest to the brigades they belonged to. Issues, except of ammunition, were made at night in all cases. By this system, the hauling of forage for the supply trains was almost wholly dispensed with. They consumed theirs at the depot".(19)

Finally, Grant positioned his last uncommitted reserve, Major General Ambrose E. Burnside's Ninth Corps at Annapolis, Maryland. From there, Burnside's twenty thousand troops were well placed to reinforce or support either the Army of the Potomac or the Army of the James.

By April 27th, Grant was sufficiently satisfied with preparations to order the advance as soon as the roads dried enough to support troop movements.(20) His confidence was reflected in a letter to the Army Chief Of Staff, Major General Henry Halleck:

"The Army of the Potomac is in splendid condition and evidently feels like whipping somebody."(21)

The remaining question was where to do the whipping? Grant favored flanking Lee out of his Mine Run trench lines by moving east, taking advantage of easy access to water transportation that would serve to ease the problem of resupplying the army. Meade preferred a movement by Lee's left flank, primarily to avoid the possibility of becoming

entangled in the Wilderness, an untamed region of second growth timber and dense undergrowth. Lee had used the Wilderness to great advantage the year before to defeat the Army of the Potomac at Chancellorsville. Grant explained the factors that influenced his decision in these words:

"At this time I was not entirely decided as to whether I should move the Army of the Potomac by the right flank of the enemy, or the left. Each plan presented advantages. If by his right - my left -, the Potomac, Chesapeake Bay and tributaries would furnish us an easy line over which to bring all supplies to within easy hauling distance of every position the army could occupy from the Rapidan to the James River. But Lee could if he chose, detach or move his whole army north on a line rather interior to the one I would have to take in following. A movement by his left - our right - would obviate this; but all that was done would have to be done with the supplies and ammunition we started with. All idea of adopting this latter plan was abandoned when the limited quantity of supplies possible to take with us was considered."(22)

On May 4th, with all finally in readiness, the Federal offensive began. Butler's army embarked in transports at Fort Monroe, Virginia for the trip up the James River to Richmond, and Meade began crossing the Rapidan River at Germanna Ford and moving into the Wilderness.

Lee, meanwhile, had correctly divined the Federal plan. By mid-April, he was anticipating the attacks on his flanks in the Valley and at Richmond, as well as the main assault across the Rapidan.(23) The key to thwarting the Union plan, in Lee's view, was to defeat Grant's main thrust by seizing the initiative and attacking the Army of the Potomac at the first opportunity. Lee began gathering his forces, recalling Longstreet's First Corps from the Virginia - Tennessee border and concentrating the other two corps

already south of the Rapidan.(24) Though not unmindful of the threat to his flanks, Meade's army was clearly Lee's primary concern. In the Shenandoah Valley, Major General John C. Breckenridge, a former Vice President of the United States, was left to cope with Sigel as best he could. As events unfolded, Breckenridge's meager force, augmented by cadets from the Virginia Military Institute, soundly defeated Sigel on May 15th at New Market, driving him from the Valley and temporarily ending the threat from that quarter. To guard Richmond, Lee recommended that President Jefferson Davis hasten forward General P.G.T. Beauregard with all his available forces from North Carolina.(25) Beauregard was ordered north, arriving in Richmond in time to confront Butler.

On Lee's front, the veterans of his army, despite their privations, were confident and in excellent spirits.(26) Many believed this would be the war's climactic campaign. Colonel Walter Taylor, writing his sister just before the Wilderness battle, echoed the sentiments of much of the army:

"The beginning of the end is, I believe, at hand... Never did matters look so bright for us."(27)

Lee too was confident and hoping that Grant would choose precisely the course of action he did. In the Wilderness, Grant's numerical superiority would be largely offset by the restricted maneuver space and, with the region's limited visibility and thick forestation, his superior artillery would be nearly useless. If Grant moved into the Wilderness, Lee's intent was to attack with his whole army.(28) A dispatch from Lee's staff to Lieutenant General Richard S. Ewell, commanding the Second Corps, reveals something of Lee's readiness for combat:

"If the enemy... comes this way, we will take up our old line. The General's desire is to bring him to battle as soon now as possible."(29)

Grant, aware of the Wilderness hazards, hoped to pass the army through and into the open country beyond before Lee could react effectively. Lee, however, well aware of Grant's general position, advanced his forces. The two armies made contact on May 5th, and the engagement quickly became general. For two days, desperate fighting at close quarters, often hand-to-hand, ensued. The fighting surged back and forth, with neither side able to attain a

substantial advantage. When the fighting subsided on the 7th, Grant had sustained some 17,500 casualties and Lee about half that figure.(30) The two exhausted armies occupied the positions shown in figure 3 on the morning of May 7th.

Butler, meanwhile, had landed the Army of the James at Bermuda Hundred, a narrow peninsula formed by the James and Appomattox Rivers, fifteen miles south of Richmond. Thwarted in his attempts to capture Petersburg or cut the railroad to Richmond by Beauregard's 10,000 Confederates, Butler by mid-month had entrenched on the peninsula and had largely ceased to be a threat. As Grant disgustedly wrote, Butler's ineptitude had served to:

"... limit very materially the further usefulness of the Army of the James as a distinct factor in the campaign."(31)

By the end of the month, Grant had stripped Butler of five divisions to supplement the ranks of the Army of the Potomac.

Stalemated in the Wilderness and with his flanking operations accomplishing little, Grant was forced to consider his next move. His after-action report described the situation:

"On the morning of the 7th, reconnoissance showed that the enemy had fallen behind his entrenched lines... From this it was evident to my mind that the two days' fighting had satisfied him of his inability to further maintain the contest in the open field, notwithstanding his advantage of position, and that he would await an attack behind his works."(32)

Grant had several options open. He could retreat across the Rapidan or Rappahannock; move to Fredericksburg, regroup and open a new supply line; or renew the movement toward the left. Either of the first two would have yielded the initiative to Lee and seriously damaged the morale of the army. Grant decided to again try to flank Lee by moving to

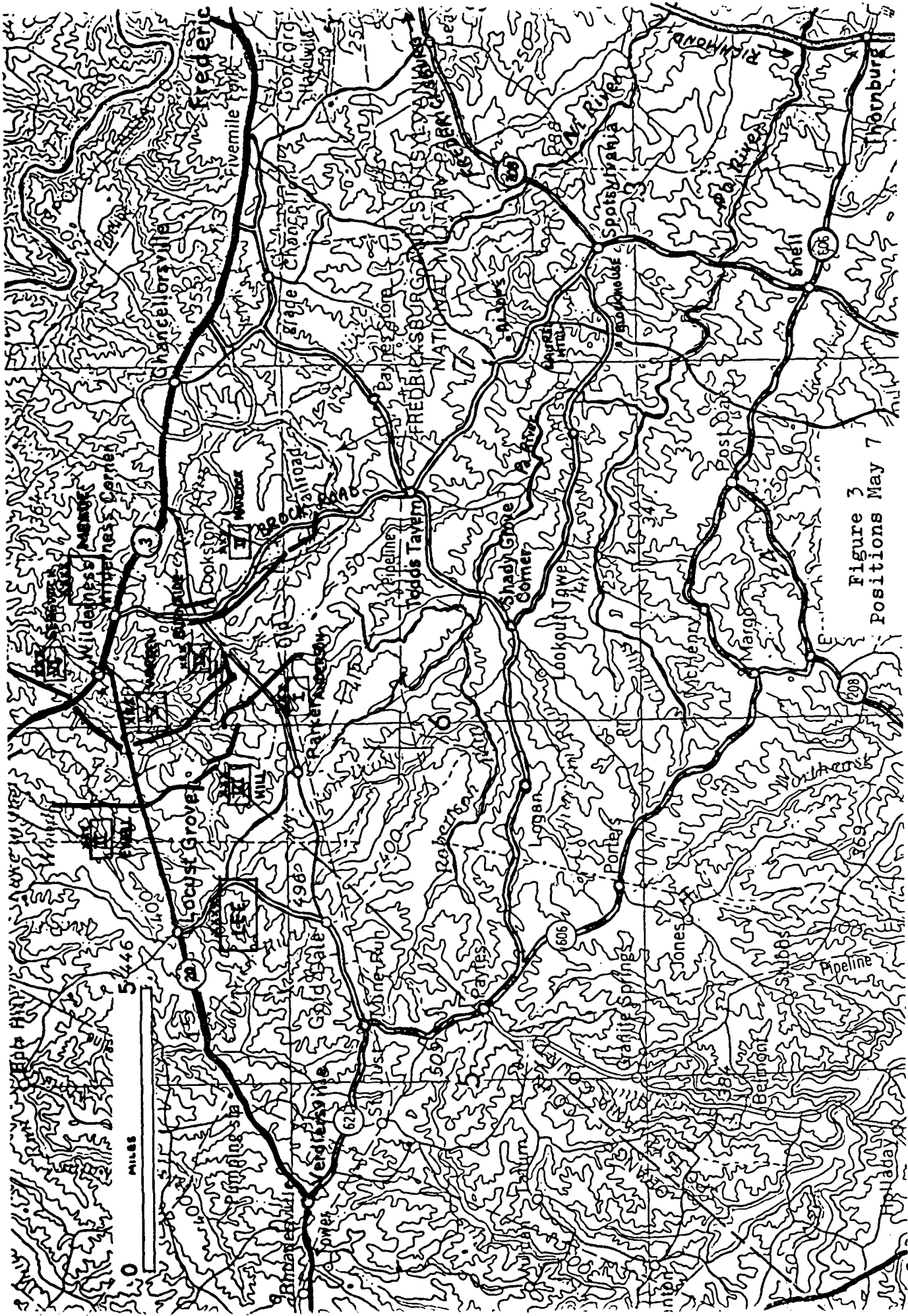


Figure 3
Positions May 7

Spotsylvania* Court House. A tiny hamlet, Spotsylvania's importance derived from its proximity to the major roads south to Richmond and to Hanover Junction, where the Virginia Central and Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac railroads intersected. Grant explained the operational considerations which motivated his decision in his memoirs:

"My object in moving to Spotsylvania was two-fold: first, I did not want Lee to get back to Richmond in time to crush Butler before I could get there; second, I wanted to get between his army and Richmond if possible; and if not, draw him into the open field."(33)

Additionally, he was anxious to unite with Butler. As he explained to Lieutenant Colonel Adam Badeau, his secretary, on May 8th:

"My effort will be to form a junction with Butler as early as possible, and be prepared to meet any enemy interposing..."(34)

Accordingly, Grant instructed Meade early Saturday morning, May 7th, to prepare the army for a night march.(35) Meade, in turn, issued the necessary order in mid-afternoon, instructing Warren's Fifth Corps, in the lead, to march for Spotsylvania at 2030 hours by the most direct route, the Brock Road.(36) Major General John Sedgwick's Sixth Corps was directed to move at the same hour by way of Chancellorsville and Piney Branch Church. He was also to seize the Blockhouse Road. The Second Corps, under Major General Winfield S. Hancock, was ordered to follow Warren as far as Todd's Tavern. The trains, temporarily, were to concentrate at Chancellorsville. Sheridan's orders were simply to keep the corps commanders advised as to the enemy's whereabouts. Burnside's Ninth Corps was separately instructed to follow the Sixth Corps. Routes of march are shown in figure 4.

The ordered movement required the Union trains to be set in motion in mid-afternoon to clear the roads for the troops. When Grant failed to renew the attack that morning and, later, his trains were observed moving, Lee decided

* - Modern spelling; formerly spelled Spottsylvania.

to act. Earlier in the day, he had observed to Brigadier General John Gordon:

"Grant is not going to retreat. He will move his army to Spotsylvania... that is the next point at which the armies will meet."(37)

Earlier, to guard against the contingency that Grant would opt to move to Spotsylvania or Fredericksburg, Lee had directed Major General William Pendleton, his artillery chief, to cut a road from the Confederate right to the Shady Grove Road, a route roughly parallel to the Union direct line of march to Spotsylvania.(38) Late in the afternoon, Lee directed Major General Richard H. Anderson, commanding the First Corps in place of the wounded Longstreet, to move his corps, by way of Pendleton's road, to Spotsylvania Court House.(39) Anderson was ordered to begin the march at 0300 hours on the 8th. Lieutenant General A.F. Hill's Third and Ewell's Second Corps were to follow when the situation to their front permitted. The race for Spotsylvania was on, with each side having about the same distance to cover.

Warren's corps began moving at about 2100 hours. Progress down the narrow road was slowed by the exhaustion of the troops and smoke from the burning woods of the Wilderness. At Todd's Tavern, the Fifth Corps was delayed for an hour and a half by Meade's cavalry escort obstructing the road.(40) It was nearly 0330 hours when the column cleared Todd's Tavern.(41) A mile beyond that point, Brigadier General Wesley Merritt's cavalry was trying to clear Major General Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry from the road. Fighting dismounted, Lee's troopers had felled trees across the road and were contesting the Union advance fiercely. Merritt was making little headway. Finally, about daylight, Brigadier General John Robinson, leading Warren's advance, replaced Merritt's cavalry with his infantry and drove the Confederates from position to position down the Brock Road.(42) About two hours later, Robinson reached a fork in the road, three miles from the courthouse: an area known locally as Laurel Hill.

Anderson began his march about the same hour as Warren, some six hours earlier than Lee had ordered.(43) Anderson decided to march early because:

"Upon withdrawing the corps from its place in line of

battle... I found the woods on fire and burning furiously in every direction, and there was no suitable place for a rest. The road by which I was conducted was narrow and frequently obstructed, so that at best the progress of the troops was slow, and the guide having informed me that it preserved the same character until near Spottsylvania Courthouse. I decided to continue the march until I should be in easy reach of that place."(44)

Anderson's line of march was unobstructed. By midnight, Sheridan's orders to his cavalry commanders to picket the roads between the Wilderness and Spottsylvania had not reached the field. On reaching Todd's Tavern, Meade found much of the Union cavalry bivouacked in the fields on either side of the Brock Road. Meade ordered the cavalry to move out down the Brock Road and the Catharpin Road between Todd's Tavern and the Shady Grove Road; but by then it was too late.(45) Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry was already in place on the Brock Road and Major General Wade Hampton's division was covering the Catharpin Road at Corbin's Bridge over the Po River. So badly served by the cavalry was the army, that Grant and Meade, taking the wrong road in the dark, nearly blundered into Hampton's troops.(46)

Pushing on through the night, Anderson reached Laurel Hill just ahead of Warren, rendering what the foremost historian of The Army of Northern Virginia characterized as his greatest service to the Confederacy.(47)

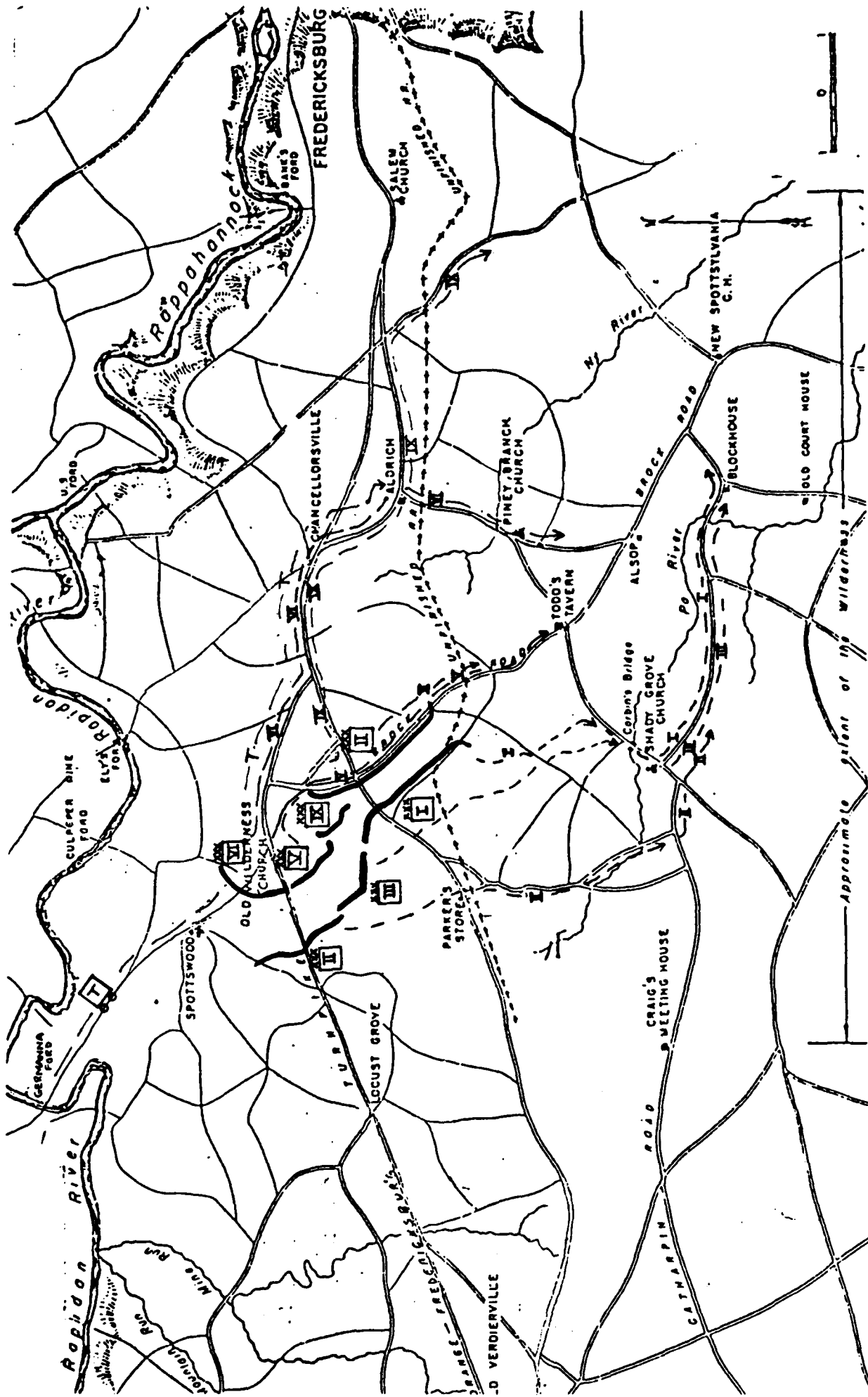


Figure 4
 Routes of March - Wilderness
 to Spotsylvania

The Battlefield (48)

In May 1864, Spotsylvania Courthouse, seat of a sparsely populated agrarian county, was a sleepy village consisting of a courthouse, hotel and a few scattered residences. Its military value accrued from its proximity to the major north-south lines of communication. Four miles to the east lay the Telegraph road (U.S. Route 1), the major road between Richmond and Fredericksburg. Twenty-five miles to the southeast, the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac and Virginia Central railroads met at Hanover Junction. Both railroads were important supply lines for Richmond and the Army of Northern Virginia. The road network through Spotsylvania offered a choice of routes to Hanover and beyond to Richmond. Additionally, a good road (state route 208) connected Spotsylvania and Fredericksburg, through which Grant's supply line to Belle Plain ran.

The battlefield is drained by two rivers, the Po and the Ny, running generally east-west. Though both were shallow and fordable by individuals, steep, tree-lined banks made them impassable by organized bodies of troops except at bridges. The Po crossed the Confederate line of march in two places; on the Catharpin Road (state route 612) two miles south of Todd's Tavern, and on the Shady Grove Road (state route 608) about three miles southwest of the Courthouse. Bridges existed at both points: Corbin's on the Catharpin Road; and a wooden structure on the Shady Grove Road. The bridge on the Shady Grove Road was named after the Blockhouse, a square wooden structure located a mile to the west at the intersection with the Old Courthouse Road (state route 648). The Blockhouse was destroyed by fire in the late 1970's and an historical marker now indicates its former site. To the north, the Fredericksburg Road was bridged across the Ny one and one-half miles from the Courthouse.

Two miles to the west of Spotsylvania Courthouse is a range of low hills which initially run to the north, then swing to the east and finally cross the Fredericksburg Road about half a mile to the northeast of the village. These hills, or ridges, became Lee's defensive position during the battle. Figure 5 is a modern topographical map of the Spotsylvania battlefield, which depicts the location of major landmarks and superimposes the lines of the opposing armies. The countryside surrounding Spotsylvania in 1864 was heavily wooded, with occasional farms occupying large cleared areas. Ground cover as it exists today within the National Military Park north of the Brock Road, is essentially the same as it was in 1864.

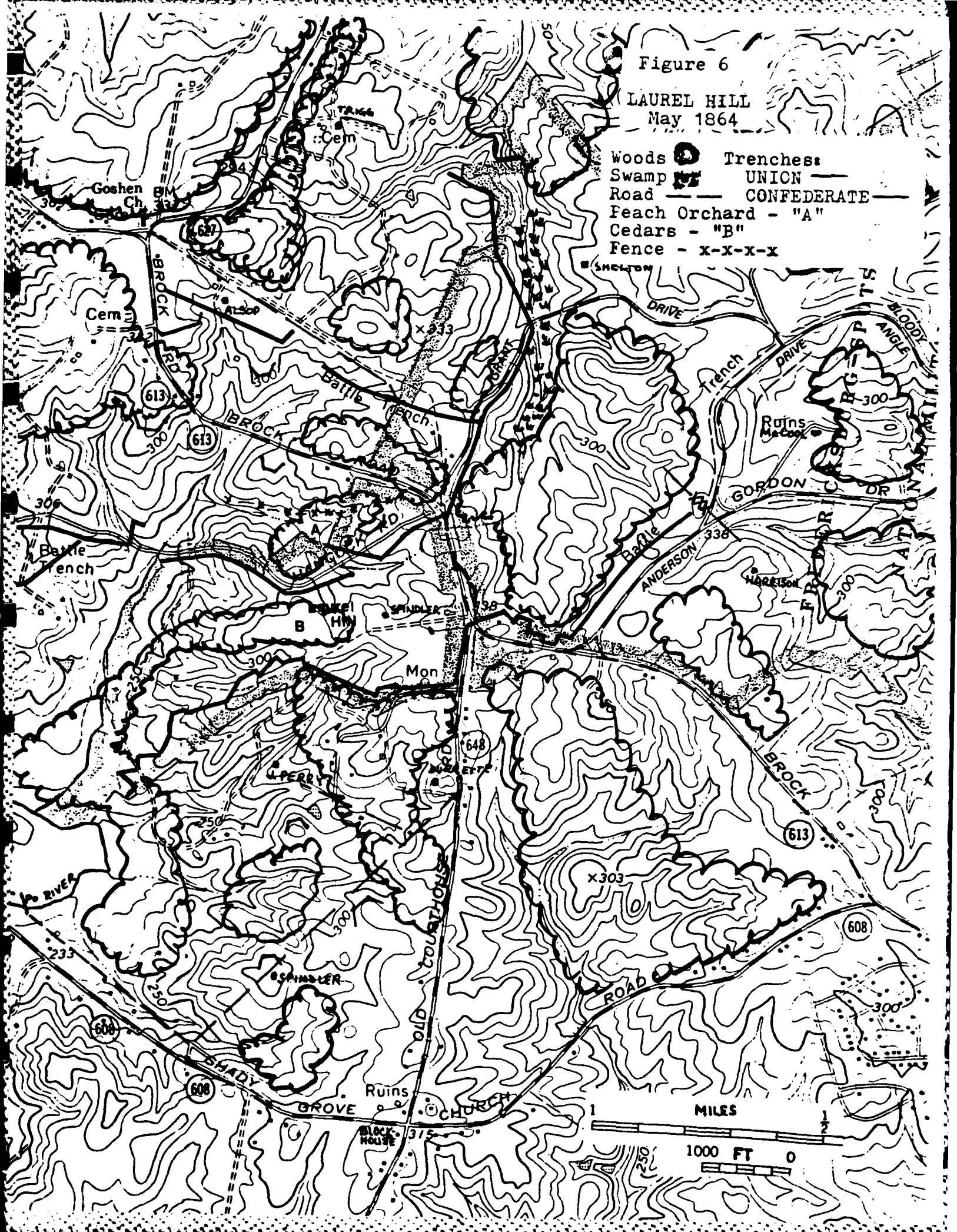
Laurel Hill was the local appellation for that area of the Spotsylvania battlefield southwest of the Brock Road between

its present day junction with Grant Road and Old Courthouse Road (state route 648). Figure 6 is a topographical map of Laurel Hill with the significant ground cover patterns and landmarks of 1864, and a trace of the opposing lines superimposed. The area north of the picket fence, which ran just south of today's Hancock Road, was probably part of the Alsop farm while that to the south belonged to the Spindlers. The Spindler house was located on Laurel Hill, but had burned sometime before the battle. Consequently, no trace of it remains today. Most of what were Anderson's trench lines on the Spindler farm have been destroyed as a result of years of cultivation; however, most of Warren's trench lines have been preserved and are easily identifiable.

Figure 6

LAUREL HILL
May 1864

Woods Trenches
Swamp UNION
Road CONFEDERATE
Peach Orchard - "A"
Cedars - "B"
Fence - x-x-x-x



Tactical Overview

"After a sharp encounter with the Fifth Army Corps and Torbert's division of cavalry, General R.H. Anderson with the advance of the army repulsed the enemy with heavy slaughter and took possession of the Courthouse. I am the more grateful to the giver of victory that our loss was small".(49)

Robert E. Lee's cryptic message to Secretary of War James A. Seddon reassured the government that, once again, the Army of Northern Virginia was between the invader and Richmond. Lee, however, had good cause to be grateful: the race for Spotsylvania Courthouse had been won by a margin of minutes.

Warren's lead division, Robinson's Second, reached the fork of the Brock Road at Alsop's farm (see Figure 7) about 0800 hours on May 8th. Robinson's brigades, in ragged line of battle, took the left, or main fork,(50) pursuing the retreating cavalry and nearly capturing a section of horse artillery.(51) Emerging into the open south of Alsop's, where the two forks of the Brock Road reunite, Robinson halted to regroup his disordered regiments. His official report outlines the action that followed:

"... I could plainly see the enemy's line in the edge of the timber beyond. I here halted and reformed the division, and again advanced to the attack... I placed myself at their head and led them forward... At this moment, a part of Griffin's division advanced out of the woods on my right. Cheering my men on, we had arrived within 50 yards of the works when I received a musket ball in the leg... as I was borne from the field I saw our troops were repulsed and the attack had failed."(52)

Robinson had expected to attack Confederate cavalry. Instead, he found veteran infantry from Anderson's First Corps.

Anderson's column reached the Blockhouse Bridge over the Po about daylight, where he halted for breakfast.(53) After an hour's rest, the march was resumed and shortly thereafter Anderson received calls for assistance from both Brigadier General Thomas Rosser, whose cavalry brigade was being driven from Spotsylvania Courthouse by Brigadier General James Wilson's Federal cavalry division, and Fitzhugh Lee, hard pressed by Robinson's infantry near the Alsop farm. Henagan's (Kershaw's) and Humphreys' brigades of Major General Joseph Kershaw's division, and Perry's (Law's) brigade of Major General Charles Field's division, along with Haskell's artillery battalion, filed left and hurried to the aid of Fitzhugh Lee.(54) The remainder of the Corps continued the march to the Courthouse. The Confederate infantry reached Fitzhugh Lee's position across the Brock Road and filed in behind the rail piles felled by the cavalry when the attacking Federals were only sixty yards distant.(55) Canister from Haskell's guns and the infantry's disciplined volleys quickly repulsed the attackers. Robinson's shattered brigades fell back to Alsop's farm, pursued part of the way by Humphreys' Mississippians, and entrenched.(56) The division would be broken up the next day; its brigades distributed among the other three divisions of the Fifth Corps.

Brigadier General Joseph Bartlett's brigade (3/1/V), which had gone in on Robinson's right, reformed under cover of the First Division's other two brigades which were sheltered in the right fork of the Brock Road. As soon as it had formed, Brigadier General Charles Griffin, commanding the First Division, ordered it forward again. This attack succeeded in reaching the high ground near the ruins of the Spindler house.(57) Griffin held the position as Brigadier General Samuel Crawford's Third Division, the Pennsylvania Reserves, came up on his left, cleared the woods of Confederates at the road junction and established a defensive line.

It was now about 1100 hours and Field's other four brigades, having driven Wilson from Spotsylvania Courthouse, began arriving at Laurel Hill. Flanking Griffin on his right, they forced him to retire about 200 yards.(59) Before the Confederates could press their advantage further, Brigadier General Lysander Cutler's Fourth Division attacked to Griffin's right, driving Field's troops back.(60) Both sides now began to entrench. By 1230 hours, the fighting had subsided to skirmishing and artillery exchanges. Warren was forced to tell Meade he was stymied:

"We have finally succeeded in pushing back the enemy as

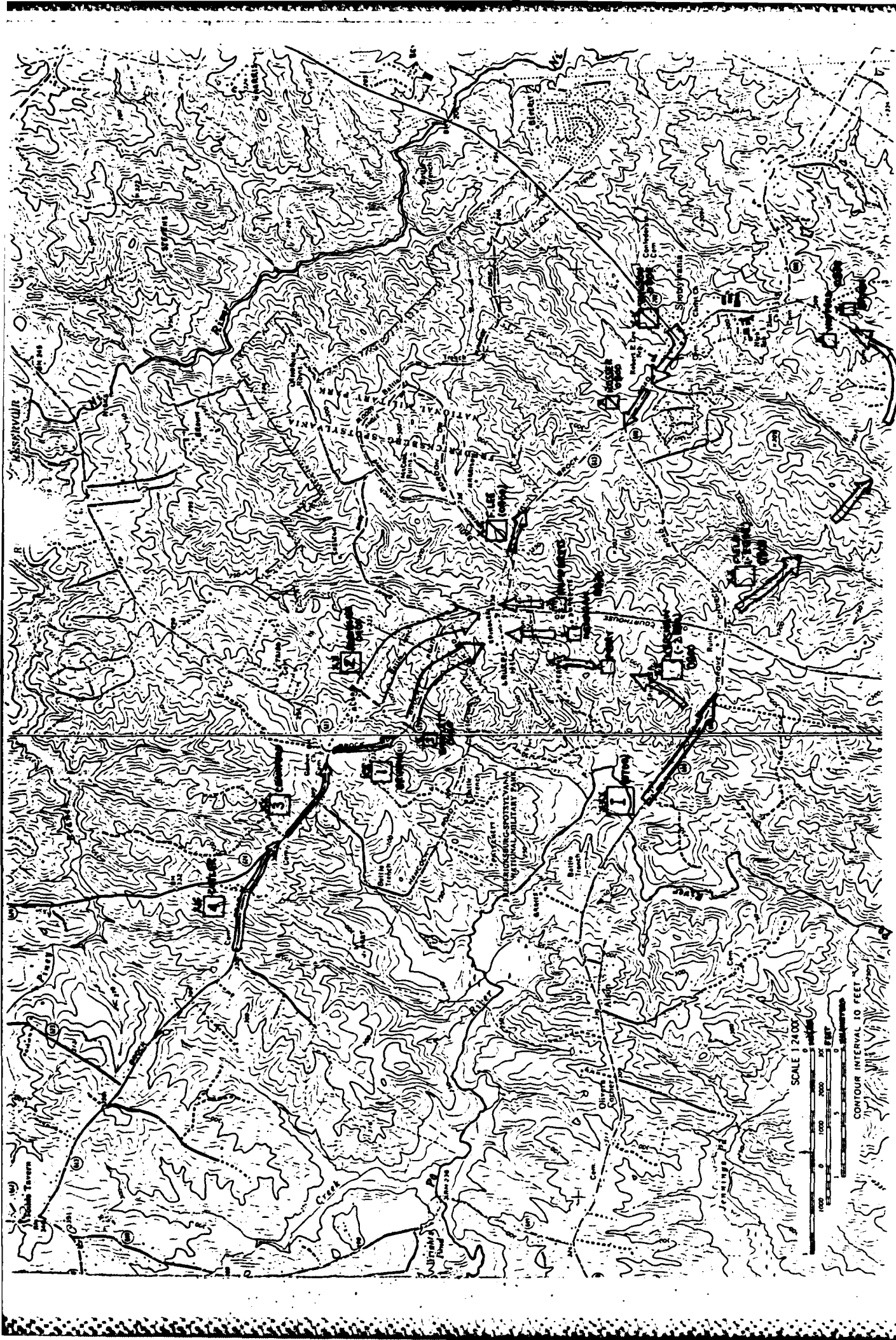


Figure 7
Advance on Laurel Hill

far as we have tried, but have not yet gained the junction of the Catharpin (the old Courthouse Road is meant) Road with the one I have been moving on... I have again suffered heavily, especially in stragglers. The Second Division (Robinson's) is quite disorganized... I have done my best, but with the force I now have I cannot attack again unless I see very great weakness in the enemy's left flank. It would be well to send troops of Sedgwick's... to me, and to move on with Hancock's... I... have taken prisoners from at least two divisions of Longstreet's corps... I cannot gain Spottsylvania Courthouse with what force I have... You can best judge whether I can be spared more assistance... I would like to have it from both Sedgwick and Hancock. I am out of ammunition."(61)

Within the hour, Brigadier General Horatio Wright's First Division of the Sixth Corps arrived, one brigade extending the left of Warren's line and three to the right. Meade's reply to Warren's message arrived shortly after Wright:

"Sedgwick's whole corps is sent to join you in the attack on the wing... It is of the utmost importance the attack of yourself and Sedgwick be made with vigor and without delay."(62)

Despite Meade's urgings, the afternoon was consumed in bringing up the remainder of Sedgwick's corps and planning the assault. Sedgwick arrived in mid-afternoon, and by virtue of seniority, took command of the attacking forces.(63) In addition to the Sixth Corps, Brigadier General John Gibbon's Second Division was sent to Warren's right flank from the Second Corps. The Confederates used the afternoon lull to throw up fieldworks and position additional artillery.

With his forces in position at last, Sedgwick ordered an attack by the Fifth and Sixth Corps in late afternoon. The advance, which stepped off at about 1700 hours, was characterized as more of a reconnaissance than an attack by Brigadier General John Bratton, commanding a brigade of defenders.(64) Crawford's division, however, followed up the initial attack on the far left. Passing over an open field and through the woods, his line overlapped the Confederate right and struck Major General Robert Rodes' division of Ewell's Second Corps, which was just filing in on Anderson's right. Rhodes' counterattack succeeded in driving Crawford back, but not before the Sixth Alabama Regiment was mauled, losing its colors to the Twenty-Second Massachusetts Regiment.(65) The opposing forces occupied the positions shown in Figure 8 at the close of fighting on May 8th.

Meade's order for May 9th ruled out offensive operations that day.(66) Both sides used the day for rest, distribution of rations and ammunition, entrenching and disentangling intermingled units. The Sixth Corps, with some confusion, was consolidated east of the Brock Road,(67) and Crawford's division was moved to the Union right.(68) On the Confederate side, Kershaw's division was united east of the Brock Road and Field's to the west of it. Corps artillery was placed along the line and dug in. Skirmishing, sniping and artillery exchange continued throughout the day, claiming the life of Major General John Sedgwick. Command of Sixth Corps was passed to Brigadier General Horatio Wright.

Sheridan, after a heated argument with Meade over responsibility for misuse of the cavalry during the march from the Wilderness, was released by Grant to raid Lee's rear.(70) The Federal cavalry departed on the 9th, followed shortly thereafter by Major General J.E.B. Stuart's troopers. Burnside's Ninth Corps was moved during the day from the vicinity of Chancellorsville to a position within sight of Spotsylvania Courthouse on the Fredericksburg Road.

His advance was halted by Confederate cavalry which he mistook for infantry. Grant, fearing a Confederate move on Fredericksburg, ordered Burnside to hold his position and entrench.(71) The Confederate Third Corps, now commanded by Major General Jubal A. Early, reached Spotsylvania Courthouse in the afternoon and took up a line opposite Burnside.(72) Ewell bent his line back to the east to connect with Early, forming a salient at the northern apex of the Confederate line that would be the scene of savage fighting on May 12th.(73)

Early's trains had been observed moving east on the Shady Grove Road. Believing Lee's left flank open, Grant ordered Hancock to cross the Po from his position on Warren's right and advance into the Confederate rear.(74) By 1730 hours on the 9th, Hancock had three divisions across the Po and was moving on Lee's unprotected flank. A

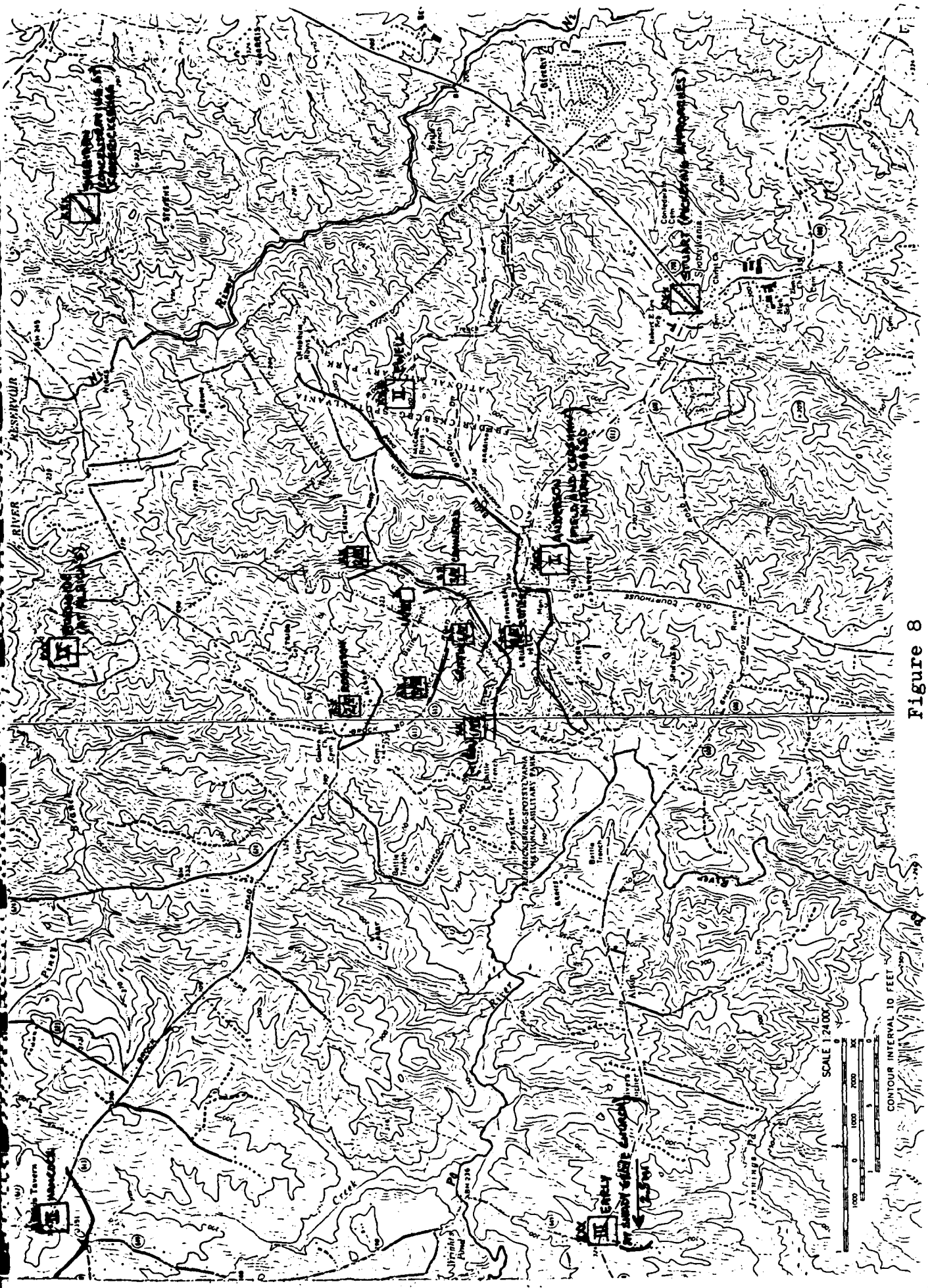


Figure 8

Positions at Close of
Fighting
May 8

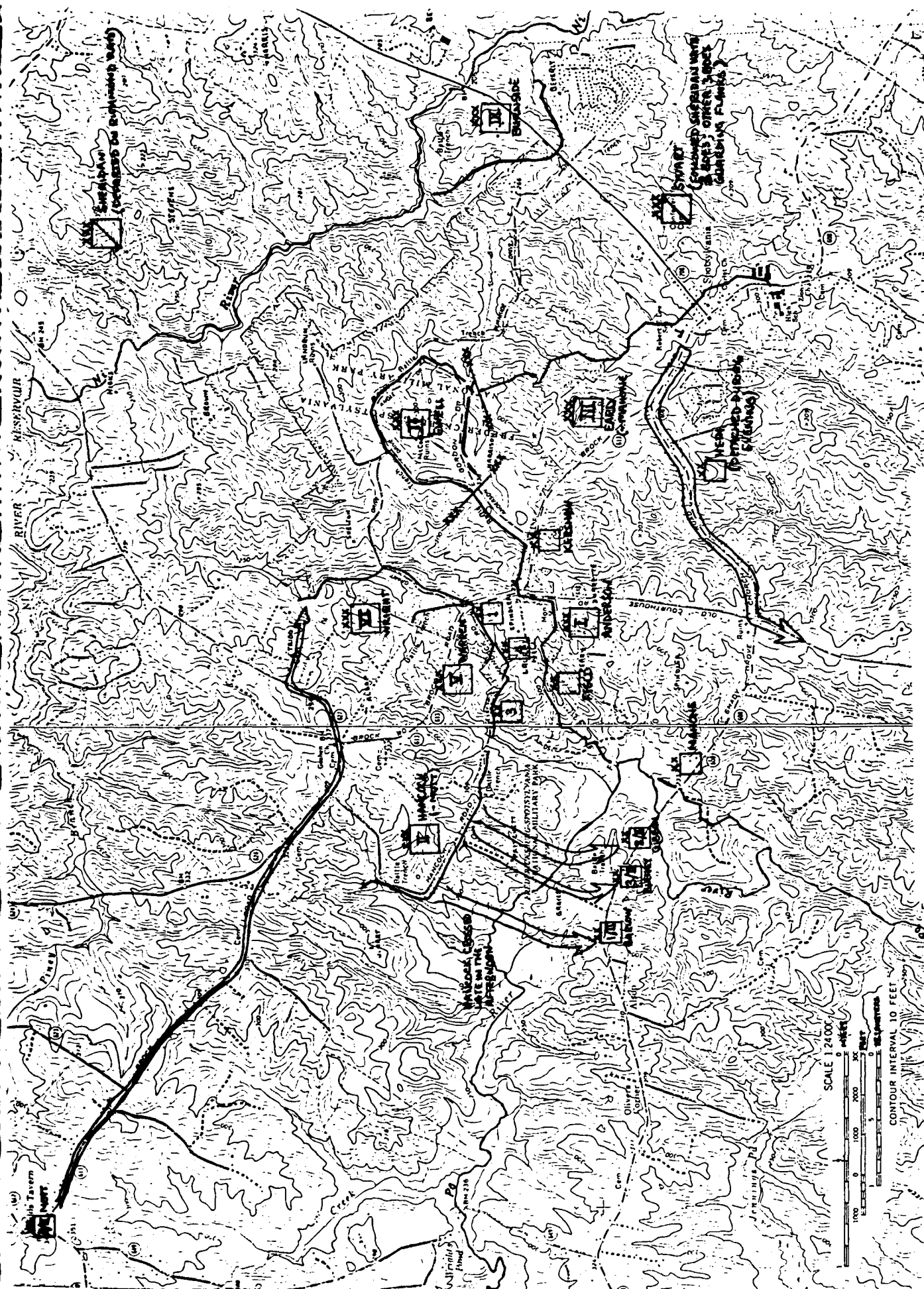


Figure 9
 Summary of Action
 May 9

combination of spirited resistance by Hampton's cavalry division, darkness and confusion, caused Hancock to halt for the night just short of the Blockhouse Bridge over the Po. Lee recognized Hancock's turning movement constituted a grave threat and dispatched two of Early's divisions, Major General Harry Heth's and Brigadier General William Mahone's, before dawn on the 10th to meet it.(75) Dispositions of opposing forces on 9 May are shown in Figure 9.

Early's divisions effectively stymied Hancock's advance and Grant, believing Lee had weakened his center to oppose Hancock, decided to attack that part of the line. Orders were issued for Hancock to recross the Po in time to lead an attack by his, Warren's and Wright's corps at 1700 hours. (76) Burnside was directed to reconnoiter in force and attack if the conditions were favorable. In preparation for the main assault, Warren had conducted two divisional reconnaissances in force in the morning and early afternoon. (77) These operations had succeeded in capturing the Confederate rifle pits along the crest of Laurel Hill and disclosed what Warren considered an opportunity for an immediate attack. Accordingly, he requested and received permission to attack at 1500 hours, before all of Hancock's divisions would be in position.(78) Crawford's and Cutler's divisions, supported by Brigadier General Alexander Webb's (1/2/II) and Brigadier General Samuel Carroll's (3/2/II) brigades from Hancock's corps, moved to the attack at about 1630 hours, led personally by Warren in full dress uniform. (79) The ground over which the attack was made was described by a correspondent:

"The point at which the attack was designed to be made, was a hill held by the enemy in front of Warren's line. This was perhaps the most formidable point along the enemy's whole front. Its densely wooded crest was crowned by earthworks, while the approach, which was swept by artillery and musket fire, was rendered more difficult and hazardous by a heavy growth of cedars, mostly dead, the long bayonet-like branches of which, interlaced and pointing in all directions, presented an almost impassable barrier to the advance of a line of battle."(80)

Although the Federals reached the Confederate lines in some places, Brigadier General E. Porter Alexander, Anderson's artillery chief, described the ease with which the assault was repulsed:

"In full uniform, he (Warren) attacked the lines held by Field's division... approaching through dense thickets which hid him from view until at quite close quarters. But our guns had been so placed as to flank these thickets and riddled them with canister as the enemy passed through. They emerged in bad order and unable to form under close musketry, and were repulsed with severe losses, among them (Brigadier) General (John C.) Rice, mortally wounded." (81)

Hancock, with his divisions now in place, renewed the assault at 1830 hours, using Brigadier General John Gibbon's Second Division and Major General David Birney's Third Division, as well as the battered divisions of the Fifth Corps. (82) However, this attack was also repulsed with heavy losses. Better success attended the attack of Colonel Emory Upton (2/1/VI) on the Sixth Corps front. Using an innovative tactic, Upton struck Brigadier General George Dole's brigade of Rodes' division with a column of twelve regiments, opening a gaping hole in the Confederate lines. (83) His support, Brigadier General Genshom Mott's division (4/II), failed to advance and Upton was driven out by a determined counterattack. Nonetheless, Grant was much impressed with Upton's skill and promoted him to Brigadier General the following day. Figure 10 depicts the events of May 10th.

May 11th, unseasonably cold and rainy, was another day of relative inactivity. Warren again probed Anderson's lines at Laurel Hill, but no serious attempt was made to dislodge the Confederates. Grant, however, planned to continue the battle. He telegraphed Halleck:

"We have now ended the sixth day of very heavy fighting. The result to this time is very much in our favor. But our losses have been heavy as well as those of our enemy. We have lost to this time 11 general officers killed, wounded

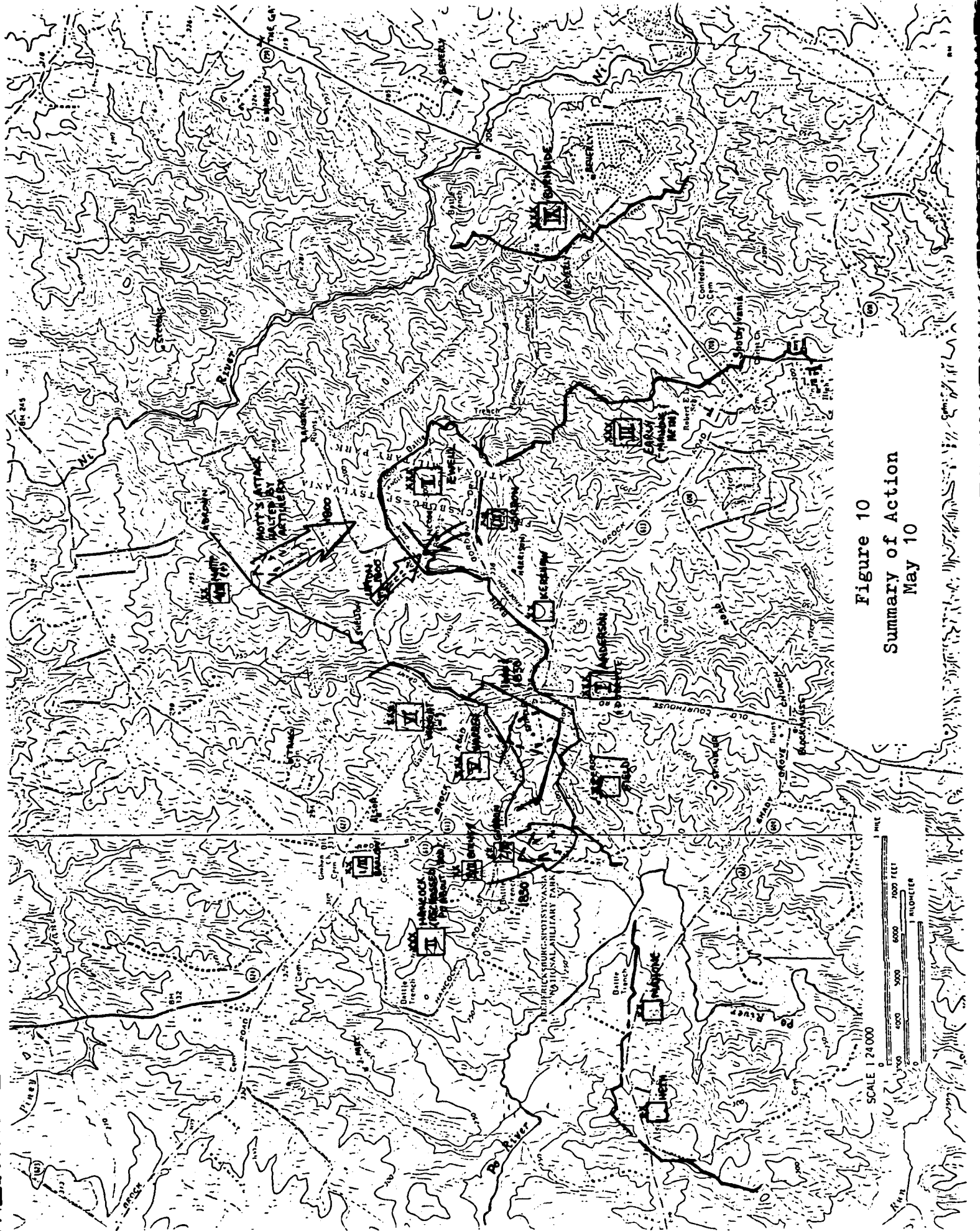


Figure 10
 Summary of Action
 May 10

and missing, and probably 20,000 men.... I am now sending back to Belle Plain all of my wagons for a fresh supply of provisions and ammunition, and propose to fight it out on this line if it takes all summer."(84)

Believing Ewell's salient to be a weak point, Grant decided to attack it in strength. Accordingly, he directed Meade to move the bulk of Hancock's corps to the left after dark so as to be in position to attack with Burnside at 0400 hours the next morning.(85) Warren and Wright were to fix the Confederate left, while the Second and Ninth Corps ruptured the right. In short, Grant intended to duplicate Upton's success on a much grander scale, for as he wrote Meade:

"There is little doubt in my mind but that the assault last evening would have proven entirely successful if it had commenced one hour earlier and had been heartily supported by Mott's division and the Ninth Corps."(86)

Meade issued the necessary order, telling Warren to hold the position vacated by Hancock and assigning Colonel John Kitching's heavy artillery brigade to assist him.(87) Wright was directed to hold his trenches with one division and place the other two in a position to support Hancock. Hancock's men slogged their way to the vicinity of Brown's farm, arriving shortly after midnight, and formed for the attack some 1200 yards from the Confederate lines.(88)

On the Confederate side, the shifting of Federal troops and an exaggerated report of a two regiment Union reconnaissance on the left, led Lee to believe that Grant was undertaking another flank march.(89) Mahone, still in position on Anderson's left was reinforced by parts of Major General Cadmus Wilcox's division of Early's corps. More importantly, two batteries of Second Corps artillery were withdrawn from the salient to facilitate the rapid march of the infantry, should that prove necessary.(90)

At 0435 hours, Hancock's 20,000 men swept forward and over the breastworks, capturing some 4,000 prisoners, including two generals, and 20 artillery pieces before encountering Major General John Gordon's division in a second line of works.(91) Gordon counterattacked, driving Hancock's men back.(92) By 0600 hours, all of Hancock's troops were engaged and he requested Wright be ordered to his support.(93) For the next twenty hours, one of the

war's fiercest battles raged in the salient, afterwards known as the "Bloody Angle." Both commanders fed every available unit into the fight; Grant to exploit Hancock's success and Lee to buy time until a new defensive line could be completed across the base of the salient.

Brigadier General Lewis Grant, commanding a Vermont brigade, described the character of the fighting in the salient in his report:

"It was not only a desperate struggle, but it was literally a hand-to-hand fight. Nothing but the piled up logs of breastworks separated the combatants. Our men would reach over the logs and fire into the faces of the enemy, would stab over with their bayonets, many were shot and stabbed through the crevices and holes between the logs; men mounted the works, and with muskets rapidly handed to them, kept up a continuous fire until they were shot down, when others would take their place and continue the deadly work.... I was at the Angle the next day. The sight was terrible and sickening, much worse than Bloody Lane (Sharpsburg). There, a great many dead men were laying in the road and across the rails... but they were not piled up several deep and their flesh was not so torn and mangled as at the Angle."(94)

Burnside's assault was made on time and initially pushed the Confederates back, but counterattacks quickly halted his advance.(95) By mid-morning, fighting on the Union left had subsided to heavy skirmishing. At Laurel Hill, Meade directed Warren to keep his troops close to the enemy and be prepared to attack.(96) Warren responded by pushing his skirmishers forward and opening an artillery barrage shortly after 0600 hours.(97) Meade's next directive at 0800 hours, ordered Warren to attack immediately, to which Warren replied:

"Your order to attack... leaves me no time to attack the

key points first. One of them is in front... of the Sixth Corps which enfilades and takes my left in reverse." (98)

Later, at 0900 hours, Warren reported to headquarters he could do no more at present than keep his skirmishers and artillery active. (99)

Meade, believing Lee must be stripping his left in favor of the salient, next gave Warren a preemptory order at about 0900 hours to attack immediately. (100) Warren repeated the order to his division commanders, but made little attempt to organize a coordinated assault. Moreover, his obvious reluctance to assault the Confederates exasperated both Grant and Meade sufficiently for Grant to have Warren replaced by Humphrey. Initially his choice to succeed Meade if necessary, Grant's growing disenchantment with Warren is reflected in his Memoirs:

"He was a man of fine intelligence, great earnestness, quick perception, and could make his disposition as quickly as any officer... But I had discovered a defect which was beyond his control, that was very prejudicial to his usefulness in emergencies. He could see danger at every glance before he had encountered it." (101)

The attacks were made by Crawford's, Cutler's and Griffin's divisions, but were disjointed and uncoordinated. No detailed accounts of the action were submitted by any of the principals involved. A survivor's account, however, leaves little doubt as to how easily the attacks were repulsed:

"Daylight brought but scant comfort, the rain continuing, everybody being soaking wet, the trees dripping showers of water, while underfoot the ground was like dough, the situation trying the patience and patriotism of the strongest hearts; but some of the boys made light of it, saying there was a good time coming, only wait a little.

longer. Things are never so bad but that they might get worse, and this was proved when the brigade was again ordered to assault the works... the line soon came into sight of the rebels and a steady fire was opened upon them, which was replied to with all the vigor characteristic of our ubiquitous Southern friends. This unequal contest was continued about half an hour, after which the line was withdrawn, nothing having been accomplished except to add more names to the long list of disabled."⁽¹⁰²⁾

As soon as Warren's attack failed, Meade ordered Humphreys to shift the Fifth Corps to the salient. Cutler's division moved shortly thereafter, followed by Griffin's. Crawford, with Kitching's artillery, was left to hold the trenches of the Fifth, Second and Sixth Corps.⁽¹⁰³⁾ Lee followed suit, moving Humphreys' and Bratton's infantry brigades and Cabell's artillery battalion to the defense of the salient.⁽¹⁰⁴⁾

Fighting continued at the salient until the early hours of the 13th, but with decreasing intensity after dark. Lee withdrew after midnight to his newly constructed defensive line, leaving Grant in possession of the "Bloody Angle." Warren's divisions were returned to him after dark and he was restored to command of the Fifth Corps as informally as he had been relieved.⁽¹⁰⁵⁾ Opposing dispositions at the close of fighting on 12 May are shown at Figure 11.

The rains continued on the 13th and, except for some probing of Lee's lines, was a day of rest and refit. Grant decided to renew operations the next day, striking Lee's right before it could be reinforced from his left and before his entrenchments could be extended.⁽¹⁰⁶⁾ Meade, that afternoon, issued an order directing Warren to march, after dark, to the rear of the army and occupy a position to the left of the Ninth Corps. Wright's Sixth Corps was to follow.⁽¹⁰⁷⁾ Warren was to be in position for an attack down the Fredericksburg Road to Spotsylvania Court House by 0400 hours on the 14th. (See Figure 12)

The march began at 2200 hours and was described by one of the participants:

".... Showery all day... the mud was dreadful, the night

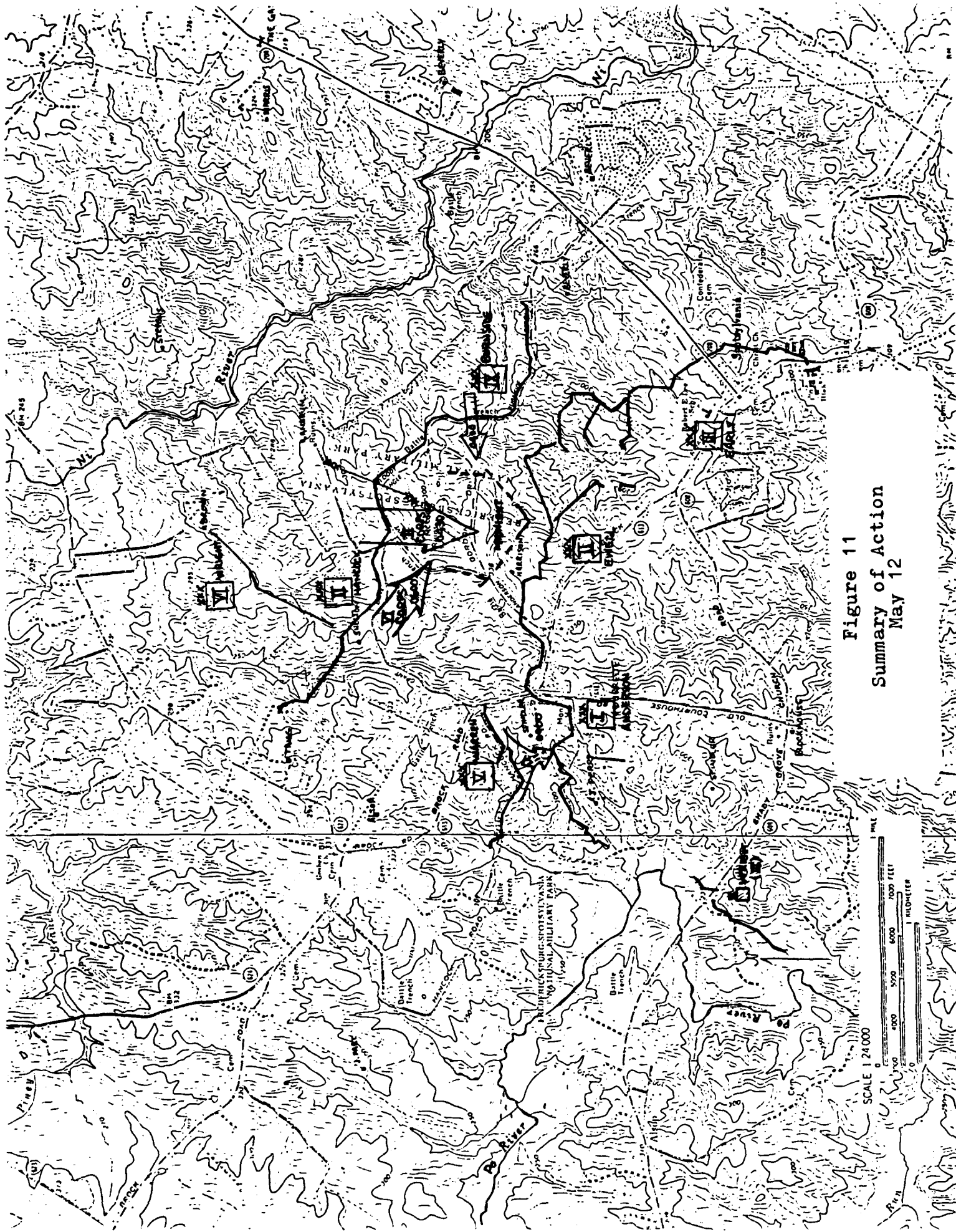


Figure 11
 Summary of Action
 May 12

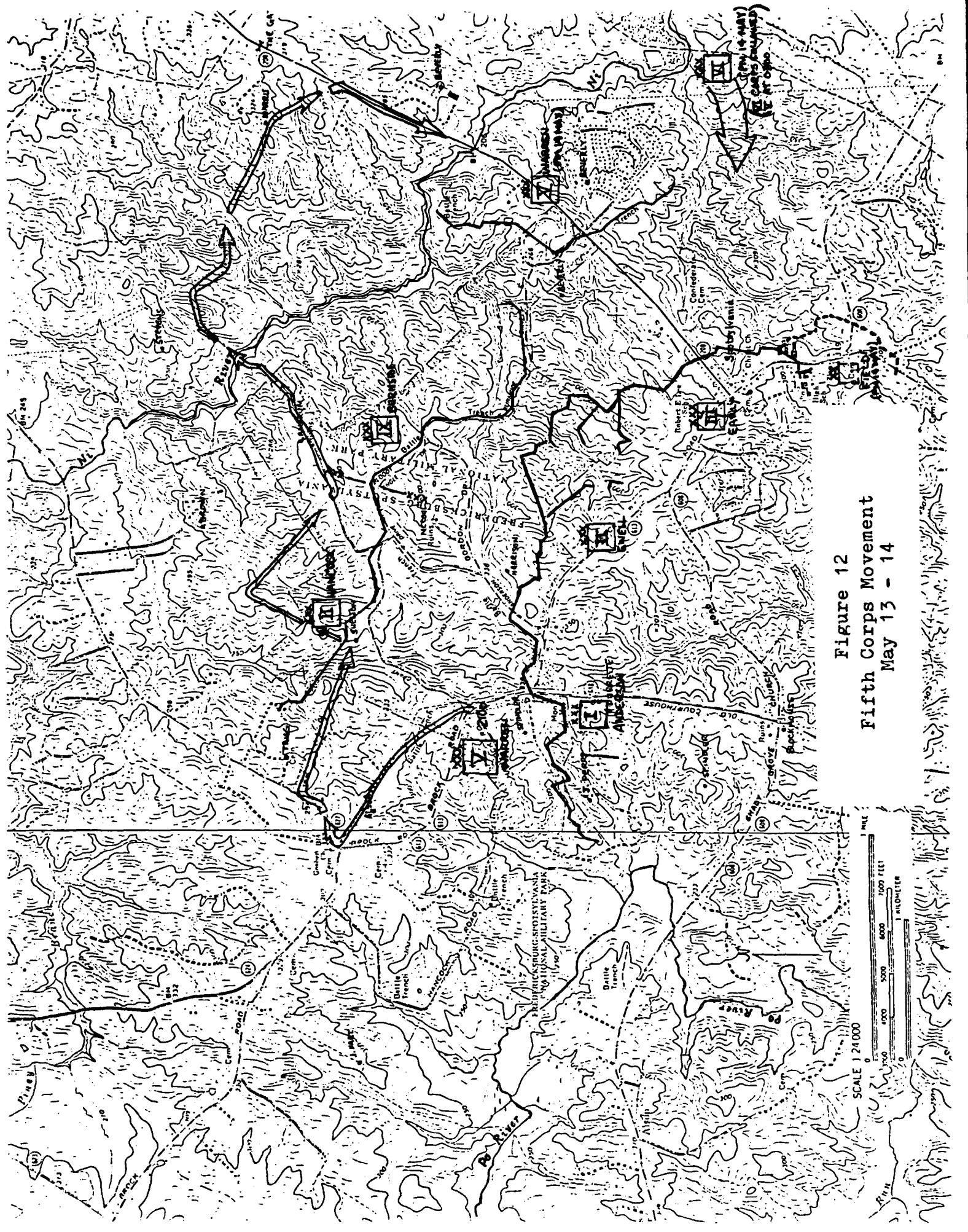


Figure 12
 Fifth Corps Movement
 May 13 - 14

dark, we forded streams up to our knees, and the mud was all the time over our shoes... Very likely the difficulties of this night, with its more than Egyptian darkness, had not been reckoned upon by the commander and the appointed hour found the would-be assailants a long way from the expected point of advance. The route was past the Landrum House to the Ny River, which had to be waded, and beyond the route did not follow any road, traversing the fields and a track cut through the woods. Then came a fog, so dense that not even the fires built to light the way could be seen. Men exhausted by the difficulties of the march and previous exactions fell asleep all along the way. The new locality was quite unknown and b/ daylight when the attack was to take place, only Griffin with his First Division, having twelve hundred "fagged out" men had arrived... Naturally, the four o'clock charge was not made."(108)

The fighting at Laurel Hill was over. The rain and slow march gave Lee enough time to meet the threat to his right and Grant cancelled further offensive operations for the day.(109) Rains continued through the 16th, turning roads into quagmires. Both armies spent the time improving entrenchments. By the 18th of May, conditions had improved sufficiently for the Second and Sixth Corps to assault the strengthened Confederate trenches, among the most formidable of the war, at the base of the salient. The attempt was abandoned after brief fighting convinced Grant of the futility of continuing the attack. An ensuing effort by Burnside on the left was repulsed with equal ease.

For many of the same reasons that prompted his move from the Wilderness, Grant again began sliding to the left on the evening of the 20th. Except for rearguard actions, the Battle of Spotsylvania was over. The ten days of fighting cost Grant about 18,000 casualties and Lee in the neighborhood of 10,000.(110) The war of attrition was well underway.

Spotsylvania Tour

Stop One: Todd's Tavern.

Approaching from north of Fredericksburg, proceed south on interstate highway 95. After crossing the Rappahannock River, take the first exit, state route 3. Proceed west toward Culpeper, Virginia on route 3 for approximately 11.5 miles to Wilderness Corner. Enroute, you will pass Salem Church on the left and the Chancellorsville Battlefield Visitor Center on the right. At Wilderness Corner, turn left (south) on state route 613 (Brock Road). Continue south for six miles to Todd's Tavern Market, a one story, white block building on your left. Park in the Market parking lot.

From south of Fredericksburg, go north on interstate highway 95 to the Thornburg exit. The exit is marked "Thornburg/Stonewall Jackson Shrine". Take the exit and proceed west on state route 606, through Thornburg, about 5 miles to Snell. Turn right at Travelers Baptist Church in Snell and proceed on state route 208. Continue north 4.5 miles to Spotsylvania Courthouse. At Spotsylvania (stoplight), route 208 turns sharply north toward Fredericksburg. Continue straight through the intersection. You will be heading generally northwest on state route 613, the Brock Road. About 5.5 miles from the intersection, you will reach Todd's Tavern Market on the right.

The original Todd's Tavern was located across the road in the open field. Nothing remains of it and only an illegible historical marker on the shoulder of the opposite side of the road, next to the "612" sign marks its former place. A concrete-covered well is situated in the northwest corner of the Market parking lot. This well serviced Todd's Tavern in 1864.

Facing south, two sets of Union entrenchments stretched in an arc from the woods on your right, across the open field and the Catharpin Road to the woods to your left. The first line, about 1/4 of a mile from here, were erected by the cavalry May 7-8 and the second, 3/8 of a mile distant, by the Second Corps on May 8th. Part of the trench lines remain in a good state of preservation.

You are now standing astride the route Warren's corps took from the Wilderness to Laurel Hill. Though he was unaware of it, he was engaged in a race for possession of Spotsylvania Courthouse with Anderson's Confederate First Corps. Both started about the same hour and each had a march of slightly over ten miles to the objective.

The Fifth Corps, from its position in the center of Meade's line, began forming in column in the vicinity of the Lacy House about 2100 hours.(111) The corps' wagons earlier in the day had been sent to Chancellorsville, clearing the road for the infantry. Robinson's division took the lead, probably followed in order by Griffin, Crawford and Cutler. Artillery batteries marched behind the division to which they were assigned.(112)

After three days of savage fighting in heat more common to August than May, the troops were unusually fatigued and lethargic. Adding to their weariness, the march started as a series of halts, followed by orders to close up. Only the knowledge the army was moving south, not retreating, lifted the spirits of the column. A survivor of the Maryland Brigade (3/2/V) of Robinson's division described the march in these terms:

"At first, nobody knew whether it was an advance or a retreat. Soon, the apparent direction...gave currency to the flattering rumor that Lee's whole army was in full retreat and that Grant was after him... The double lines of Hancock's corps, through which we were being rushed, rapturously cheered our advance..."

"The first halt was to throw out the flankers on the night, when, after an hour or more of hard marching, the long lines of works were at last cleared. Plunging into the mysterious gloom of a deep cut and washed out road, men occasionally tumbled into rocky furrows, or stumbled over carcasses. At intervals, darkness would be made visible on the right by blazing brands dropping from some distant tree trunk, still aglow in the depth of the Wilderness... The low, damp air, reaked with the pungent, acrid snuff of horse and human slaughter. Shortly before daylight (Sunday, May 8, 1864), the head of the column emerged into open country.

around Todd's Tavern, where a cavalry division was found, and a halt ordered. No sooner were arms stacked than men dropped, falling asleep directly when they touched the ground.... they had to be punched, kicked and shaken up..."(113)

Another veteran also remembered the march:

"All night we marched and halted (but halted more than we marched). We did not often stop to rest, but jogged along at a snail-like pace. When our column moved, we marched route step, arms at will, and when it halted we came to order arms and leaned upon our guns, keeping our places in the ranks, so as to be on the alert so as to prevent a surprise, ready for any emergency. About midnight we had just emerged from the woods, and halting in the road, stood leaning on our guns.... three quarters of them asleep and the other quarter more so, as we waited for the column to start."(114)

The head of Warren's column reached Todd's Tavern about 0100 hours to find the Brock Road obstructed by Meade's cavalry escort.(115) Meade and Grant had ridden out to confer with Hancock and await the arrival of the Fifth Corps. Complicating the road jam, Brigadier General Wesley Merritt's and Brigadier General John Gregg's cavalry divisions were encamped in the fields around Todd's Tavern, awaiting orders.(116) Meade immediately ordered Merritt down the Brock road to clear the way to Spotsylvania Courthouse, but Warren's column was halted for an hour and a half waiting for Meade's retinue and Merritt's cavalry to move off the road.(117)

In the five and one half hours since the march began, the head of the column had advanced about half the distance to Spotsylvania, and the corps was strung out on the road for more than five miles. The last unit in the column, Rittenhouse's artillery battery, left the Lacy House at 0100 hours.(118) (See Figure 13) By the time the column began to

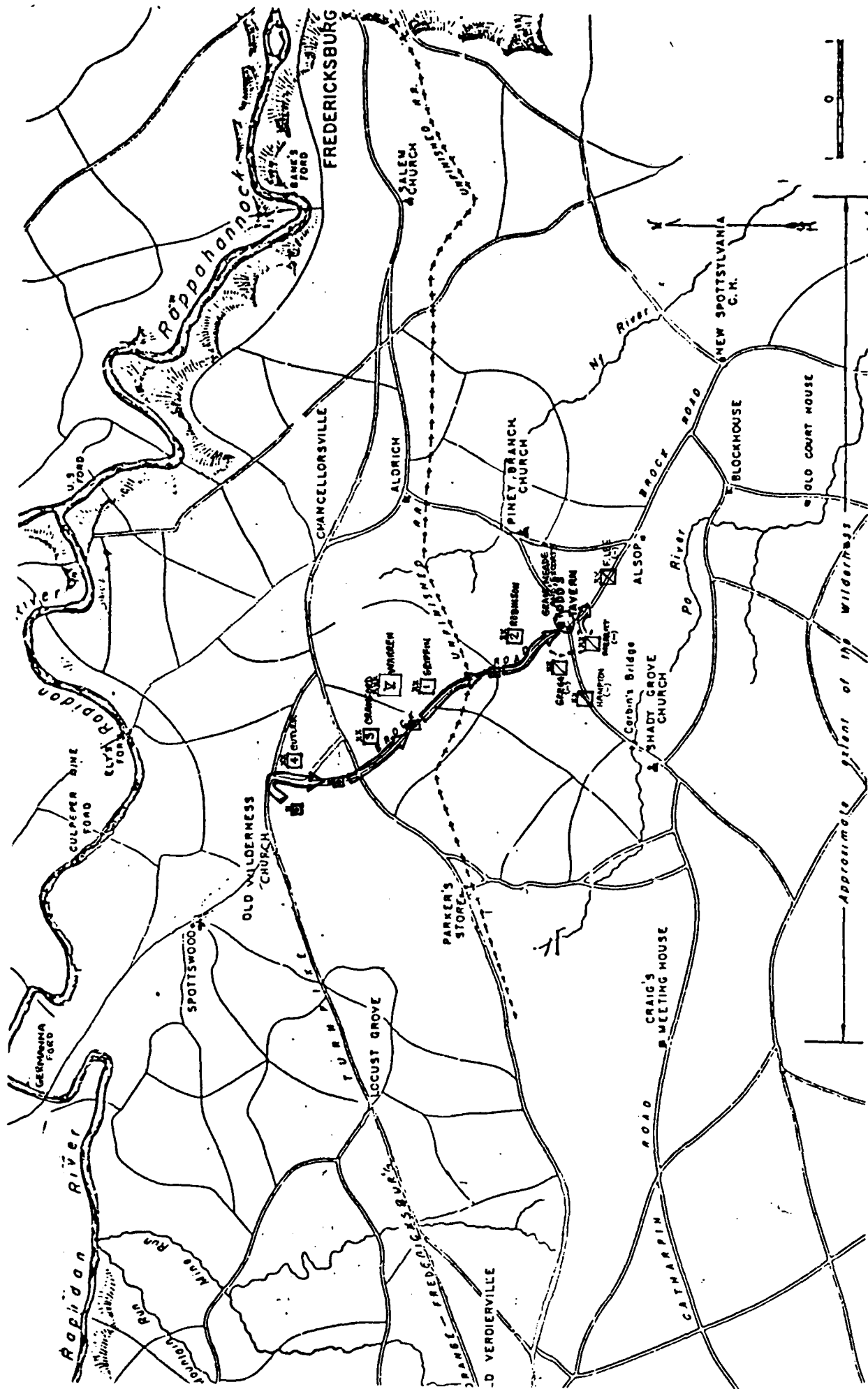


Figure 13
 Fifth Corps - Midnight
 May 7-8

move again, firing could be heard a mile or so ahead,
indicating Merritt was meeting opposition.

Return to your car and proceed to Stop 2.

Stop 2: Alsop's.

Continue southeast on state route 613, Brock Road, for 2.6 miles to its intersection with route 627. Goshen Church is on your left at the intersection. Park in the church parking lot.

During the drive to Goshen Church, notice the rolling, heavily wooded nature of the terrain. Bear in mind, too, that the area is much more densely populated, and therefore, less heavily forested than it was in 1864. Nonetheless, one can readily appreciate the difficulties the Union cavalry encountered in clearing Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry from the road.

You will also pass state route 697 on your left 1.7 miles from Todd's Tavern Market. The head of Warren's column reached that vicinity about daylight and, in that area, Robinson deployed his infantry.

From Goshen Church, walk across the road to the vicinity of the telephone pole on your right. Facing south, you can see a white mobile home to your left and a white farm house to your right. The farm is the site where the Alsop house stood in 1864. The paved portion of the Brock Road - to your right - was then a narrow, sunken farm road. The main road was where the dirt road - to your left - is today. We recommend that you do not attempt to follow the dirt road. It does not provide access to the National Military Park, ending at the buff colored mobile home on the knoll. Moreover, though not marked at the entrance, the authors were informed emphatically that the road is private!

This area, Alsop's, retains much of the same pattern of field and wood as existed during the battle of Spotsylvania.

"It is of the utmost importance that not the slightest delay occur in your opening the Brock Road beyond Spotsylvania Courthouse, as an infantry corps is now on its way to occupy that place."(119)

That, in part, was Meade's order to Brigadier General Wesley Merritt at Todd's Tavern. By Merritt's account, it was nearly 0300 hours before he was able to move his two brigades of troopers through the infantry and on to the road.(120) Colonel Alfred Gibbs' Reserve Brigade took the lead and had barely left Todd's Tavern a mile behind when he encountered Fitzhugh Lee's dismounted cavalry blocking the

road. Gibbs attempted to drive Lee, as a regiment from the Second Brigade went in on each flank.(121) Progress, however, was slow as Lee's men fell back from position to position in what one of Stuart's staff officers characterized as:

"one of the severest conflicts in which Fitzhugh Lee's division was ever engaged".(122)

Shortly after daylight, about 0600 hours, with the head of Warren's column slightly more than a mile northwest of where you are standing, Merritt suggested to Warren that the infantry would have better success driving the Confederates than his cavalymen.(123) Warren agreed and Robinson deployed his brigades across the road: Colonel Peter Lyle's First left of the road and leading; Colonel Andrew Denison's Maryland (Third) on Lyle's right; and Colonel Richard Coulter's Second still further to the right and rear.(124) The remainder of the Corps remained in column. Advancing to the front, Robinson's men, perhaps made nervous by the numerous dead alongside the road, mistook Merritt's withdrawing trooper's for the enemy and opened fire, inflicting a number of casualties on the luckless cavalymen.(125) Finally, however, the infantry made contact with the Confederates. A veteran of Coulter's brigade described the action that followed:

"... When the command to fall in was given... the column moved forward... filing to the right and coming into the line of battle. Every preparation was now made for a fight, flags unfurled, guns loaded and primed, and at the command "Fix bayonets", the sharp click of the rattling steel ran down the line like a miniature volley of pistol shots. When everything was ready, the brigade bugle sounded the advance,... and... the battalion stepped briskly forward, shoulder to shoulder, with the rest of the brigade.... In

grand array, the blue line swept over the field... and as the combatants approached each other, the enemy fired rapidly, knocking a man over here and there, but their cannon shots flew wildly overhead.... scaling the hill on the other side, (we) gave the Southerners a few parting shots to accelerate their speed. The lines now reformed, the men congratulating each other on the easy victory and telling of the narrow escapes in the charge. As soon as the regiments were in line the bugle sounded the advance and the brigade again moved forward through the woods, over fences, and through the large clearing known as Alsop's farm."(126)

It was about 0800 hours when Robinson's men reached this area. The Confederate cavalry had given way quickly before the infantry; consequently, Warren sent Meade the following message:

"The opposition to us amounts to nothing as yet; we are advancing steadily, the enemy uses artillery, two pieces, on the road. General Robinson has gone ahead with a brigade, mostly in line. I follow closely with the columns filling the road, and artillery; if there is nothing but cavalry, we shall scarcely halt, if our troops can be made to move, but they are exceedingly hesitating, I think. General Robinson's orders are to use only the bayonet, and carry every battery the enemy shows. It is believed to be Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry."(127)

Actually, most of Robinson's division had halted in disorder from heat and fatigue in the vicinity of the

knoll where the buff colored mobile home now sits.(128) Robinson was among them, trying to reform the line and continue the advance.

While Robinson was busy reorganizing his force, the artillery arrived and began to go into position. Lieutenant George Breck, with Batteries E and L, 1st New York Light, went into position near the Alsop house. Captain Augustus Martin's Battery C, Massachusetts Light, went to the support of Robinson's line.(129)

Griffin's division next reached the road fork and, still in column, took the right hand branch. The artillery following him - Battery E, Massachusetts Light (Captain Charles Phillips) and Batteries D and H, 1st New York Light (Captains Lester Richardson and Charles Mink, respectively) - took position on the high ground about one-fourth of a mile south of the Alsop house.(130) (See Figure 14)

At 0830 hours, the line now restored and the artillery in position, Robinson's men moved forward again. The advance of the Fifth Corps was now but two miles from Spotsylvania Courthouse and, so its commander believed, had nothing but cavalry in front.

Return to your car and proceed to Stop 3.

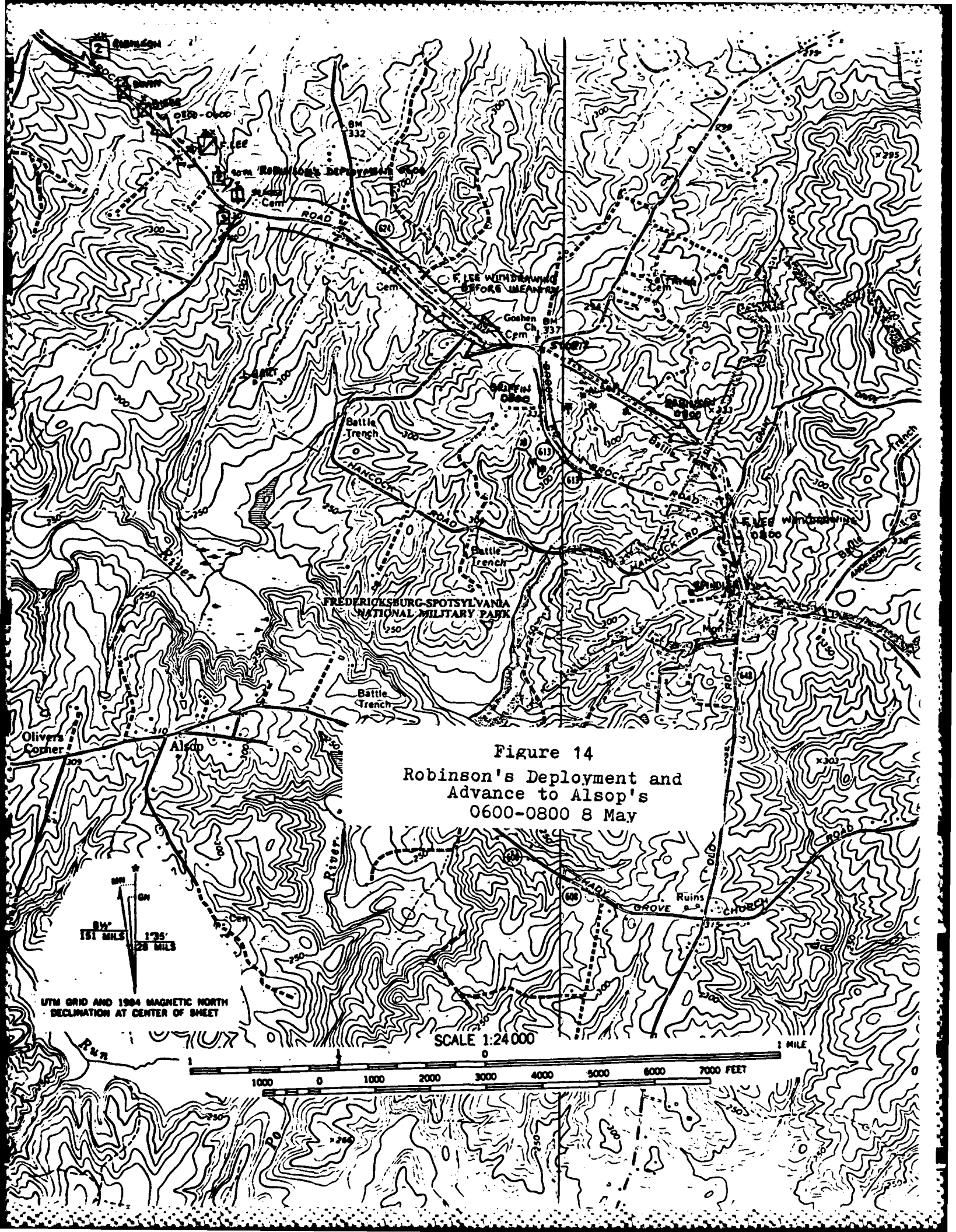
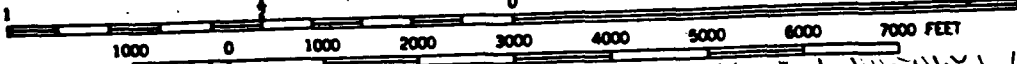


Figure 14
 Robinson's Deployment and
 Advance to Alsop's
 0600-0800 8 May

SCALE 1:24 000



UTM GRID AND 1984 MAGNETIC NORTH
 DECLINATION AT CENTER OF SHEET

MM
 GN
 151 MILES
 1°35'
 28 MILES

Stop 3: Union Lines

Return to Brock Road, state route 613, and proceed one mile. Turn left on Grant Road and continue on to the Visitor Center, about 150 yards, and park in the parking lot. Return on foot to Sedgewick Monument, the obelisk you passed at the junction of Brock and Grant Roads. The monument marks the spot where Major General John Sedgwick, Sixth Corps commander, was killed by a Confederate sniper on May 9th, 1864.

Looking south along the Brock Road, a white, two story house is visible atop a small knoll. The house is situated very near the intersection of the Brock and Old Courthouse (or Blockhouse) roads. The Confederate positions were in the tree line to the right and, though not visible from this position, left of the house. Confederate artillery was sited on the highground where the house now sits. Notice the white mailboxes to your front and rear. This was probably the initial position of the Federal artillery on the morning on May 9th. Supporting infantry took position on the highground where the brown house is now situated.

Robinson's leading brigade, Lyle's (1/2/V), emerged from the woods into the open here just as the Confederate cavalry was disappearing over the crest of the hill about half-way to the tree line near the large white house. A four gun battery of horse artillery was taking position on the crest to the left of the road to impede the Federal advance.(131) Buoyed momentarily by the opportunity to capture the guns, the men of Lyle's lead regiment, the 39th Massachusetts, pressed forward in disorder, leaving the remainder of the brigade behind.(132) Major Henry McCellan, an aide to Major General J.E.B. Stuart, described the action as follows:

"Fitz Lee was greatly aided in this battle by his battery, now commanded by Captain P.P. Johnston, (Major James Breathed having recently been made major of the (horse artillery) battalion. His last position was near Spottsylvania Courthouse (on) the crest of a hill, which was held by Johnston's battery to give the led horses and

dismounted men time to retire. Both Breathed and Johnston were present. A strongline of battle soon made its appearance on the edge of the opposite woods, and seeing no support to the battery, pressed eagerly forward to capture it. The fire of the battery was maintained as long as possible, when Breathed directed Johnston to retire the left section. Johnston declined to leave while his battery was still engaged, but retired three of his guns, one piece at a time, when he himself was shot through the shoulder, and followed the third gun from the field. Before any of the guns had left position, the enemy had approached so near that they felt secure of capturing the battery, and the demand for surrender was heard from all sides.

"Breathed was now alone with the last gun. The cannoneers had limbered up the piece and had mounted their horses to retire; but before the gun could be moved, the drivers and horses of the lead and swing teams were killed or wounded, and Ryan, the driver of the wheel team, had his arm shattered by a bullet... Breathed jumped from his horse, cut loose the teams that were struggling on the ground, mounted a wheel horse, brought off (from the battlefield) the gun as a miracle. The enemy pressed on with great cheering. As they crossed the crest of the hill, they met the fire of Anderson's men... staggered by it, they fell back..."(133)

As Lyle's men were falling quickly back, Robinson was near this spot, forming his brigades for an assault. Major General Warren rode up then and urged Robinson forward. Robinson

asked to delay the attack until all of his troops were up, straggling and fatigue having taken a severe toll during the march; but Warren impatiently ordered him forward.(134) As the Seventh Maryland Regiment swung into position on the right of the line, Warren was heard to tell the troops:

"Never mind cannon! Never mind bullets! Press on and clear this road. It's the only way to get to your nations."(135)

At nearly the same time, Martin's Battery C, Massachusetts Light Artillery, swung into position to your right and began firing solid shot into the woods on the opposite rise.(136) Shortly past 0900 hours, Robinson completed his deployment. The division was formed by brigades in columns of regiments.(137) Two brigades, Colonel Peter Lyle's First and Colonel Andrew Denison's Maryland (Third), were on the right of the Brock Road, with the Thirty-Ninth Massachusetts and Fourth Maryland Regiments in the lead. Lyle's left rested on the road. Colonel Richard Coulter's Second Brigade formed on the left of the Block Road with the Nintieth Pennsylvania leading.(138)

As the line moved to the attack, four regiments of Bartlett's brigade (3/1/U) emerged in two lines from the woods to the right of the Maryland brigade. The Eighty-Third Pennsylvania and the the Forty-Fourth New York were in Bartlett's front line.(139) They, like Robinson's men, were expecting little opposition. While they were forming line of battle, Brigadier General Bartlett had ridden among the men of the Forty-Fourth New York, assuring them there was nothing but cavalry in their front.(140) One of Robinson's Marylanders described the general attitude in these words:

"...the men generally failed to take in the gravity of the situation. Their senses were simply stupified by sleepless overwork. They had been temporarily braced up by the intoxicating excitement of combat and pursuit, but, when massed in close column, they acted as if they supposed the next order would be to stack arms and rest..."(141)

Ready or not, Bartlett's men moved up on Robinson's right and together the men of the First and Second Divisions advanced towards the Confederates, some 400 yards away. (See Figure 15) As these lines moved out, the Twenty-Second Massachusetts and the Fourth Michigan Regiments of Bartlett's brigade took position in support of the artillery

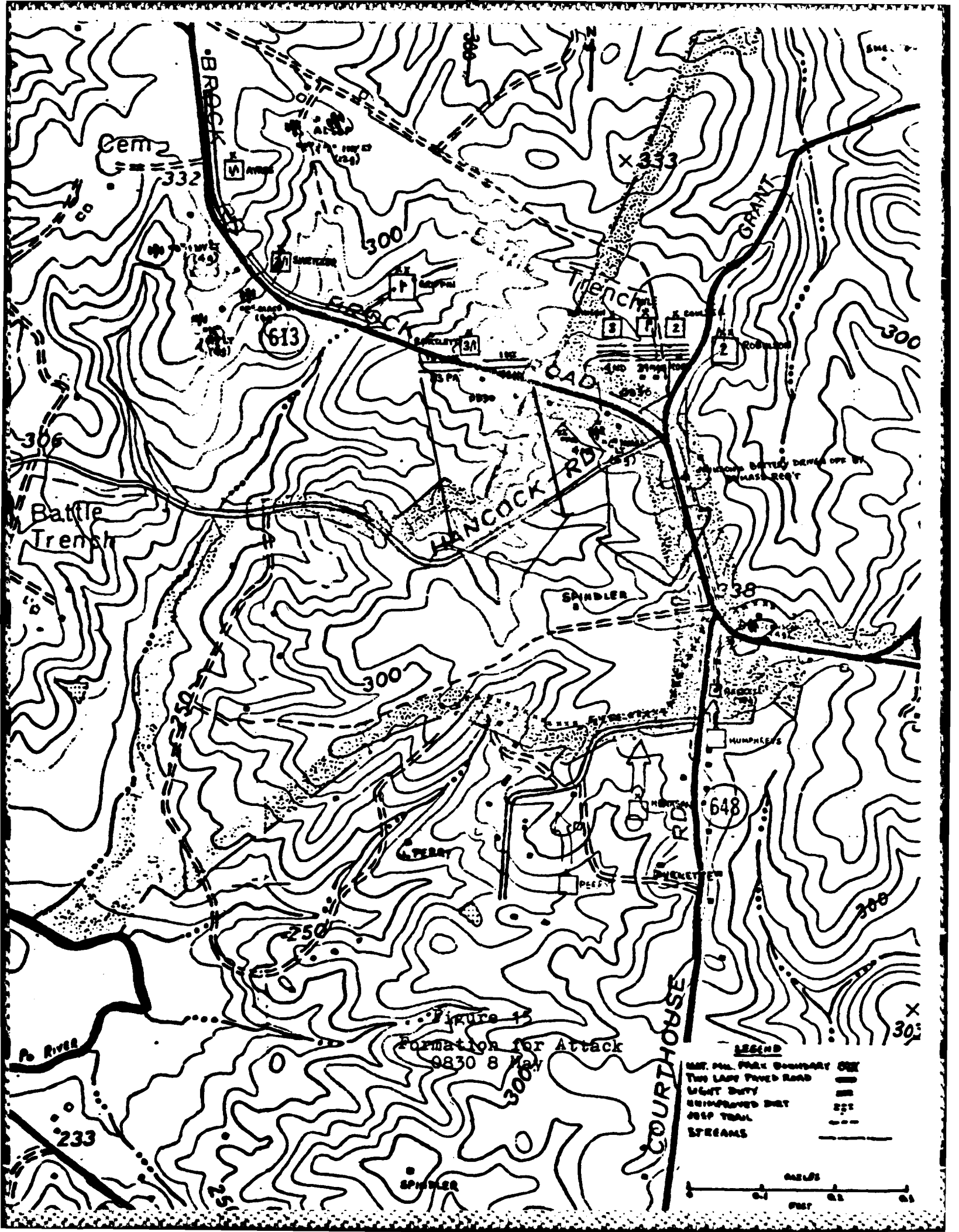


Figure 13
 Formation for Attack
 0830 8 May

LEGEND

INT. MIL. POLY. BOUNDARY	---
TWO LANE PAVED ROAD	==
LIGHT DUTY	---
UNIMPROVED DIRT	---
DEEP TRAIL	---
STREAMS	---

0 0.1 0.2 0.3
 MILES
 0 100 200
 FEET

on the wooded knoll to the right of Martin's battery. The other three regiments of the brigade had been left in the Wilderness to mask the division's departure. They were only now enroute to Laurel Hill.

Proceed to Stop 4.

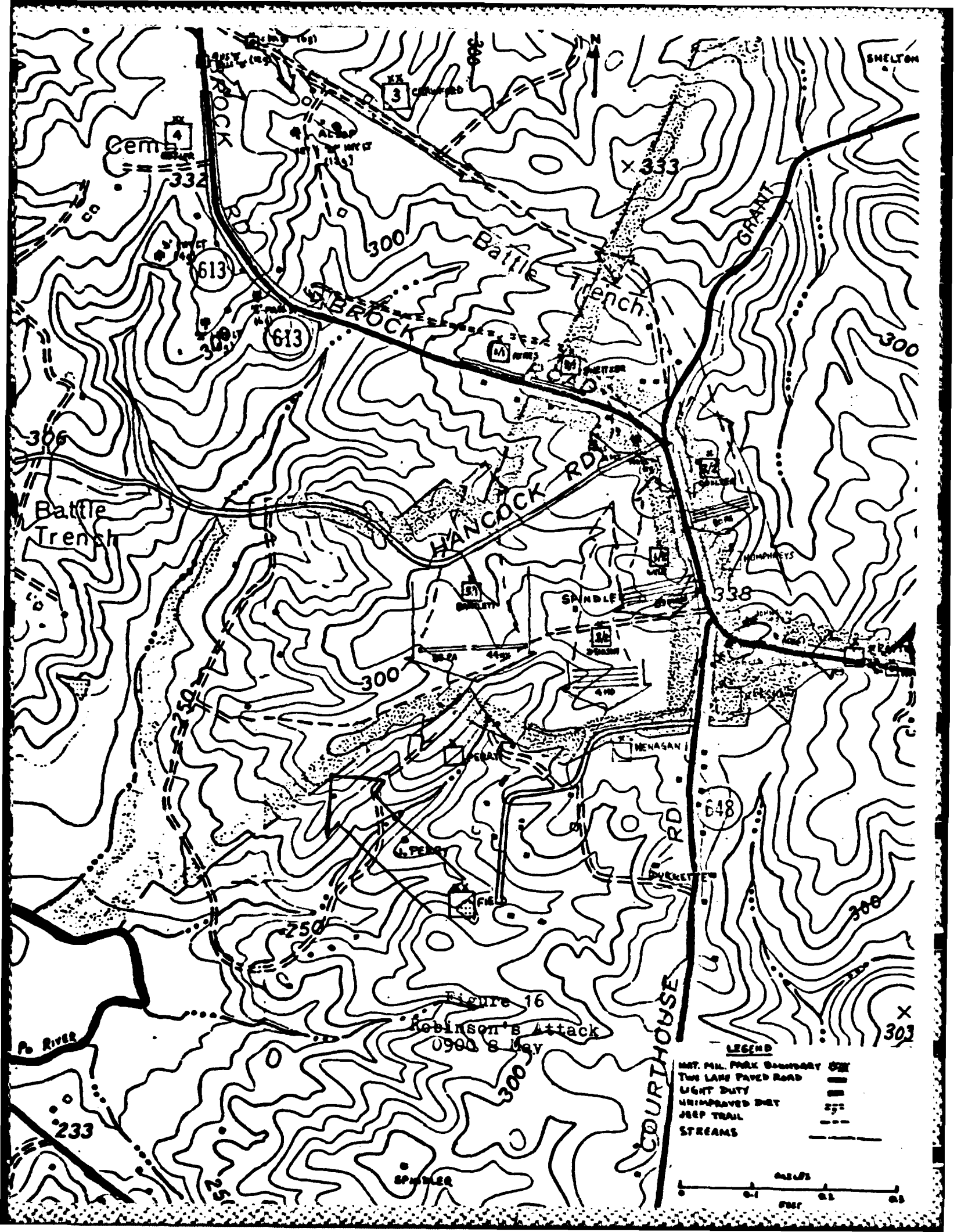


Figure 16
Robinson's Attack
0900 8 May

LEGEND

- Mt. Pin. Park Boundary
- Two Lane Paved Road
- Light Duty Unimproved Duty
- Jeep Trail
- Streams

0 0.1 0.2 0.3

Stop 4: The Battle of Laurel Hill - 8 May 1864.

From the Sedgwick Monument, cross the Brock Road on foot and proceed west on Hancock Road. Notice the trench line in the trees to your left. These are the remnants of Warren's trenches, begun on the afternoon of 8 May and continuously improved until vacated. They are in much better condition than Anderson's, but have nonetheless eroded significantly since 1864. Continue down the road past the "Warren's initial line" marker on the left. Ten yards beyond the marker, two wooden steps on the left lead to a footpath through the woods. Follow the footpath through a clearing, down into a wooded ravine, and across the footbridge over the small stream, then into the clearing and up the hill. From the crest, you should see three clumps of fir trees on the crest of the next rise. Continue along the path to the trees. Just before you reach the trees, you will cross a jeep trail. Continue on to the trees and beyond for about 15 yards until you have a clear view of the dip beyond the crest of Laurel Hill, on which you are now standing, and the subsequent rise into the tree line approximately 250 yards to the south. You have followed the course taken by Colonel Denison's Maryland Brigade (3/2/V) in Robinson's attack. You will recall that Colonel Peter Lyle's First Brigade was to the left, and Colonel Coulter's Second Brigade attacked on the other side of the Brock Road. (See Figure 16)

As Robinson's and Bartlett's troops were advancing over the undulating terrain you have just crossed, Confederate infantry and artillery were taking position ahead. Johnston's four gun battery of horse artillery, after retiring from the crest of this hill on the other side of the Brock Road, took position on the highground at the junction of the Brock and Old Courthouse (Blockhouse) Roads. Two batteries from Major John Haskell's First Corps artillery battalion quickly joined them, and were reinforced shortly afterwards by five more guns from Cabell's battalion. (142) Brigadier General Benjamin Humphreys' Mississippi brigade had crossed the Brock Road about 300 yards to your left front, and was taking up position in the woods to the right of the Confederate batteries. Colonel Henagan's (Kershaw's) South Carolina brigade was filing in behind the railpiles erected by the cavalry in the woods to your front, and the cavalry was withdrawing to Spotsylvania Courthouse. The other two brigades of Major General Joseph Kershaw's division, had earlier been sent to Spotsylvania Courthouse, along with four brigades of Major General Charles Field's division. Field's other brigade, Law's Alabama, temporarily under Colonel William Perry, was

enroute to Laurel Hill and would soon come up through the woods to your right front.(143) The Confederates, with the advantages of an unmolested march, a little rest and breakfast, were much less fatigued than the attackers. Additionally, they knew the attackers were infantry and had few delusions as to the severity of the fighting to come.

The advancing Federals knew shortly after passing the crest of Laurel Hill that they were attacking veteran infantry. Lieutenant Colonel Charles Pierson, who would succeed to command of the Thirty-Ninth Massachusetts regiment within minutes, described the attack in these words:

"Lyle's brigade, in which my regiment was, charged over 500 yards of open, badly gullied ground under a rapid fire from the enemy's muskets and from the artillery we had so nearly captured. The troops went over the rail fence, into the abatis, and up to within 30 feet of the works, getting shelter then from the slope of the hill and the felled pine trees. Here they lay to recover their wind, easily keeping down the fire of the enemy to their front.... Lyle's brigade having rested those few minutes, started to go over the works, and would have gone over, but at this moment, discovering a fresh brigade of the enemy (probably Brigadier General John Bratton's brigade arriving from Spotsylvania Courthouse) (144) advancing in line of battle upon our left, I... gave the order to retire and the command fell back in some confusion..."(145)

The account of the Maryland Brigade is equally descriptive:

"The enemy opened with shell, followed by canister and

then double canister from the cross fire guns on their right. Their fire increased in intensity as the attack advanced.... Naturally enough the front rank was goaded into a return fire; individual progress was as naturally retarded by the act of aiming and reloading; men from the rear pressed impatiently forward to repeat the process. In this way, ranks and regiments became intermingled, straggling was made easy, the time of exposure was fatally prolonged.... At the distance of about fifty yards from the works, General Robinson was shot from his horse.... Colonel Denison... was about the same time shot from his horse.... Upon the fall of these two ranking officers... the situation was that of forlorn hope. What remained of the movement was no longer a column, but a bunched and ragged line. At points where the enemy's fire was most concentrated, the drone of bullets blended into a throbbing wail.... Such was the first assault upon the enemy's works at Spottsylvania... sometimes called the battle of Laurel Hill. It was the first of a long series, almost uniformly with similar results...(146)

Across the road, Coulter was being similarly handled. Checked by artillery on the front and flanked on the left by some of Humphreys' regiments, his brigade retired before those to his right. Coulter's after action report laments the absence of concerted action, and records the disgust he felt that day:

"Those whose duty it had been to reconnoiter the front reported "only dismounted cavalry." Brigade and division

were pushed forward with great rapidity over difficult ground, many being compelled from utter exhaustion to halt, so that when the enemy was in reality met, our lines were almost decimated, and those remaining unfit for any offensive operations. One of the men advancing, having obtained through the thick undergrowth, a view of the enemy's skirmishers, remarked, "pretty dismounted cavalry, carrying knapsacks". The sequel proved the truth of this remark. The division, exhausted and decimated, soon found itself engaged by a strong veteran division of the enemy, choosing the ground and abiding the attack."(147)

On the right, Bartlett's brigade, temporarily was having better success against Perry. The experience of the Eighty-Third Pennsylvania is recounted in the regimental history:

"... As we advanced, someone suggested that a charge could be more effectively made with fixed bayonets, and so the order ran along the entire line and the men fixed them as they went.... It began to appear now, as we neared the woods, that we had counted without our host, and that we were about to encounter an enemy who were in larger force than ourselves.... as we approached, we received a volley from their musketry. At that instant, we dashed forward on the double quick, and not until we came close upon them did we discover that they were behind a breastwork of logs and rails.

"We found a whole brigade, several times our own number, thus entrenched... they stood their ground and commenced pouring in a murderous fire upon our ranks. Our men... rushed upon them and began plying the bayonet.... The bayonet was vigorously used along the whole line. We stood face to face, not over fifteen feet apart, for over half an hour - so close that the discharge of our muskets almost flashed in their faces - but still the enemy stood their ground. They were so posted that we received the fire from two lines, both of which were protected by breastworks. Our right flank was also exposed to the fire of their skirmishers... To contend any longer against such odds... was madness. We had already lost heavily... and so we fell back without much regard to order..."(148)

The Forty-Fourth New York, on the Eighty-Third Pennsylvania's left, never made it to the Confederate works. When Robinson's division retreated, some of Henagan's pursuing men struck the Forty-Fourth in the left flank, rolling up the line and inaugurating a precipitous retreat. (149) The pursuit continued across the fields on both sides of the road as far as the Sedgwick Monument. There, the Confederates were held up briefly by Martin's battery and its infantry support. Colonel William Tilton, the senior infantry officer supporting the battery, described the action in his after action report:

"... I was... ordered to support with my regiment (22d Massachusetts) one of our batteries, under direction of Captain Martin. I occupied a wooded knoll on the right of the battery, and soon was reinforced by the Fourth Michigan. A line that had charged the enemy before we had formed was

now coming back sharply pursued. The Eighteenth Massachusetts and the First Michigan rallied upon my right. We meanwhile opened fire and checked the foe. They soon, however, were seen in a piece of woods a few hundred yards upon our left aiming to get in our rear. The batteries now retired. All the troops on the knoll moved off by the right flank to the right and rear." (150)

Bartlett's brigade reformed just beyond the position of Martin's battery under cover of the First Division's other two brigades, which were in a sunken portion of the right fork of the Brock Road.(151) Robinson's division, however, reached the Alsop house before it could be halted and reformed.(152) It erected breastworks and remained there for the remainder of the day. The Second Division would be disbanded the next day.

It was then about 1000 hours and Warren's other two divisions, Crawford's Third and Cutler's Fourth, were up and moving to the attack. Simultaneously, Field's brigades were returning from Spotsylvania Courthouse and moving into the woods to your right between Perry's brigade and the Po River, just over three-fourths of a mile to the southwest.(153) The Confederates, however, were in considerable disorder. Haskell's battery was out of ammunition and had suffered heavy casualties. It was withdrawn and Huger's battalion moved up and posted in the woods to your right front, among the infantry.(154) Humphreys' brigade, across the road, had pursued Coulter's brigade through the woods and was out of contact with the rest of the line.(155) Henagan's and Perry's brigades were less disordered, but both had pushed skirmishers into the woods behind you.

Crawford's division double-quickened into the woods across the Brock Road, met Humphreys' disorganized troops and quickly drove them off. Encountering dense undergrowth and a swamp in their front, however, Crawford did not press the attack, but fell back to where Grant Road now runs and began entrenching a defensive line.(156)

For a better appreciation of the attack by the First and Fourth divisions, return to the jeep trail and follow it west (left) for about 300 yards, past the two fir trees and along the fence line. Stop when you are approximately opposite the two-story house visible beyond the fence and through the trees on your left. Perry's brigade was in

position approximately along the crest to your front. The crest was then covered with a belt of cedar trees, about 20-25 yards wide. Beyond, where the tree line is now, the ground rises again and was open nearly as far as Alsop's.

Griffin's now reformed division, along with Cutler's advanced between 1000 and 1100 hours. Griffin drove off Henagan's skirmishers and halted on the reverse slope of the crest to your right; safe from the Confederate artillery. Cutler advanced on Griffin's right with three brigades abreast: Brigadier General James Rice's Second Brigade nearest Griffin; Brigadier General Edward Bragg's Third in the middle; and Colonel W.W. Robinson's First on the right.(157) See Figure 17.

Cutler's lines were formed in the open field north of Hancock Road. Rice's brigade encountered Confederates in a peach orchard just north of the road (see Figure 6) and spent the next hour or so clearing it.(158) The First and Third Brigades, however, pressed forward. Bragg's after action report describes his attack:

".... The enemy were in a position in the woods skirting the field in our front and upon the right flank, his skirmishers thrown forward... The troops advanced in good order for 250 yards across the field, when the enemy's advance opened a brisk fire, which checked the onward movement, and at this moment the lines upon the right and left partially gave way and a panic ensued, which for a moment threatened the total demoralization of the command."(159)

On the Confederate side, Lieutenant Colonel William Oates, temporarily commanding two regiments of Perry's brigade, remembered the attack in these words:

"I drew in my skirmishers, and on entering the woods became hotly engaged with a Pennsylvania brigade commanded by General Bragg, of Wisconsin, as I have since learned from that gentleman.

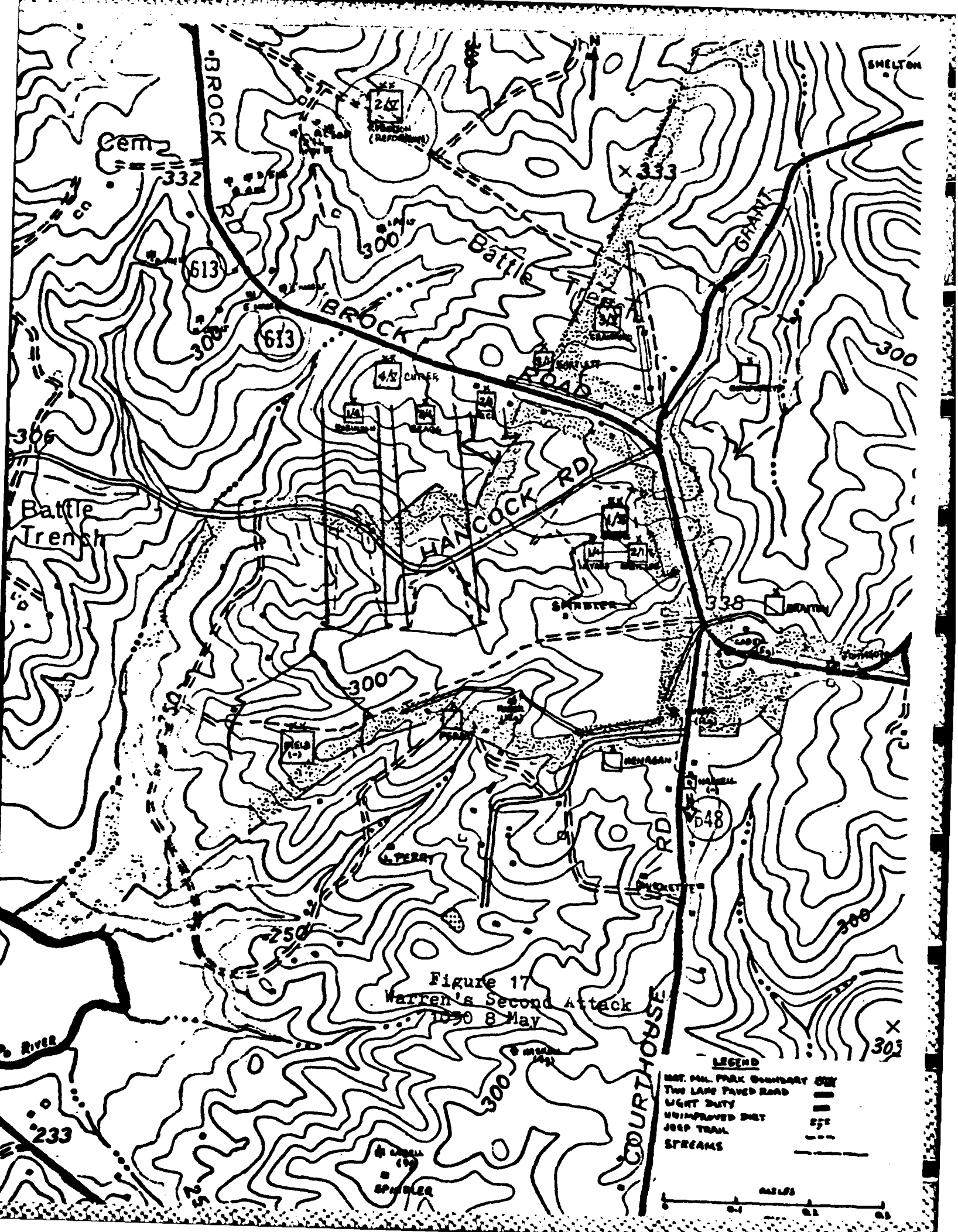
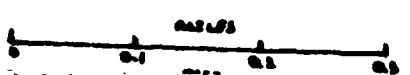


Figure 17
Warren's Second Attack
1030 8 May

- LEGEND**
- NET. PAK. PARK BOUNDARY
 - TWO LANE PAVED ROAD
 - LIGHT DUTY
 - UNIMPROVED DIRT
 - JEOP TRAIL
 - STREAMS



"My two regiments drove the four opposed to them two hundred yards, when Bragg was reinforced by his old regiment, the Sixth Wisconsin, Colonel Dawes commanding, which forced my line back to the crest of a ridge, where I extended left and right to confront those opposed to me. Here we received and returned brisk fire for a half an hour before they retired beyond range. Colonel Perry came up during the engagement, and when it ceased directed me to retire across a ravine and take up the best defensive position I could on the ridge beyond. I did so, and formed a line of battle behind a little fence, which I had torn down and the rails laid along in a pile for the men to lie behind for their protection."(160)

The first ridge Dates mentions is through the trees to your front. The ravine is in front of you, over the crest. Where you stand, of course, is the second crest, where the Fifteenth Alabama took position. The position of the fence is directly behind you.

Colonel Robinson's after action report states that Bragg broke first, but, in any event, he withdrew when a Confederate brigade, probably Brigadier General George Anderson's, returning from Spotsylvania Courthouse, struck his right flank.(161)

Cutler's division reformed after its repulse and took up defensive positions along the present Hancock Road. Griffin, with both flanks exposed, followed suit shortly thereafter.

It was about noon when Cutler was repulsed and Warren, despairing of any further prospect of dislodging the Confederates, requested the Sixth, and perhaps the Second Corps be sent to his assistance.(162) The heaviest fighting at Laurel Hill, however, was over for the day. Both sides entrenched their positions and brought up additional forces throughout the remainder of the day. The Federal artillery finally took up positions supporting the infantry, but even so, only eight of Fifth Corps' twelve batteries fired a round on the 8th of May.(163)

By early evening, the Sixth Corps was up and the attack was renewed by both corps. On this side of the road, it was

half hearted, consisting of little more than pushing skirmishers forward. On the other side of the road, Crawford's division pressed the attack with greater vigor and overlapped the Confederate right. Ewell's Second Corps, however, was at the same time moving into position on Anderson's right and quickly repulsed the attack.

In short, three Confederate Brigades, supported by every gun in the First Corps, had fought five times their number to a standstill at Laurel Hill. More importantly, at day's end, Anderson's men held the two vital crossroads, here and at Spotsylvania Courthouse, that Grant needed to interpose his army between Lee's and Richmond. The day's action had wrecked the Fifth Corps' Second Division and cost some 1500 Union casualties as compared to a few hundred Confederate.(164) Nonetheless, Grant would attack this front twice more over the next five days. The slaughter that attended these attacks is reflected in the May 14th observation of a regimental chaplain in Coulter's brigade:

"The Fifth Corps... now... looks scarcely larger than did Robinson's Division ten days ago."(165)

Proceed now to Stop 5.

Stop 5: Fifth and Second Corps Attack - May 10th.

Continue west along the jeep trail, beyond the point where the tree line bends sharply left. In front of you, the cleared area will widen substantially and the ground will start to fall away toward the Po River (not visible through the trees). On your right, behind a rise and through the trees you should see a modern two-story reddish brick house with a chimney at each end. Continuing along the jeep trail and keeping the trees close on your left, you should soon see a lone oak tree, almost straight ahead near the bottom of the hill. Behind the lone oak is a clump of oak trees and, to the left, an unbroken line of pine and cedar. Roughly 100 yards ahead, in line with the lone oak, is a group of several tree stumps. The stumps are Stop 5. Standing near the stumps and looking toward the lone oak, on your left was the Confederate line, established during the afternoon of 8 May, which generally followed the tree line; but was 50 to 75 yards forward, in the field. The Union position was to your right, just over a quarter of a mile away through the trees. It was in this area that the Fifth and Second Corps attacked the Confederate left on May 10th.

Though Grant intended to use May 9th to prepare for a concerted attack on Lee's lines, two events occurred which upset his plan and caused him to order the attack here on the 10th instead.(166)

Burnside was ordered to move the IX Corps from Chancellorsville toward Spotsylvania Courthouse via the Fredericksburg Road, halting at "the gate", literally a gate in a fence that ran across the road. Burnside failed to recognize the gate and continued two miles beyond, crossing the Ny River. There, about noon, he was attacked by a regiment of dismounted cavalry. Believing the attackers to be infantry, Burnside halted, took up a defensive line and reported to Grant that he was confronted by a superior force of the enemy.(167) Grant, assuming Burnside was at "the gate", thought Lee must be moving on Fredericksburg and decided to strike what he thought was the unguarded Confederate left flank.(168)

Hancock, earlier in the day, had moved three of his Second Corps divisions into position on Warren's right, leaving one to guard the crossroads at Todd's Tavern.(169) Grant ordered Hancock to cross the Po and turn Lee's flank. Hancock crossed in good order, but was unable to seize the Block House Bridge before darkness halted him. When the sun came up on May 10th, Hancock found two of Early's Third Corps divisions in position to block any further advance.

Grant, ignorant of where Lee's flanks actually were, reasoned that the Confederate left and center must have been

weakened to block Hancock and Burnside, and determined to attack there.(170) Hancock was ordered back across the Po to join Warren in an attack on Laurel Hill set for 1700 hours.(171)

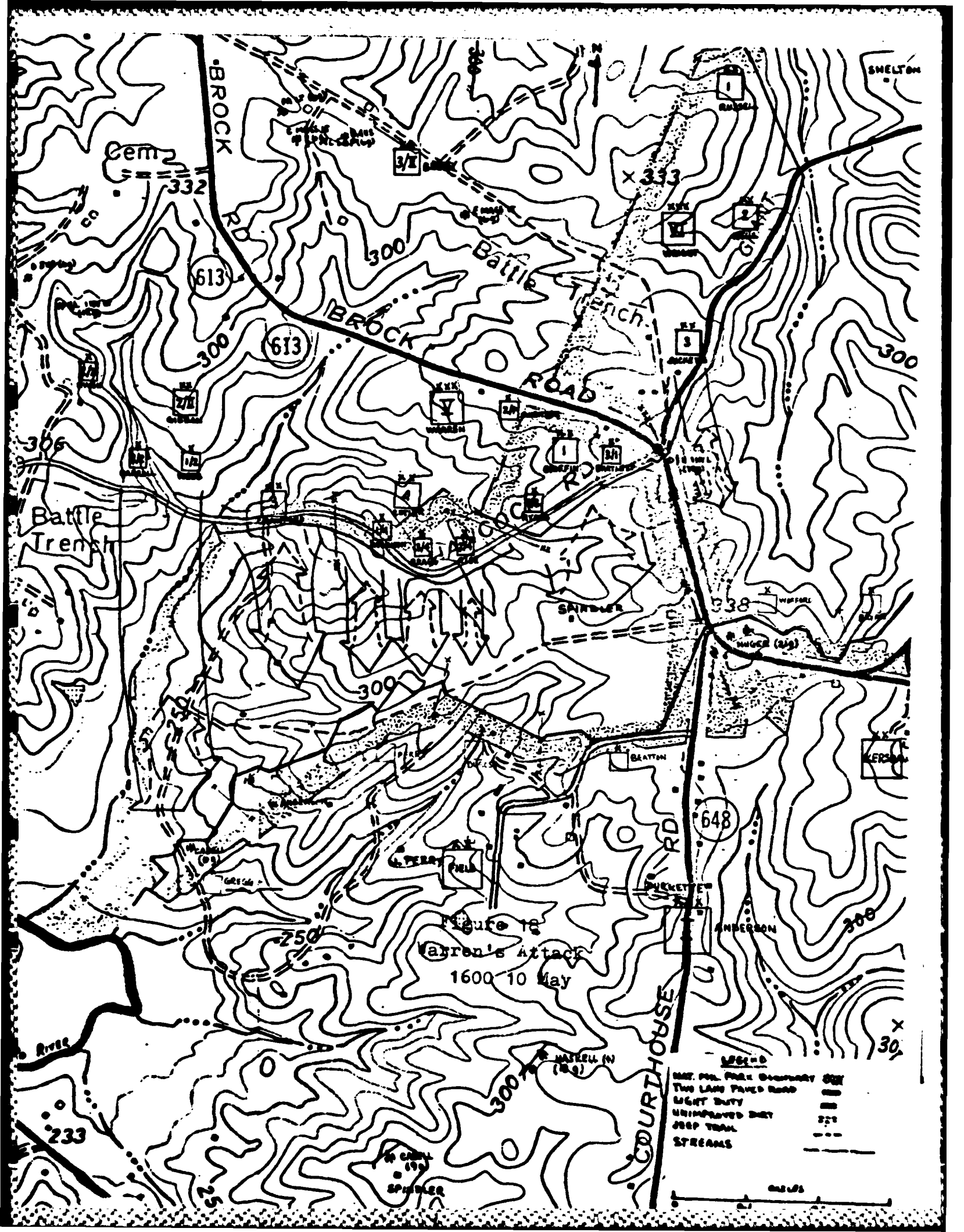
While Hancock was returning, Warren was conducting two reconnaissances in force in this proximity; one at about 1130 hours by two regiments, and the other at about 1400 hours with Cutler's division. The latter gave Warren information that convinced him to attack before Hancock's divisions were ready. At about 1630 hours, Warren, in full dress uniform, led his men forward. Brigadier General Samuel Carroll's Third and Brigadier General Alexander Webb's Second brigades of the Second Division, Second Corps, advanced across the open field to your front. Cutler's division (4/V) attacked the Confederates on the hill crest you just left and Crawford's division (3/V) went on Cutler's right. (See Figure 18)

Cutler's attack was apparently over almost before it began. His after action report states merely:

"Being governed in my movements by the troops on my right, I advanced until the troops on my right were repulsed, when, by the orders of the Major General commanding the corps, I retired to the trenches."(172)

There is some question concerning the morale of Cutler's men at this point. The experience of Colonel Rufus Dawes' Sixth Wisconsin in the 1400 hours reconnaissance by the division may help to explain the lack of enthusiasm for the assault:

"...We advanced to an assault upon the enemy in their entrenched position at Laurel Hill. We came suddenly upon their works without being aware of their proximity, on account of the thick brush, and we received a very destructive enfilading fire.... I moved by the right flank to get under the brow of a hill. We were not 200 feet from the enemy.... The enemy poured over us a continual storm of bullets. We now saw the bodies of our soldiers burning in



grass and leaves which had been ignited by the musketry. Major General Warren soon came running up the hill to have a look at the rebel works, when I seized his yellow sash and pulled him violently down.... To have exposed himself above the hill was certain death.... After remaining for a time, which I cannot estimate, under the brow of this hill... we again retreated to our breastworks."(173)

Crawford's line, the center of which passed near this spot, was similarly repulsed. Carroll and Webb fared little better as Carroll's report makes clear:

".... About 4 P.M. was ordered by General Gibbon, commanding (the) division, to assault the enemy line in my front, which I executed as ordered. Charging through a belt of burning woods, 35 to 40 yards wide, the right of my line reached the enemy's breastworks and the whole line reached the abatis, but was exposed to such concentrated and murderous fire from two lines as to make the position untenable, and I fell back to the original position, where I remained."(174)

In some places, the attackers briefly entered the Confederate lines and hand-to-hand fighting ensued. The worst occurred along Brigadier General John Gregg's front, where Carroll's men struck. His Texas brigade constituted Anderson's extreme left, with the line running from about the stand of oaks to your front to this spot. One of the Texans described the attack thusly:

"Giving no notice of their intentions, five of their brigades, under cover of heavy timber, crawled close up to

the breastworks. Then, with loud huzzas they sprang forward in a seemingly reckless charge.... The Texas regiments were not as ready as they should have been, and for a few seconds it looked as if the enemy would win the breastworks.... a sheet of flame... burst from the entrenchments mowing down the assailants by the hundreds, and in front of the Fourth and Fifth Texas and the Third Arkansas the onset was soon checked.

"The First Texas was not as successful as its comrade regiments... About the middle part of the line occupied by it, a gap, probably forty feet wide, had, for some reason, been left unprotected by the breastworks, and into this, a double line of the Union soldiers poured, shooting right and left, and to some extent using their bayonets... The First Texans immediately rallied, and joining in a hand-to-hand contest with their assailants, soon drove them back over the works; and as by this time the balance of the brigade was idle and turned their fire on the Federals still in front of the First. They were soon compelled to precipitate flight.

"The rugged First was a peculiar regiment in many respects.... While in East Tennessee they took a notion that they could march with greater ease if relieved of the weight of bayonets...and they threw them away. When at Spotsylvania, quite a number of them felt the points of bayonets in the hands of the enemy, they "saw the point"...

and quiet was no sooner restored than they were... soon well equipped with them - securing many of them from the abandoned guns of the Federals, and borrowing, "unbeknownst" to the owners, others from an Alabama brigade of another division."(175)

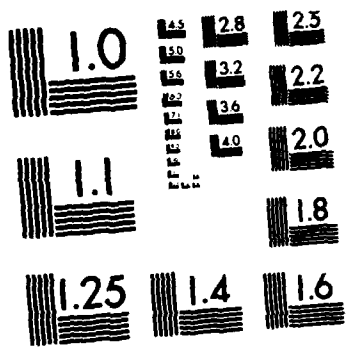
Thereafter, when passing other brigades of Field's division, the First Texas was subjected to ribald comments of every description regarding its lack of bayonets on May 10th. Some aspects of military life are eternal.(176)

Hancock, arriving at Laurel Hill while Warren's attack was in progress, renewed the attack at dusk. It achieved even less success. A sentence from Brigadier General John Gibbon's (commander of the Second Division, Second Corps) after-action report aptly summarized the day's achievements here:

".... The only result of the two assaults was to kill and wound a large number of men, many of whom were burnt to death by the conflagration which raged in the dry timber...."(177)

Four thousand more casualties had been added to the Union toll on May 10th; most of them at Laurel Hill.(178)

Proceed now to Stop 6.



MICROCOPY RESOLUTION TEST CHART

Stop 6: Fifth Corps Attack, May 12th.

Return along the jeep trail toward Stop 4. Turn on the footpath you used to reach Stop 4 from the Sedgwick Monument. Follow it for about 100 yards, stopping on the crest of the rise just before the wooded ravine. In this ravine occurred one of those curious incidents which illustrate the meaning of "the fog of war."

In the pre-dawn mist and fog of May 12th, Hancock's Second Corps struck the Confederate lines at the salient, one and a quarter miles northeast of here, and achieved a stunning breakthrough that threatened to split Lee's army. For the next twenty hours, both commanders fed every available unit into the fighting at the salient; Grant to exploit the success and Lee to buy time until a new line of entrenchments could be completed.

Warren's initial role in the attack was to keep close to the enemy and prevent him from reinforcing the troops battling Hancock.(179) By 0800 hours Wright's Sixth Corps had joined Hancock's Second in the salient and both corps were being hard pressed by a savage Confederate counter-attack. Warren was ordered to attack at Laurel Hill to keep Wright's right flank from being turned. Cautious as always, Warren was slow to comply, prompting Meade to issue him a preemptory order to attack, and then to send Brigadier General Andrew Humphrey to make sure it was carried out.(180)

It was impossible from the Official Records to reconstruct precisely what followed. Warren's after-action report is typical of those filed by Union participants:

"... I also again assailed the enemy's intrenchments, suffering heavy loss, but failing to get in. The enemy's direct and flank fire was too destructive. Lost very heavily...."(181)

Between 0900 and 1000 hours, two assaults were made by parts of the Fifth Corps over the same ground as the attacks on 8 May.(182) The order of the divisions that morning was: Griffin's on the left, his left on the Block Road; Cutler's to Griffin's right; and Crawford's to the right of Cutler's. Neither attack was coordinated. An account by a member of Griffin's division described the attack on the left:

"The 12th of May, 1864, is a date never to be forgotten by any of the 32d (Massachusetts regiment) who were present in the attack on Laurel Hill that day. Brief as the action was, the loss of the regiment in proportion to the numbers engaged, was greater than in any battle of the war.... About 9 o'clock A.M. we received orders to attack the position of the enemy on Laurel Hill, and the brigade... advanced with a rush across the intervening space.... at the front of Laurel Hill. The men, whose momentum had carried them thus far, faltered under the terrible fire, and laid down within a short distance of the enemy's line of works. Here the ground did not cover the left of the regiment, and while Colonel Stevenson was trying to draw his left under shelter, he saw that the regiment on his right had broken and was falling back in great disorder, and once ordered the men to save themselves."

"The advance had been disastrous but the retreat as usual was far more so... of the 190 men who advanced in the Regimental line, 103 were killed or wounded, and from the time that they left the works until the remnant had returned, less than thirty minutes had elapsed."(183)

The action in the center was similar in character as Colonel Rufus Dawes remembered:

"In the early morning, we again charged upon the enemy at Laurel Hill. Our brigade (1/4/V) was in the front line and

Colonel Bragg's was in the second line. We came upon one of General Crawford's brigades (Pennsylvania Reserves), who lay in a breastwork near the Rebel line. Here a halt was made. Colonel Bragg... ordered me to lead my brigade forward.... The men sprang over the breastworks with great alacrity... and... continued advancing under a heavy and destructive fire for several yards, when, finding no line on my right or left, so far as I could see through the timber... I ordered my line to halt and fire until the troops on the right and left should move to our support. After a few minutes of rapid firing, suffering meanwhile severe loss, convinced of the futility of striving without support to advance through the abatis in our front, while to remain longer was wanton sacrifice of life, I ordered my men back behind the breastwork.... The assault was manifestly hopeless from the outset."(184)

Crawford's men met the same fate:

"Reserves hardly reached the crest of the hill until the same staggering fire that told so fearfully upon our ranks on the 10th, was again experienced."(185)

Federal accounts would indicate that in these fruitless assaults, the attackers suffered heavily at the hands of the defenders. The Confederates, however, saw it differently. Brigadier General E. Porter Alexander's description of the attack casts some doubt upon who caused the casualties:

"... At 10 A.M., we saw Warren's men advance over the open

ground where they had first assaulted us on the 8th. By common consent, infantry and artillery reserved their fire until his line was within a hundred yards. Then both opened and the line was quickly driven back with heavy loss to them, and but little to ourselves. They fell back to their right out of our sight in a hollow. We followed their disappearance with a random fire of artillery down the hollow... but, being random fire, it was presently discontinued to save ammunition. Soon there broke out in the hollow a furious fusillade for which we could find no explanation, unless they were firing on each other by mistake. This seemed unlikely when it was kept up for over two hours, a great roar of musketry.... Can it be that two Federal divisions fought each other for nearly that time... It seems so.... It hardly seems likely that so much loss could have been incurred from their very brief exposure to our fire."(186)

Brigadier General John Bratton's after action report supports Alexander's statement:

"...the enemy assaulted us heavily, advancing beautifully in two lines of battle. We held our fire until they were within 50 yards of us, when by a deliberate and well directed volley, a line of their dead was laid down across the entire front of my brigade... the fusillade continued for some minutes, and strewed the field with dead and

wounded from their scattered and fleeing hordes. Many of those in the open field fled... behind the crest ... to their right, our left.... Their position could not be seen from our batteries, but I ordered them to open up on them,... which was afterward found to have become... effective, killing and mutilating great numbers of them. Unfortunately, the commander of the battery informed me that his orders were to save ammunition... and (I) ordered him to cease firing, and thus saved the lives of many Yankees. They kept up an active fusillade - indeed, a terrific roar of musketry - all the while. This continued for so long (for some hours) that we began to suspect that by some happy mistake they were fighting themselves. It seemed a heavy battle and we had nothing to do with it."(187) (See Figure 19)

Federal accounts report nothing unusual occurred in the ravine. After the war, Alexander tried to find out what happened that day. A lengthy correspondence between he and Colonel H.H. Humphreys, a son of Grant's Chief Of Staff, concludes with Humphreys' verdict:

"I cannot explain it, and am of the belief that it will remain one of those cases which one side says it did and the other says it did not. Something like the Scotch verdict "not proven."(188)

Return to your automobile and proceed to Stop 7.

Stop 7: Anderson's Trench Lines

From the Sedgwick Memorial, go south on the Brock Road for approximately six-tenths of a mile to Anderson Drive, a Park Service road. You will find a "road closed" gate and sign across Anderson Drive, but there is enough room between the barrier and the Brock Road for you to park safely. The road is closed for reasons of economy; the park is not closed. Entrenchments, as you have no doubt gathered from the eye-witness accounts, played an important part in the Battle of Spotsylvania in general, and at Laurel Hill specifically. Some of the best preserved entrenchments remaining are in this part of the park. Cross the barrier and walk northeast on Anderson Drive. On your left, you see the remains of the trench line that Lee had constructed while the salient was being attacked. As you continue on for about 25 yards, you will see a line of trenches on your right and, 15 yards further, another line. The trail on the right of the road along the trenches is closed, but the one on the left is open. The better trenches, unfortunately, are to the right. Nonetheless, from the road, you can quickly gain an appreciation for the extent and complexity of the earthworks. Traverses to protect the infantry from enfilading fire are visible, as are the artillery pits and protected communications between the two lines.

"With entrenchments such as these, having artillery throughout, with flank fire along their lines wherever practicable, and with rifled muskets then in use, which were effective at three hundred yards as the smooth-bore muskets at sixty yards (accuracy of fire is meant, not range), the strength of an army sustaining attack was more than quadrupled, provided they had force enough to man the entrenchments well. In fact, there is scarcely any measure by which to gauge the increased strength thereby gained." (189)

The entrenchments which Brigadier General A.A. Humphreys

so described were, to that point, the most formidable ever constructed by an army in the field. Consisting of an interlocking network of dirt and log earthworks, studded throughout with guns, the line followed the terrain to advantage and gave Lee's veterans an almost insurmountable edge on the defensive. Head logs placed a few inches over the works gave the infantry a slit to fire through in relative safety. Woods in front of the line were cut to deny the enemy concealment, and open areas obstructed with timber barriers and sharpened stakes bristling outward.

These fortifications, which both sides erected in greater or lesser detail, were a response to the new war introduced by Grant: the war of attrition. During the Wilderness fighting, when the two armies maintained continuous contact for three days, earthworks became common. There was no safety from enemy bullets and shells without them, and they provided some protection against the sudden, vicious attacks that had become commonplace. Moreover, on the Confederate side, Lee's dwindling numbers forced him to remain on the defensive and conserve the army's ebbing strength.

By May 8th, the men of both armies understood the imperatives and threw up defensive works at every halt. A private in a South Carolina regiment described the activities on Laurel Hill during the afternoon of May 8th:

"The men, of their own accord, commenced to cut down pine trees to build breastworks. The only tools we had for this purpose were the little hand axes, about three inches wide, which some of the men had.... they... would not hesitate to jump onto a pine tree that would square twenty inches; and it was surprising how fast they would have it down, cut off, trimmed up and cut off again. Then the whole company would take it up, place it in position. We worked this way for some hours into the night. All the while the whole skirmish line was pretty warmly engaged." (190)

Another Confederate remembered those days in much the same way:

"Death or wounds came at all hours of the night or day.

Absolute safety was nowhere to be found...Lee's whole force, barely sufficient to hold the line confronting the enemy's, his soldiers could not be allowed, when relieved from service at the front, to seek resting places beyond the zone, lest, in case of sudden attack, they fail to reach the threatened parts of the line in time to avert disaster. Whenever a halt was made... breastworks were immediately erected - the Federals, notwithstanding their overwhelming preponderance in numbers, being as insistent as the Confederates on having such protection. The Confederates soon became experts in the manipulation of the pick and spade, and when, as frequently happened, such tools were not at hand, and the enemy threatened a speedy attack, resort was had to bayonets - tin cups and frying pans and such few axes and hatchets as were carried by individual soldiers. With these and such logs and rails as could be found near, fairly safe breastworks were thrown up in an hour's time."(191)

From those modest beginnings, the fortifications were continuously improved throughout the ten days that the two armies confronted each other at Spotsylvania.

Brigadier General E.P. Alexander, one of the most observant and objective participants in the war, thought the value of well-laid out breastworks could hardly be overestimated:

"Our equipment with entrenching tools was always far below our requirements, and in emergencies, the men habitually loosened the ground with bayonets, and scooped it up with

tin cups. The line was laid out generally by those who built it. The Federals had a large force, perhaps 2,500 men, of engineer troops and heavy artillery regiments, habitually employed in building and improving their entrenchments under the direction of engineer officers. They were more valuable than an equal number of regular troops, and should be part of the equipment of every army."(192)

In addition to the absolute advantage in physical protection the fortifications provided the defender, they apparently gave an equal edge in morale. Federal attacks at Laurel Hill on the evening of the 8th, and on the 10th and 12th were, at best, half-hearted in whole or part. The reaction of one Union soldier to the order to assault Anderson's works frontally on May 10th, probably was typical:

"I must confess that I had some misgivings as to the judgment of the commanding general who had *ordered or* advised this change; for, as this was an important position, the Rebels had fortified it strongly... Every man in the ranks saw the folly of the attempt, and judging from the undercurrent of their conversation, it is not probable that they would have made a very determined effort, or gone far... I observed the countenance of the officers, from the colonels down, and I must say that there were the longest faces upon this occasion of any previous one..."(193)

Earthworks would dominate the remainder of the war and, using them with the same skill as here at Spotsylvania, Lee would hold more than twice his numbers outside Richmond for nearly another year. Gone were the days of 1862 when Lee's insistence of earthworks before the Seven Days battles had earned him the derisive nicknames "Granny" Lee and the "King of Spades".

This completes Stop 7 and the primary tour of Laurel Hill. An additional stop, consisting of a visit to Anderson's position on May 8th and a drive along the Confederate line of march, is offered for a comparative appreciation of the race for Spotsylvania Courthouse. The route will return you to Todd's Tavern Market on the Brock Road. If you choose to continue the tour, proceed to Stop 8.

To return to Interstate 95 from this location, travel southeast on the Brock Road to Spotsylvania Courthouse. Notice the building at the stop light. It served as a hotel during the civil war years and is the only building at the intersection from that era still intact. Turn left at the stoplight and follow route 208 approximately 7.5 miles to its intersection with U.S. Highway 1. Turn right. The junction with Interstate 95 is about a mile from the intersection.

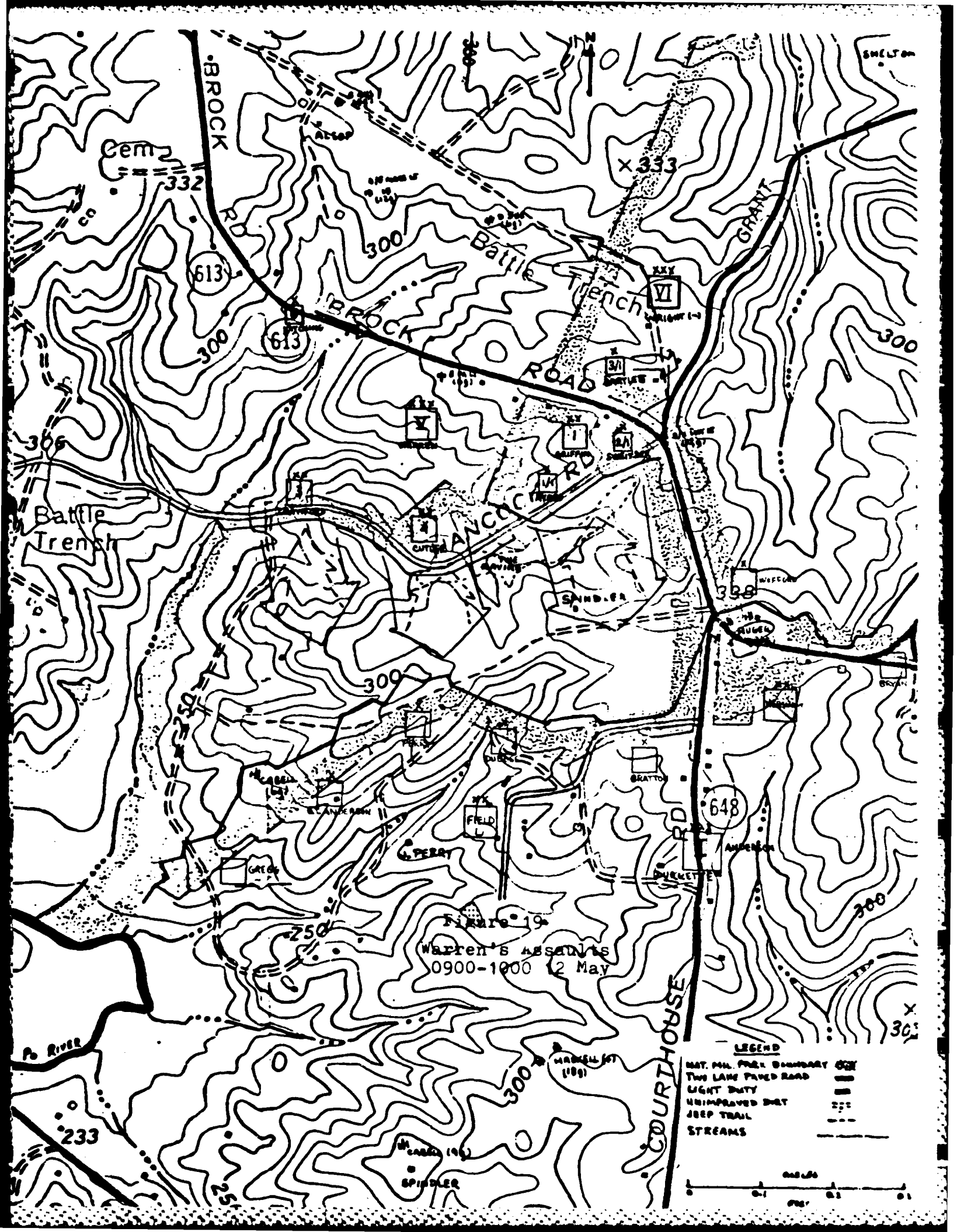
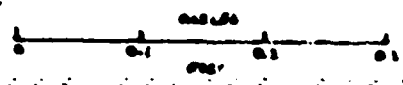


Figure 19
 Warren's Assault
 0900-1000 12 May

- LEGEND**
- MAT. MIL. POLY. BOUNDARY
 - TWO LANE PAVED ROAD
 - LIGHT DUTY
 - UNIMPROVED DIRT
 - JEOP TRAIL
 - STREAMS



Stop 8: Anderson's Route of March

Return to your automobile and proceed northwest on the Brock Road for two-tenths of a mile. Turn left on Blockhouse Road (state route 648) and continue south for 0.15 miles to Prichett Road. Turn right and park on the shoulder at the top of the small rise 100 yards ahead. On the right are the remains of Anderson's trenches. Walk forward a few feet until you encounter a trail through the woods. Follow it past the small stone marker erected by the survivors of the Seventh Maryland Regiment, to the edge of the tree line. You should have a good view ahead of the crest of Laurel Hill. You are now standing in front of the line held by Henagan's brigade of Kenshaw's division on May 8th.

At the close of the Battle of the Wilderness, Anderson's First Corps held the extreme right of the Confederate line. Lee, you will recall, anticipated a possible move to his right by the Federals and directed measures be taken to meet that contingency during the morning of May 7th. The principal measure consisted of having Pendleton cut a road from Anderson's line south to where the First Corps could easily gain the Shady Grove Road, a road that essentially parallels the Block Road to near Spotsylvania Courthouse. Late in the day, when he was certain that Grant intended to move eastward, Lee directed Anderson to start his corps for Spotsylvania Courthouse by 0300 hours on May 8th. Anderson, finding the woods to his rear on fire, marched much earlier.

The Confederate First Corps diary indicates the march began about 2300 hours, 7 May; some two hours after Warren's corps started on the road for Todd's Tavern.(194) Other accounts, however, indicate the march more probably began at virtually the same time as Warren's.(195) Kenshaw's division took the lead, followed by Field's. The corps artillery moved from Parker's store on the Orange Plank Road (state road 621) south to the Catharpin Road (state road 608) and then east to its intersection with the Shady Grove Road.(196)

The exact route of the infantry from the Wilderness cannot be determined. It seems probable, however, that the road Pendleton "cut" was actually a wood road running along a ridge behind Anderson's lines. This road continued south and east to the Catharpin Road, north of Corbin's Bridge over the Po.(197) The road is shown on contemporary military maps of Spotsylvania County.(198) Pendleton's men probably widened this existing narrow wood road, rather than construct an entirely new one. What we believe is its remnant, at the junction of the Catharpin Road, will be pointed out later in the tour. The authors walked the area

behind Anderson's Wilderness line, but were unable to locate any definite remnants of the upper portion of the road. (See Figures 20 and 21) Please note that Anderson's route is outside the the National Park Service boundaries and, should you be inclined to walk it, permission should be obtained from the various owners of the property.

The first part of the march from the Wilderness, through the heat and smoke of burning woods, and along a narrow, stump filled road, must have been slow and fatiguing. Confederate accounts, however, have little to say of the march. Either Lee's veterans were used to such hardships by 1864, or the rigors of this march would pale compared to what they would endure during the next year.

The first danger point, Corbin's Bridge over the Po on the Catharpin Road, was passed about 0200 hours.(199) Parts of two Federal cavalry divisions were then at Todd's Tavern, watched by Major General Wade Hampton's cavalry division. Anderson's infantry passed a little more than a mile south of Todd's Tavern without the Federals becoming aware of their presence. Warren, about the same time, was trying to clear Meade's escort from the Brock Road, and Merritt was moving his cavalry onto it to clear Fitzhugh Lee's troopers from the Fifth Corps route.

Anderson pushed his troops through the night. At dawn (0506 hours), the First Corps was at the Blockhouse Bridge over the Po, one mile directly southwest of here, where a halt was called for breakfast and to permit the artillery to join.(200) As the men ate their cold rations, they could hear sporadic firing to the north.(201) Unbeknownst to Anderson, the firing was between Fitzhugh Lee's men and Warren's deploying infantry, northwest of the Alsop farm. At nearly the same time, Brigadier General Thomas Rosser's cavalry brigade was being pushed out of Spotsylvania Courthouse and west along the Brock Road, by Brigadier General James Wilson's Federal cavalry division. In between his beleaguered forces, at Laurel Hill, Major General J.E.B. Stuart was having fences torn down and trees felled by such men that could be spared from the fighting to form a primitive breastwork of rails across the Brock Road. Stuart was aware that Anderson had been ordered to Spotsylvania Courthouse, and was sending couriers to find him with requests to hurry the march before the Federals swept him out of the way.

Anderson resumed the march at about 0630 hours, and by 0700 hours, the head of the column was near the Block House.(202) There, Major J.C. Haskell, commanding an artillery battalion which had been moved to the front of the column, received the news from Stuart's courier that the cavalry was hard pressed. Haskell, believing the situation urgent, sent the courier to Anderson, and immediately started his artillery for Laurel Hill.(203) Haskell probably arrived here shortly before

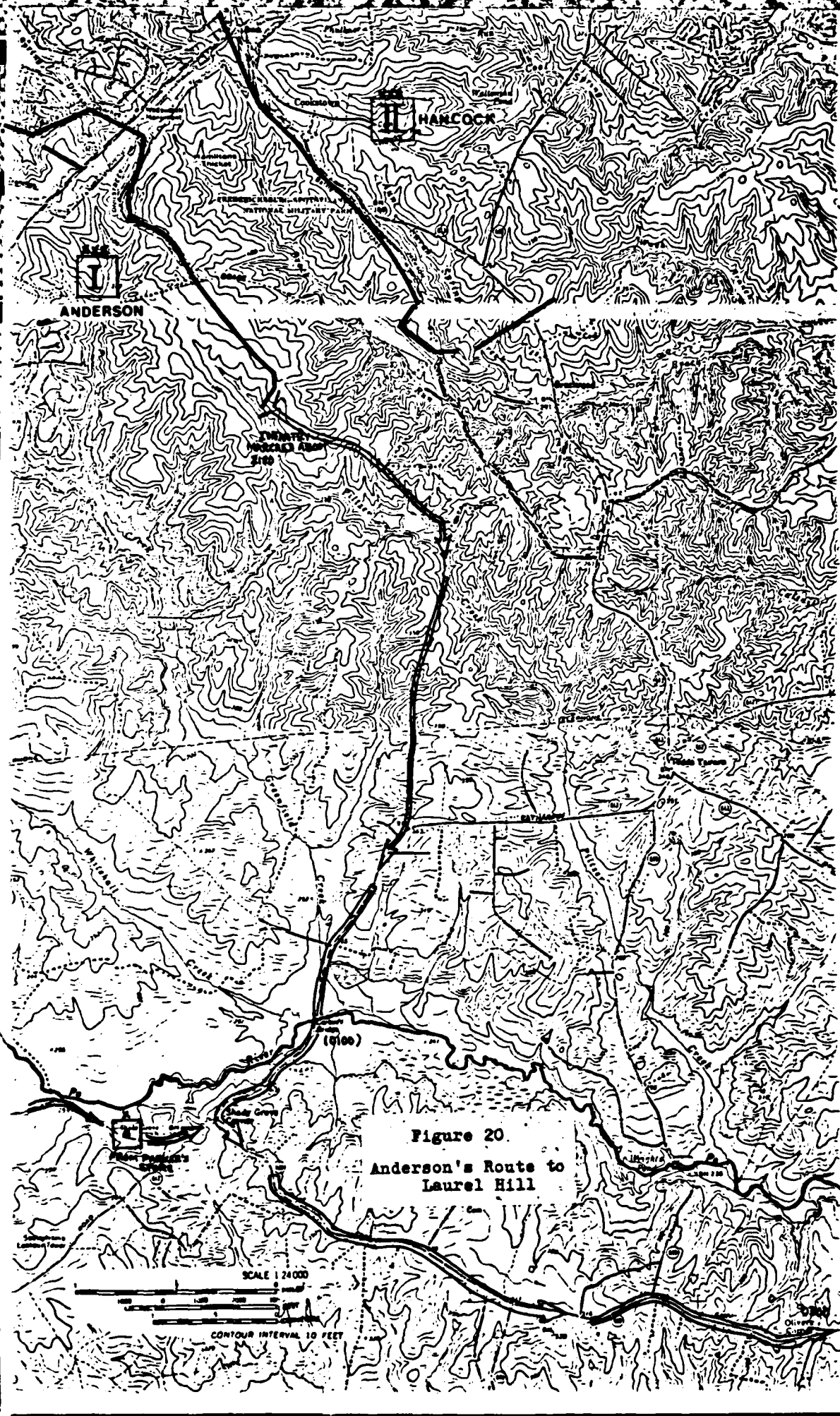


Figure 20
Anderson's Routes to
Laurel Hill

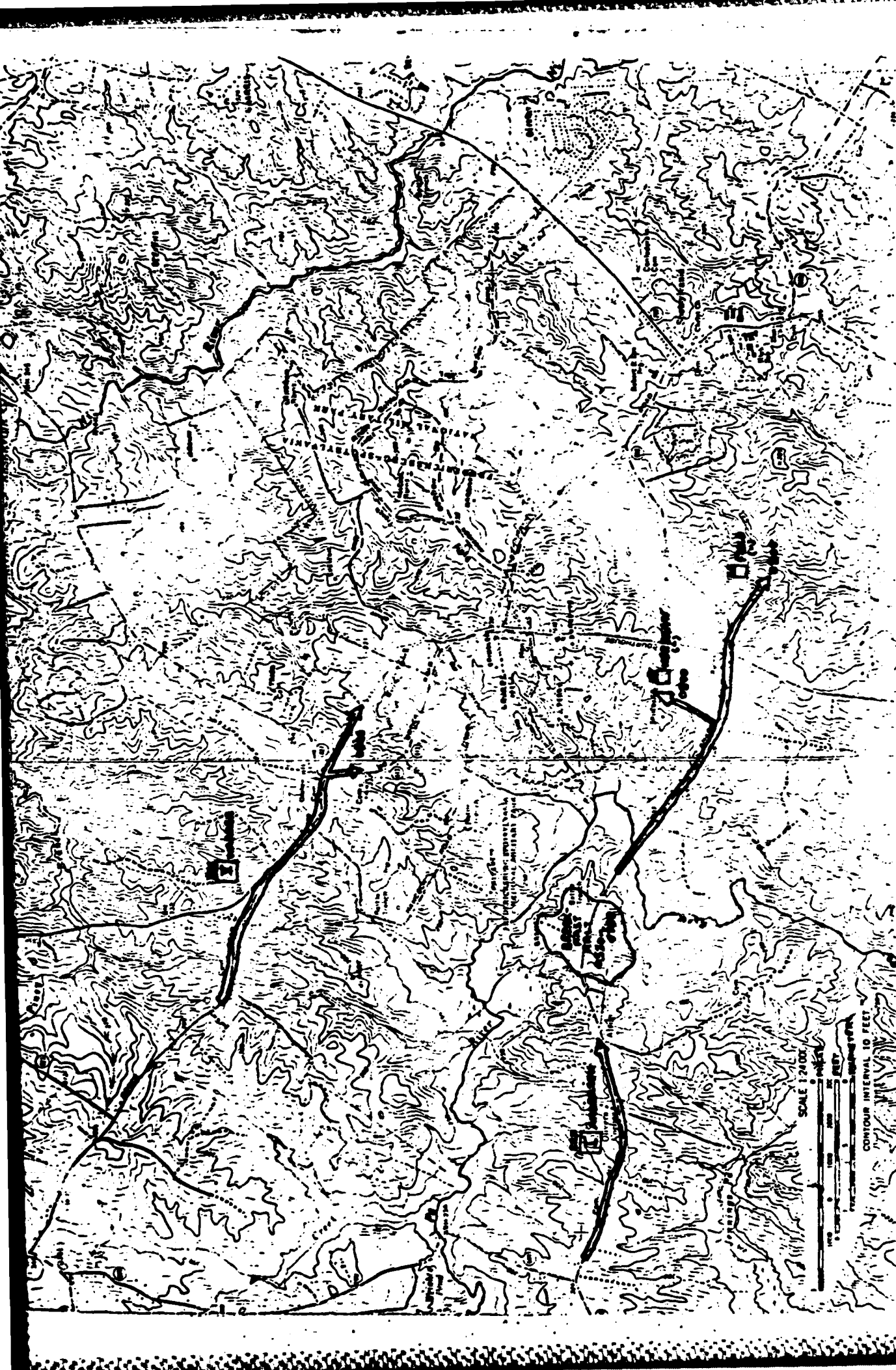


Figure 21
Anderson's March
Shady Grove Road to Laurel Hill
0400-0800 8 May

0800 hours. He went into position on the high ground where the white house to your right now sits.

Meanwhile, Anderson, having received Staurt's request for help, dispatched two brigades from Kershaw's division (Henagan's and Humphreys') and one from Field's (Perry's) to Laurel Hill. With the rest of the corps, he moved by a concealed route to Spotsylvania Courthouse.(204)

The action at Spotsylvania Courthouse was brief. Wilson withdrew up the Fredericksburg Road as soon as he learned Confederate infantry was approaching. The Courthouse was in Confederate hands by 0930 hours.

The situation here, however, was a different story. Henagan, in the lead, marched toward Laurel Hill on a farm road that serviced the Perry, Durette and Spindler farms to your south. What happened next is described by a member of Henagan's brigade:

"... we are aroused and begin our march. Soon we see an old Virginia gentleman, bareheaded and without shoes, riding in haste towards us. He reports that our cavalry are holding the enemy back on Brock Road, but that the Federal infantry are seen to be forming for an attack, and, of course, our cavalry cannot stand such a pressure. General Kershaw orders us forward in double quick. Still we are not there. Then it was that a gallant cavalryman rushes to us and said, "Run for our rail piles; the Federal infantry will reach them first, if you don't run." Our men sprang forward as if by magic. We occupy the rail piles in time to see a column, a gallant column, moving towards us, about sixty yards away. Fine, deadening fire, is poured into that column by our men. A gallant Federal officer rides just in the rear, directing the movement. "Pick that officer off his horse," is the command given to two or three of our cool marksmen. He

falls. The column staggers and then falls back.... Here is the gallant J.E.B. Stuart, Lieutenant General (sic), commanding the cavalry of Northern Virginia, with hat off, waving it in an enthusiastic cheering..."(205)

Humphreys' brigade, following Henagan's, double-timed across the road and took position in time to meet the attack along the high ground opposite the white house to your front. Perry filed in to the left of Henagan. Anderson's chief of artillery, Brigadier General E.P. Alexander, spent a hectic morning bringing up and positioning the guns:

"This gave me such busy and promiscuous occupation in examining and selecting ground, distributing batteries and having them intrench themselves in the interval when they were not firing, that I have but little more than general recollections of the other events of the day. But it was a day of solid, hard fighting.... The fighting lasted until dark and during it, I think I brought into action about every gun I had, either on the line, or from positions where we could fire over our line.... Hugar had two of Moody's 24 pounder brass howitzers hit in the muzzle, though neither was disabled. A 12 pound solid shot actually went down the bore of one.... Frank Hugar loaded the ball in one of Taylor's Napoleons and fired it back, as, he said, it seemed to know the road."(206)

Alexander's "general recollections" include the following:
"Kennedy and Humphreys had hardly gotten into position

when they were charged by the three brigades of Robinson's division of the Fifth Corps.... Warren had told them, the prisoners afterward stated, that there was only cavalry behind the rail breastworks, who had no bayonets, and could not stand close quarters. They actually did charge home to the rails, and a bayonet fight took place across them; but, though superior in numbers, the Federals were repulsed, leaving the ground strewn with dead and wounded..."(207)

After the repulse of Robinson's division, Cutler and Griffin attacked, but Field's division was by then filing in on your left and the charge was easily repulsed. The remainder of the fighting here was a repetition of the 8 May scenario: Federal charge and bloody repulse. Confederate reports and histories contain little detail on the remainder of the fighting at Laurel Hill.

Return to your automobile to follow Anderson's line of march. Turn around (there is room further down Pritchett Road) and return to the the Blockhouse Road and turn right. Go south 0.5 miles to the intersection with Shady Grove Road (route 608). The Block House sat here, on your right. Turn right on Shady Grove Road. Approximately 1.1 miles from the intersection, you will cross the Po River. The Blockhouse Bridge, in May 1864, was some 300 yards to the east of the present location. One-half mile west of the bridge, you will pass a dirt road to your right in the midst of a large cleared area. This is the field where the First Corps stopped for breakfast at dawn on the morning of May 8th. Goshen Church and the Alsop farm are just under one and one-half miles due north from this location.

Just under five miles further on, you will reach Shady Grove Corner. You will see a white church on your right. Turn right onto Catharpin Road (state road 612). Corbin's Bridge over the Po is seven-tenths of a mile north of the intersection. As you cross the Po, notice its steep and wooded banks. These banks made the Po a significant barrier to organized bodies of troops. Because of this factor, Corbin's Bridge was of significant tactical importance.

One mile beyond the bridge, the road bends sharply to the right. At the top of the bend, you will see a mobile home and a green shed on your right. On the left is a narrow, red clay farm road. This is where Anderson's corps entered the Catharpin Road. The dirt road runs north for four-tenths of

a mile before terminating. We advise against trying to follow the road. The right of the First Corps position on May 7th is two and one-half miles northwest of this location.

Continue on the Catharpin Road for 1.4 miles to the intersection with Brock Road. This ends the auto tour of the Confederate route.

Reflections

"The Wilderness campaign was necessary to the destruction of the Southern Confederacy." (208)

Grant wrote those words nearly twenty years after the Battle of Spotsylvania, with the benefits of hindsight and reflection to color his judgment. On the strategic level, it is difficult to fault Grant's analysis. The campaign, of which Laurel Hill was a small part, accomplished most of the aims he hoped to achieve. Grant's persistent hammering kept Lee pinned in front of the Army of the Potomac, and robbed him of the opportunity to seize the initiative. Moreover, in the strategy of exhaustion, Lee's army was depleted beyond the South's capacity to reconstitute it. By the time the Army of Northern Virginia was forced into the trenches around Richmond and Petersburg in June, it was no longer capable of the slashing offensive operations that had marked its glory days. Its high command had been decimated: all three corps commanders had changed, as well as many division and brigade commanders since May; and its ranks thinned by better than 20,000 irreplaceable veterans. Union casualties too had been horrific; more than 18,000 at Spotsylvania alone. Those casualties, however, could be replaced, and though the numbers were high in an absolute sense, the rate was far less than Gettysburg or Antietam. The campaign was also necessary for Union morale in that critical election year. Grant's refusal to retreat before Lee, his confident dispatches and dogged movements southward, combined to erode the myth of Southern invincibility, and helped infuse in the Northern populace the belief in inevitable Union victory.

On the operational level, Spotsylvania was a Union failure. Grant achieved neither of his objectives: interposing between Lee and Richmond; or, failing that, to draw the army of Northern Virginia into the open where it could be overwhelmed by the superior forces.

A major contributor to the operational failure was the ineffectiveness of the Union cavalry. Grant's operational concept required possession of the key crossroads at Todd's Tavern and Spotsylvania Courthouse until the army passed these points, massed and turned south. The cavalry did secure Todd's Tavern until relieved by the infantry of the Second Corps; but it failed completely to seize the other crossroad, or to clear the primary route of march to the objective. It similarly neglected to picket, much less obstruct, the roads available to the Confederates. The responsibility for the cavalry's performance rests squarely with Sheridan. His orders called for clearing the Union

route, obstructing the Confederate's and seizing the road junctions, and was to be implemented by 0500 hours May 8th: the same hour Anderson's men were breakfasting three miles from Spotsylvania Courthouse. Sheridan's failure to have his forces in motion long before the infantry moved left the Confederates free to march unmolested, and contributed significantly to Anderson's winning the race for the Courthouse.

In its role as the "eyes" of the army, the Union cavalry's performance was even more dismal. Grant was completely ignorant of the presence of a Confederate corps on the road barely two miles from his own line of march. Consequently, Warren blundered into the Confederate infantry at Laurel Hill, and Grant spent the next two days trying to ascertain exactly where Lee's forces were. Perhaps Grant's best chance to turn Lee out of his position at Spotsylvania Courthouse passed on May 9-10, when, unsure of the location of the enemy's flanks, he withdrew Hancock from south of the Po. With a numerical superiority of better than 2:1, better equipment and better mobility than the foe, the Union cavalry's performance was inexcusable.

Lee, in contrast, was served well by his cavalry. Not only did Fitzhugh Lee's division slow Warren's march by a few vital hours, but Hampton's insured Anderson's line of march was clear, and Rosser's brigade held on at Spotsylvania Courthouse until help arrived. Lee also generally had reliable, timely information on Union movements from the time Grant crossed the Rapidan.

Warren's march to Laurel Hill on May 7-8 is a study of confusion and disorganization. It is doubtful he would have reached Spotsylvania ahead of Anderson even without the blunders of the cavalry. Though Warren surely was aware of the criticality of speed in reaching Spotsylvania Courthouse, particularly after encountering Meade and Grant at Todd's Tavern, he tolerated interminable and unnecessary delays on the march. From the time he encountered the roadblock at Todd's Tavern to when he replaced Merritt's cavalry with his infantry, Warren appeared content to let events take their course. Some blame attaches to Meade and Grant as well in this respect. If, as their communications and reports indicate, they understood the necessity for moving swiftly, it is difficult to comprehend why they permitted the cavalry escort to block the road at Todd's Tavern, or failed to intervene to clear the road. To Meade's credit, he did order Merritt's cavalry division, idle at Todd's Tavern, out to clear the road in front of Warren. The confusion that ensued, however, as Merritt passed his troopers to the head of Warren's column, only aggravated the delay.

Tactically, the best opportunity for a breakthrough at Laurel Hill was on the morning of May 8th. Warren's 27,000 men were confronted by not more than 7,500 Confederates

until mid-afternoon. Robinson's attack developed information that veteran Southern infantry was blocking the Brock Road, but Warren failed to act on the data. Rather than reconnoiter the front while his divisions massed for a concerted attack, properly supported by his artillery, Warren sent his divisions forward in piecemeal fashion as they arrived at Laurel Hill. Additionally, he failed to consider the condition of his command: exhausted after three days of hard fighting, a tedious night march, and without food and water for the better part of a day. An hour's rest while the Confederate defenses were probed might well have restored the offensive spirit of his men.

Warren's operations on May 10th and 12th show a similar inability to orchestrate a coordinated attack. The attack on May 12th, particularly, again cast him in the role of spectator; unwilling to act decisively to alter the course of events. One is led, as was Grant, to question his suitability for corps command.

Anderson's tactics were almost wholly defensive, and were dictated by his marked numerical inferiority. Inheriting an excellent defensive line, he quickly fortified it and positioned artillery to enfilade an attack on any part of his front. Secure behind the works, his troops were hardly pressed in repulsing Warren's attacks.

The dominant feature of the battlefield quickly became the entrenchments. They came to be the Union's major tactical problem for the remainder of the war. Theodore Lyman, Meade's aide, explained:

"When we arrive on the ground, it takes of course a considerable time to put troops in position for an attack, in a wooded country; then skirmishers must be thrown forward and an examination made for the point of the attack, and to see if there be any impassable obstacles, such as streams or swamps. Meantime, what does the enemy (do)? Hastily forming a line of battle, they then collect rails from fences, stones, logs and all other materials and pile them along the line; bayonets, with a few picks and shovels, in the hands of men who work for their lives, soon suffice to cover this frame with earth and sods; and within one hour, there is a

shelter against bullets, high enough to cover a man kneeling, and extending often for a mile or two. When our line advances, there is the line of the enemy, nothing showing but the bayonets, and the battle-flags stuck on top of the work. It is a rule that, when the Rebels halt, the first day gives them a good rifle-pit; the second, a regular infantry parapet with artillery position; and the third a parapet with an abatis in front and entrenched batteries behind. Sometimes they put this three day's work into the first twenty-four hours."(209)

Warren's operations at Laurel Hill could only have served to demonstrate the futility of assaulting a well-entrenched position frontally. The solution to this vexing problem would require better than fifty years and the application of new technologies.

Endnotes

1. U.S. Department of War, The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies (128 volumes, Washington, 1880-1901), Ser. I, Vol. XXVI, pt. 1, pp. 107-116. (Hereafter cited as Official Records).
2. Official Records, Ser. I, Vol. XXXVI, pt.1, pp.1021-1027.
3. Figures for Union forces are derived from April unit strength returns in Official Records, Ser. I, Vol. XXXVI, pt. 1, pp. 114, 198, 285, 287, 915 and deducting losses in the Wilderness reported on p. 133 of the same volume.
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