

Victory at the Battle of Spotsylvania

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Outline

Thesis: The Confederate Army achieved victory at the battle of Spotsylvania despite an overwhelming opposing force, through leadership, combat experience, indomitable spirit, and the will to fight and win.

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Victory at the Battle of Spotsylvania

One of the bloodiest battles in American history is the Battle at the Spotsylvania courthouse from 8 to 21 May 1864. The appointment of Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant as the commander of all United States Armies changed the direction and intent of the Civil War and the focus had changed (Atkinson 21). LTG Grant had made it clear that his primary intent was to destroy Lee's army and blaze a path directly to Richmond (Furgurson 21). LTG Grant hoped to disable the Confederacy at Richmond and end the war as soon as possible (Matter 1). What Grant did not expect was the decisive action taken by General Robert E. Lee in a maneuver to Spotsylvania for the defense of the south and the Confederacy (Matter 110). The Confederate and Union armies met in Spotsylvania in what amounted to a monumental struggle and victory for the Confederates. The Confederate Army achieved victory at the battle of Spotsylvania despite an overwhelming opposing force, through leadership, combat experience, indomitable spirit, and the will to fight and win.

There are many heroes and stories concerning the events at Spotsylvania the actions taken by the leaders of the Confederacy proved to be the decisive force during the battle. For fourteen days the Union and Confederate troops fought and maneuvered around the town of Spotsylvania. Exceptional planning by Confederate leaders enabled foresight into the possible scenarios leading to action and counter action during the battle. The adaptability of the troops and the detailed supervision by Confederate officers allowed the defense of positions against overwhelming odds. The example set by the Confederate Officers and Enlisted men proves that in times of extreme hardship certain factors can change the tide of battle and give hope to the hopeless.

Several areas of the exceptional leadership provided to the Confederacy just prior to and during the battle at Spotsylvania lead to the victory of the Union. First the planning that was conducted allowed for the southern soldiers to meet the Union in defense and on several occasions engage and deal severe blows (Maney 44). The adaptability of the leadership and the soldiers allowed them to change with the tide of the battle and adjust accordingly. Without the proper supervision and follow up on planning, defensive positioning and manning, the Confederate defense would have failed miserably. Finally, the role played on the battlefield through the actions of leading by example can not be over emphasized at Spotsylvania where thousands of Officers, NCOs and Enlisted lost their lives during those few days.

General Lee, who had been in the field since almost the beginning of the war, had the ability to foresee his opponent's moves as almost second nature (Rhea 43). Before LTG Grant could issue the order to move his troops, Lee had already begun the march toward Spotsylvania (Furgurson 19). His early arrival before the Union allowed him to survey the terrain, routes of entry and departure and set his troops, artillery and trains in the best possible locations for defense (Matter 104). When Grant's army did arrive he found his way barred by Cavalry intent on delaying and harassing his army until the Confederates could finish their defensive positioning and allowing for more critical preparation and planning time (Maney 42). When Grant had seen what Lee had done in defense of his position, he immediately dispatched for re-supply of ammunition and an additional ten thousand troops from the Washington defense (Civil War Home, "The Battles of Spotsylvania Courthouse").

The Confederate Army movement to Spotsylvania was an exercise in adaptability and strict discipline. Knowing the need for a large and rapid force to be emplaced in Spotsylvania, Lee ordered reinforcements and Brigadier General Sedgwick was faced with the hard decision of

leaving his dead and wounded while making his way to Spotsylvania from a previous battle (Rhea 44). Upon arrival in the town Sedgwick immediately ordered the weary soldiers to construct fieldworks that blocked the route through Spotsylvania to Richmond (Civil War Home, “Spotsylvania Courthouse 8-21 May 1864”). These defenses, barriers and fighting positions were created overnight immediately upon arrival (Maney 43). When the Union arrived they found their way blocked by not only the fieldworks, but also a decisive and well-coordinated defensive force (Maney 51).

For the next fourteen days the Confederates attacked and repelled the Union troops along the line of defense. A constant surge of battle called for Officers and men to continuously adjust the lines and provide support the adjacent units (Rhea 321). On several occasions, the ability of the Confederates to adapt their force lead to severe confusion among the Union army (Rhea 209). At one-point field spotters reported that Lee had abandoned his position due to the movement of troops who were simply being repositioned for stronger defense (Maney 48). The misinterpretation caused a Union attack that quickly found that the Confederates were not only present, but in better positions for the defense than before.

The ability of the Confederate leaders to provide detailed supervision, follow-up and adjustment allowed for success during the battle. Gen Lee himself reviewed the initial line of defense and fieldworks prior to the arrival of Grant’s army (Rhea 28). His review showed the weakness in several areas of the defense and he called for an additional line to be created to add strength to the line (Rhea 323). During the course of the battle the Officers and NCOs provided constant supervision to their soldiers on the line. Fatigue was a major issue among the troops who had marched to the town, set up defenses and began the battle the next day (Maney 43). Cross leveling of assets, people, strengthening weakened areas and providing additional support

to heavy fighting was continuous during the battle and on site leaders adjusted as needed (Maney 47).

On 12 May, General Lee was roused out of his quarters by the sound of the fighting in front of the Spotsylvania courthouse. He rode out to the front lines with the intent on leading a charge against the Union Army (Rhea 250). Lee's men, seeing him there shouted "General Lee to the rear" out of loyalty and respect to their commander (Rhea 250). Brigadier General John Brown Gordon shouted to Lee "These men are Georgians and Virginians. They have never failed you. They will not fail you now" (Scott). With those words the cry for "Lee to the rear" was heard again as veteran SGT William A. Compton came out of the formation, seized hold of Lee's bridle and turned the horse around (Rhea 250). The example Lee set to his men motivated the charge and led to its ultimate success. Lee's example was typical of the Confederate leaders that stood, fought and died on the battlefield with their soldiers. The loss of leaders every day of the battle emblazoned the men to fight and defend their positions even though they were wounded and exhausted.

The ability of Confederate troops to match their forces against the Union army is a lesson in the proper application of leadership techniques. According to Major General Martin T. McMahon a conversation between himself and BG Sedgwick on Sedgwick's final day of the battle was light hearted and friendly in nature (Civil War Home, "The Death of General John Sedgwick"). Sedgwick smiled and laughed with his soldiers unknowingly on the day of his death while ensuring that everything was in order. The leaders of the Confederate army knew their soldiers and their capabilities. They shared responsibility and determined the best course of action based on the knowledge and reactions of subordinates. They worked along side their

soldiers and ensured that correct procedures were applied for the benefit of all. Finally, when needed they were pushed gently aside to allow for their safety and the mission to be completed.

The battle of Spotsylvania was a decisive victory for the Confederate army over the Union army despite an opposing view. On 11 May Grant had dispatched a message stating that he would fight the lines all summer if need be (Atkinson 275). Grant was sure that the 120,000 man Army of the Potomac would be able to surely defeat the war weary 63,000 Confederate troops emplaced at Spotsylvania (Rhea 2). After the loss of approximately 18,000 soldiers Grant decided to continue on with his march around the defensive lines to avoid further fighting (Atkinson 329). Opposing idea would say that the inability of the Confederates to destroy the Union army at Spotsylvania means that the Union won the battle. However, the intention for the Confederates at the time was not to destroy the army, but provide a delay tactic for troops at Richmond which might allow for a possible political end to the war (Rhea 326). With the battle of Spotsylvania courthouse Lee allowed other Confederate forces to resist Union efforts in Richmond and the Shenandoah Valley (Matter 348). The fourteen days and 18,000 lives the Army of the Potomac spent at Spotsylvania was a severe blow to both the confidence of Grant and the Union army (Furgurson 20).

Throughout the course of the battle at Spotsylvania, the leadership that was provided was key to the Confederate success. Lee's ability to delay Grant's army provided the right pressure at the right time against the Union army. The 63 thousand men of the Confederate army faced a force that was almost twice their size and engaged them heroically for fourteen days. Without the proper leadership the battle would have been a miserable failure. Lee's ability to plan allowed for the rapid deployment of effective defensive positioning. The adaptability of the soldiers and leaders allowed for the rapid placement of defenses and the ability to change with the tide of the

battlefield. Supervision provided ensured that issues and needs were met during the entire course of the conflict. Finally, the leaders led their men by the examples that they set and allowed the soldiers of the Confederacy to serve, fight and win with honor at the battle of Spotsylvania.

The Spotsylvania Campaign was an important period between the Confederate and Union Army. The campaign between the two Armies lasted for a period of two weeks in May of 1864 (Heritage Preservation Services). Both Armies endured severe losses and the campaign was a turning point of the Civil War (Heritage Preservation Services). Lee's Army won the campaign for several reasons, defensive position which enabled the Army to be better fortified with their defensive positions, the soldiers were determined to get revenge from the Gettysburg campaign, the soldiers truly believed in what they fought for and they had confidence in General Lee's ability to lead them into combat (Trudeau 135). The Confederate Army achieved victory at the battle of Spotsylvania despite an overwhelming opposing force, through combat experience.

One of Lee's contributions to the success of the Spotsylvania campaign was his attendance to West Point; General Lee graduated second out of his class (Heritage Preservation Services). Upon graduation from West Point Lee was commissioned and participated in the Mexican War. With Lee's participation in the campaign gave him vast amount of knowledge during the Spotsylvania Campaign. Walking for fifty minutes of each hour, the Southern column struggled along a narrow, hastily cut military road, stumbling over partially cleared tree trunks and choking on the smoke from forest fires along the way (Trudeau 151). What the Confederate officer did not know and what Robert E. Lee had just realized---- was that the Union Army of the Potomac was moving on a parallel track a few miles to the east (Trudeau, 158). The Race to Spotsylvania was on General Lee's plan when his Army reached Spotsylvania was to be in a defensive position, because he knew that the Union Army outnumbered his Army by two to one (Gallagher

124). He directed his unit to fortify ditches that was in place. Lee believed the density of the forest that it would slow Grants Army down and his Army would have an advantage. This was a good analysis on Lee's part because 122,000 of Grant's Army were casualties (Gallagher 121).

The Confederate Army entered the Spotsylvania campaign with enthusiasm and determination, especially after their recent lost with the Union Army at the Battle of Gettysburg (Heritage Preservation Services). Lee's 62,000 man Army was out-numbered, but with the experience and lessons learned through each other put the Confederate Army at the upper hand (Heritage Preservation Services).

One advantage that Lee had over Grants Army, Lee established the Signal Corp. Therefore, Lee noticed the union Army far in advance due to the signal post. During the battle, Lee also noticed that the Union Army was breaking their line of defense. Lee seeing these actions by the enemy he began to plan another line of defense across the Mule Shoe (Gallagher 126). . General Lee shifted his formations to counterattack the offensive of the Union Army of the Mule Shoe. This scrimmage lasted for approximately 24 hours, and the confederate army slowly won back the ground they had lost earlier during the battle(Gallagher 129). The confederate army inflicted a lot of losses to the union army which in turn reinforced the confederate army.

Prior to the Spotsylvania Campaign, General Lee and General Grant fought against each other during the Wilderness Campaign (Gallagher 5). General Grant's goal was to invade Richmond, Virginia, but General Lee was determined not to let this happen (Gallagher 6). Prior to the Spotsylvania Campaign, Lee had several battles under his belt which contributed greatly to the success of the Spotsylvania Campaign. The battles are the following; Battle of First Mannanas (Bull Run), Seven Days Campaign, Battle of Seven Mannanas, and 2nd Mannanas Campaign (Heritage Preservation Services). During the Seven Days Campaign General Joseph

Johnson (commanding general) was severely wounded. President Davis appointed Robert E. Lee as the new confederate commander. When Lee took command, Lee ordered JEB Stuart to scout out McClellan union forces (Gallagher 14). Lee's army attacked the union forces which broke through the union forces strong hold lines. This action forced General McClellan to retreat his forces. Through the wisdom of Lee, the union army lost this particular battle (Heritage Preservation Services).

The confederate Army won the Battle of 2nd Manassas (Gallagher 100). The battle was fought in Northern Virginia. Lee ordered General Jackson to attack a Federal column that was passing across his front near the Warrenton Turnpike (Gallagher 119). During the Battle, General Pope was convinced that he had trapped Lee's Army. During the continued fighting General Longstreet and his Army arrived and took position on Jackson's right flank without Pope knowing that Longstreet was fighting on Jackson's right flank. Longstreet's wing of 28,000 men counterattacked in the largest, simultaneous mass assault of the war (Heritage Preservation Services). The Union left flank was crushed and the army driven back to Bull Run (Heritage Preservation Services).

The Battle of Chancellors was General Lee's greatest victory. During this battle he fought against a much larger and better armed force. This campaign would impact how he approached the other campaigns that were fought until his surrender in Appomattox, Virginia. The fight between the North and South was based on both sides wanting to own the city of Richmond, Virginia (McGann).

General Joseph Hooker moved his army to an area north of Chancellorsville and west of Fredericksburg to fight in a major battle with General Robert E. Lee's army (McGann). Gen.

Hooker had an army of 130,000 men and Gen. Lee had 60,000 men (McGann). When General Lee found out about the movement of Gen. Hooker's troops he decided to attack (McGann). As the brigade commander Lieutenant General Longstreet fought at 1st Bull Run which was the first major battle of the civil war (McGann). General Edward Ewell fought in the Battle of Bull Run with General Longstreet. The First Bull Run Battle was fought in Manassas, Virginia. The union Army marched from Washington to attack the confederate Army; they attacked the confederate Army's left flank and pushed them back to Henry Hill (McGann). Lee sent Confederate reinforcements (one brigade arriving by rail from the Shenandoah Valley) to stop the union forces from reaching Richmond, the confederate line extended and broke the Union right flank. The Federal retreat rapidly deteriorated into a rout. As the division commander General Longstreet fought in the Seven Pines, Seven Days and the 2nd Bull Run Campaign (McGann). The Seven Pines Campaign was fought in Henrico, Virginia. During this campaign the confederate Army attempted to overwhelm two Federal corps that appeared isolated south of the Chickahominy River (McGann). . The Confederate assaults, succeeded in driving back the federal army and inflicting heavy casualties (McGann).

General Ewell graduated from West Point; graduate of class 1840. He served at 1st Bull Run and successfully commanded a division under Jackson during the Shenandoah Valley Campaign. In the role of division commander, Ewell fought through the Seven Days battles and at Cedar Mountain. He was wounded during the fierce fighting at Groveton during the 2nd Bull Run Campaign (Harrison).

The Wilderness Campaign was the first time that General Grant and General Lee faced each other (Harrison). Grant's focus was to make an offensive move towards the confederate capital, Richmond, Virginia and Lee's Army. General Grant thought process was if he and his Army take

Richmond, Virginia, the Civil War would come to a close. After the Wilderness Campaign, Grant's withdrew and headed towards Richmond, but his forces were stalled at Spotsylvania Court House on May 8 (Wales). This campaign lasted for two weeks along the Spotsylvania front. The Union attacked and captured nearly a division of Lee's army and came near to destroying the Confederate Army. General Lee counterattacked, and the fighting continued for nearly 20 hours (Wales).

Union generals Sedgwick (VI Corps commander) and Rice were killed; Sedgwick, the highest-ranking Northern Officer to die on a Civil War Battlefield (Harrison). The death of General Sedgwick was a big blow to the union Army. Union generals, James S. Wadsworth and Alexander Hays were killed was also killed during the Wilderness Campaign (Harrison). Lee and his men had the will to win, even though, the confederate Army was outnumbered by the union army. During the Spotsylvania Campaign the estimated casualties were the following; 30,000 total (Union Army 18,000; Confederate Army 12,000) (Wales).

The Confederate States Army (CSA) was organized in [February, 1861](#), to defend the states that seceded from the union. The army was formed around a core of 313 officers who left the [United States Army](#), and had an initial enlistment of 82,000 volunteers (Wales). In August of 1861, the Congress of the Confederacy authorized the recruitment of 400,000 men, because the army didn't have enough men to fight against the union forces (Wales). In April of [1862](#), The Confederate Congress passed the Conscription Act, which drafted all white men aged 18 to 35. In total, 1,406,180 men enlisted or were drafted into the Confederate States Army (Wales).

The Confederate Army sustainment in the fight during the Spotsylvania Campaign lasted a long time, because over 90 percent of the general officers were graduates from West Point (Wales). Not only did the officers have military education from West Point, but most of the

generals were experienced because they fought in the Mexican War and against the Indians prior to the Civil War (Wales). Through the education and combat experience of the following generals; Lee, Longstreet and Ewell they were able to employ military power and resistance to the union forces (Harrison). Lee's Army won the campaign for several reasons, defensive position which enabled the Army to be better fortified with their defensive positions, soldiers were determined to get revenge from the Gettysburg campaign, soldiers truly believed in what they fought for, and they had confidence in General Lee's ability to lead them into combat (McGann).

When the Confederate States of America were beginning to organize an Army, many of these were friends or relatives of the men in the hometown companies in which they served (Harrison). The men in the unit elected their leaders, so volunteer officers were often wary of being strict with their troops. So the NCOs had problems with drunkenness, fighting, and dereliction of duty, theft, desertion, malingering, cowardice, bounty jumping, and insubordination within the units. But through all the adversity the NCOs still managed to influence soldiers to work as team, during the most bloodiest campaign during the civil war; Spotsylvania Campaign (Wales).

The Battle of Spotsylvania didn't cover any significant objectives, nor did its outcome acknowledge any turning point in the war. The battle started just as any other, with the Union under General Grant striving to save face after Chancellorsville, and capture the town of Spotsylvania in order to put the Union army between General Lee and Richmond. The importance in the battle lies in the nature of the battle, not the outcome. The highly excited pitch of intensity displayed by the Confederates epitomizes their devotion to their cause, and it was this display of Southern patriotism which won the battle in the face of discouraging odds. Many

points make this battle significant, in particular the soldiers' motivation during the battle, the brutal hand-to-hand fighting which took place, the Confederate's shortness of supplies, and the spirit of the South which surfaced during the fighting (Galloway <http://www.civilwarhome.com>).

The drive found by the Confederates soldiers lies in two areas which assisted the Army through many large battles, and their fate at the fight to Gettysburg. The recent masterpiece of victory which occurred at Chancellorsville and the Wilderness was still echoing through the ranks of the Confederates, and the feeling of defeat was swelling in the troops (McPherson 725). Also, General Grant's purpose in taking the town of Spotsylvania was to get a clear shot of Richmond, and the threatening of their capitol drove the soldiers to dizzying heights. Similarly, the Union soldiers found new motivation in their unusually persistent commander. The Union soldiers were happily marching forward to more battle instead of the tactic of retreat practice by commanders before General Grant (McPherson 728). The weather conditions during the last three days made the roads so impassable for equipment and troops. Little fighting and movement of supplies could be done until there was a change in the weather conditions. Soldier from both sides met equally motivated opponents, setting the stage for a ruthless surprising rage of battle.

The determination of both sides of the fight is best described by the intensity battle experienced in the hand-to-hand combat. The point to be assaulted was a salient of field-works on the Confederate center, afterward called "The Bloody Angle." The bloodiest fighting of this battle occurred on May 12 when the Union assault on the salient forming the Confederate center (The Bloody Angle) was repulsed after initial success. The fight over the notorious Bloody Angle has been burned in the minds of those who experienced the carnage, causing a Union officer to say "I never expect to be fully believed when I tell what I saw of the horrors of Spotsylvania, because I should be reluctant to believe it myself were the case reversed."

(McPherson 731). A division of the Fifth Corps was added to General Hancock's attack in the center. General Lee had not another man to spare, but the few hardy veterans that sustained the keystone of this arch of defense, held it with a desperate and unyielding courage unsurpassed in the annals of human conflicts.

The spirit of the Confederates to defend their land clashed with the Federals spur to fight given by General Grant and the hand to hand combat which ensued in the trenches of the Angle created mayhem. When the command was given for the Union troops to attack, it was described as "to rise up. Where upon hurrahs went up with the order." (Galloway). This morale was the spark which ignited a field of brutal hand-to-hand combat which personified the mentality of the entire battle.

The Confederates faced a plague of disadvantages during the battle, yet one which especially on the 9th, General Grant sent Sheridan, with his cavalry, on a raid, moving from Alsop's at 4 in the morning, to first destroy General Lee's ammunition train, then strike the James, and open communication with Butler. Stuart safely guarded the ammunition train, but was not strong enough to prevent General Sheridan passing his right and gaining the highway to Richmond. Early on the morning of the 9th, Burnside advanced on the road leading from Spotsylvania Court House to Fredericksburg, which he had reached by a roundabout march to the eastward, and was moving to strike General Lee's right and rear. About the time of the failure of General Hancock's flanking movement to General Lee's left, at 9:30 of the 10th of May, General Grant dispatched to Washington, still from "near" Spotsylvania Court House. The enemy holds our front in very strong force and evinces a strong determination to interject between us and Richmond to the last I shall take no backward steps by may be compelled to send back to Belle Plain (below Aquia creek on the Potomac) for further supplies. Please have

supplies of forage and provisions sent there at once and 50 rounds of ammunition (infantry) for 100,000 men. Send General Benham with the additional train for the Rappahannock River. We can maintain ourselves at least, and, in the end, beat General Lee's army, he believes. General Grant stated "send to Belle Plain all the infantry you can rake and scrape." With the present position of the armies, 10,000 men can be spared from the defenses of Washington, besides all the troops that have reached there since General Burnside's departure of his last station. This dispatch tells the condition of things within General Grant's lines and his view of the situation, on the morning of the 10th, in a way that needs no comment.

General Grant had sent another dispatch on May 11th, informing them that he has lost eleven general officers, killed, wounded and missing, and probably 20,000 men. I am now sending back to Belle Plain all my wagons for a fresh supply of provision and ammunitions and propose to fight it out on this line, "If it takes all summer." It would take that long and more. After fighting, and winning the battle of the Wilderness, General Lee remained on the defensive anticipating General Grants' retreat, however he pressed forward. The overwhelming loss did not faze the Union general, yet only set his determination to continue to fight. The Confederate troops were not given a chance to re-supply, and the Union cavalry's victory over General Stuart gave the Union control of the supply lines and kept the Confederates from their supplies in Richmond (McPherson 728). This was thought to hamper Confederate determination; however it only turned the battle into a battle from starvation for the Confederates. Little could be done by General Lee to improve the supply and equipment line situation with the defeat of his cavalry. He continued to inspire his troop's field of strength which played out on the battlefield and is apparent in the casualties of the conflict.

It was the condition of his own army and of his own method of campaigning and not General Lee's that General Grant thus described. He knew, although what he had recently encountered should have taught him, the spirit of the men under General Lee. A loud voice said, "This is not place for General Lee." His men caught the words and instantly shouted, "General Lee to the rear," while General Gordon, his mobile face showing the incarnation of heroic daring, fairly shouted to General Lee: "These men are Georgians and Virginians. They have never failed you they will not fail you now." Just then a veteran stepped from the ranks, and seizing his bridle turned the confederate spirit during the battle reflected the Southern mentality of pride and loyalty for their country. General Lee, in many occasions, led the infantry into their objectives due to a increasing numbers of officers being killed during the battle. The Confederates troops were fighting for the life of the confederacy, thus a new found strength and anger filled the veins of their soldiers.

While the Confederate troops struggled and the infliction of Union troop casualties makes this easily a Confederate victory, the Confederate troop casualties were felt much more thus making it a possible Union troop's victory. The Confederates felt around 10,000 casualties out of fighting strength of 63,000 while the Union experienced 18,000 casualties out of fighting strength of 111,000 (Galloway). At that point in the war, the Confederate casualties had a much harder time getting replaced, and the Union army was inching closer to Richmond. No matter how hard the Confederates fought, the Union was wearing away at their forces and the spirit of the soldier was being crushed one soldier at a time.

The Battle of Spotsylvania is a testament to glory and bloodshed during the battle. As the Union army got closer to the capitol of the South, the rage and rough treatment only increased the Southern will to cause damage. The battle took place for the crossroads of a small Virginia

town, however all that was at stake brought the fighting to a level never before seen in any battle. The determination and madness behind the hand-to-hand fighting alone is vision of a fight to the death. There would be no retreat for either side, they had decided that this battle would be where they lived for victory or died in defeat.

Statistics of loss battles do not furnish an unfailing test of courage. Mistakes of officers, unavoidable surprises, now and then, occasion losses that soldier did not knowingly face, and there are sometimes other reasons why the massacre in a particular command is this battle or that does not with accuracy indicate dedicated bravery (FM 7-21.13 The Army and the Nation).

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