

CIVIL WAR 150TH

BY KATHERINE CALOS
Richmond Times-Dispatch

It came down to this. The two best generals of the Civil War. The two best armies. The most fought-over territory. The most unrelenting combat.

Day after day for 40 days in 1864, Union and Confederate troops punched and parried, side-stepped and re-engaged, dug in and quick-marched, ripped apart the enemy with cannonading canister shot and grappled hand-to-hand in the trenches.

Richmond was at the center, and the city would not be out of the crosshairs until the American Civil War ended 11 months later.

The campaign that launched on May 4, 1864, began the brutal fight to the finish.

Until now, the war had consisted of big battles with long pauses in between. From this point forward, a new Union general made sure that the war was unrelenting.

Gen. Ulysses S. Grant had been summoned to the east by President Abraham Lincoln in early March to take control of all Union forces. Grant made it his personal mission to end the dominance of Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee in Virginia and to capture the Confederate capital of Richmond.

Beginning at The Wilderness on the northwest edge of Spotsylvania County, the two armies traveled almost 100 miles during the Overland Campaign, with Lee thwarting every thrust Grant made toward Richmond, until they reached a standoff in June at Petersburg. By then the two armies had suffered a staggering 85,000 casualties.

If there was a turning point, it was the moment after the Battle of the Wilderness when Grant immediately pointed his army south toward Richmond and another battle. Previous commanders would have retreated toward Washington to rest and resupply.

Grant recalled cheers from his men as he rode past them May 7 on the way to Spotsylvania.

"The cheering was so lusty that the enemy must have taken it for a night attack," he wrote in his memoirs. "At all events it drew from him a furious fusillade of artillery and musketry, plainly heard but not felt by us."

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The outcome was anything but certain as the Overland Campaign began 150 years ago today. North and South had high hopes for success in the spring of 1864, said Gary Gallagher, the University of Virginia's John L. Nau III Professor in the History of the American Civil War. He will speak Wednesday at the Virginia Historical Society.

"The people in the United States thought it would be a fight to the finish, and they thought it would come quickly," Gallagher said. A victory at Chattanooga, Tenn., at the end of November 1863 had Union armies within striking distance of Atlanta. On the east, the last big battle had been a Union victory at Gettysburg in July.

"It's harder for us to understand, but there was even a sense of hope in the Confederacy because of things we don't really think about now," he said. If Confederates could hold on until the presidential election, Lincoln could face defeat at the polls.

"They had a string of little victories in the spring of 1864. They maintained a very strong sense of confidence in what Lee and his army were able to do."

As for Lee and Grant, neither general ever admitted how good his adversary was, Gallagher said.

"They both had egos, and both were surprised at how good the other one was, and neither could concede how good the other one was," he said.

Lee's staff officers believed Grant had been able to succeed in the West because he had not faced very good generals.

"Grant thought the same thing," Gallagher said, "that Lee had won against not-very-good generals. I don't think either one was afraid of the other or thought it would be any different."

Trying to decide which of the two generals was better seems a bit unfair, said Gordon Rhea, a South Carolina attorney who's written four volumes on the Overland Campaign.

"They had different tasks to do," Rhea said.

"Lee was outnumbered approximately 2-to-1, and he fought a brilliant defensive campaign. Grant fought a brilliant offensive campaign."

"It's a fascinating chess match between two real masters — innovative, daring, both of them liking to surprise the other, each of them having problems with subordinates, with supplies, with all sorts of things. Both of them keep going."

Rhea will speak May 31 at Cold Harbor in Hanover County, where the culminating battle of the Overland Campaign produced 7,500 casualties on June 3, 1864.

Ordering troops to attack at Cold Harbor was the only



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Confederate troops are seen in a redoubt near the North Anna River in 1864. Fighting took place at North Anna from May 23 to May 26 as part of the Overland Campaign.

TURNING POINT

The Overland Campaign pits Grant and Lee in a fight that helped shaped America

battlefield decision Grant would lament in his memoirs: "I have always regretted that the last assault at Cold Harbor was ever made. No advantage whatever was gained to compensate for the heavy loss we sustained."

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In Richmond, the approach of the armies meant that "the alarm-bell is constantly ringing, making us nervous and anxious," Judith McGuire wrote May 8, 1864, in her "Diary of a Southern Refugee."

"The militia have been called out, and have left the city, but where they have gone I know not. It is strange how little apprehension seems to be felt."

The most immediate threat to the city came from Gen. Benjamin Butler, who had brought more than 30,000 Union troops up the James River to Bermuda Hundred in Chesterfield County. Noise from those battles could be clearly heard in Richmond.

Three days later, when Union cavalry raiders approached from the north, the Daily Dispatch reported that the city was

not alarmed:

"Although during the whole of yesterday morning a momentary attack by the enemy's cavalry was considered likely, the city was as quiet and free from excitement as a summer Sabbath," said the May 12 edition. "All classes of men, not already mustered into the militia, proceeded to arm and organize for defence, (sic) and met on the Capitol square; but the movement was not attended by any flurry or excitement. ...

"Both Houses assembled at the usual hour, and proceeded with the business before them respectively as coolly as though there had been in existence no such things as Grant, Beast Butler, or Yankee cavalry."

"There was no drunkenness or other disorder on the streets, and consequently no work cut out for police reporters."

McGuire had been awakened in the middle of the night with news that Union cavalry raiders were within 16 miles of the city.

"Every lady in the house dressed immediately, and some of us went down to the porch. There we saw ladies in every porch, and walking on the pavements, as if it were evening. We saw but one person who seemed really alarmed; every one else seemed to expect something to occur to stop the raiders. Our city had too often been saved as if by a miracle."

The city was saved, but there was no miracle.

Union cavalry led by Gen. Philip Sheridan succeeded in drawing Confederate Gen. J.E.B. Stuart into a fight to protect the city. In the process Stuart was mortally wounded at Yellow Tavern, where Virginia Center Commons shopping mall now stands. Sheridan continued south on Brook Road as far as Azalea Avenue before turning east. The South had lost another hero.

"The cannon is now roaring in our ears," McGuire wrote May 12. "It cannot be more than three miles off. ... This morning, as I entered St. James' Church, I saw the smoke from the cannon dis-

tinctly. ... The prayers, hymns, psalms, and address were most comforting. ... The town is as calm as if it were not the great object of desire to hundreds of thousands of implacable enemies, who desire nothing so much as its destruction."

Butler threatened again from the south when he cut the railroad line to Danville. John B. Jones immediately worried about what would happen without supplies coming in by rail.

"This community, as well as the army, must be without food in ten days!" Jones wrote on May 13 in his "Rebel War Clerk's Diary."

"I directed my wife to lay out all the money around the house in provisions," he continued. "She got a bushel of meal and five pounds of bacon for about \$100. If we must endure another turn of the screw of famine, it is well to provide for it as well as possible. We cannot starve now, in a month; and by that time Gens. Lee and Beauregard may come to our relief."

Confederates recaptured the railroad, and the damage wasn't as serious as feared, but the incident presaged the following year when Grant's attacks on the railroad lines at Petersburg forced the surrender of Richmond.

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The Overland Campaign gets more attention than the 1862 battles around Richmond, but not as much attention as landmark battles such as Gettysburg or Antietam.

"Part of that is because of the unrelenting pace of the Overland Campaign and the numbing misery of it," said Robert E.L. Krick, park historian at Richmond National Battlefield Park. "Overland was a blur to the soldiers. It can be a blur to modern enthusiasts. Where does Wilderness end and Spotsylvania begin?"

In "No Turning Back," a new guidebook to the Overland battles co-authored by Richmond battlefield superintendent David Ruth, Richmond park ranger Robert Dunkerly and Fredericksburg park historian Donald Pfanz, battles are assigned to four main sectors: the Wilderness, Spotsylvania, North Anna and Cold Harbor.

The Battle of the Wilderness lasted two days, May 5-6. At Spotsylvania Courthouse, the war's most intense hand-to-hand combat occurred as the armies faced off May 8-21. Action at North Anna on May 23-26, when Lee was too ill to take advantage of his last opportunity to attack, and at Totopotomoy Creek May 28-June 1 continued the march south. Activities at Cold Harbor, where the Union suffered one of its most lopsided losses, continued from May 31 until Grant moved his army across the James River to Petersburg on June 12.

"The fights are complicated," Rhea said. "Big armies are rubbing up against each other, maneuvering. It doesn't have all the glamour and glory of big charges. The soldiers who fought in it thought it was terrible. It was wooded country. You can't see what you're doing. People were getting killed all over the place. There were lots of bugs."

"You go to these battlefields and there are very few monuments. Soldiers didn't want to go back."

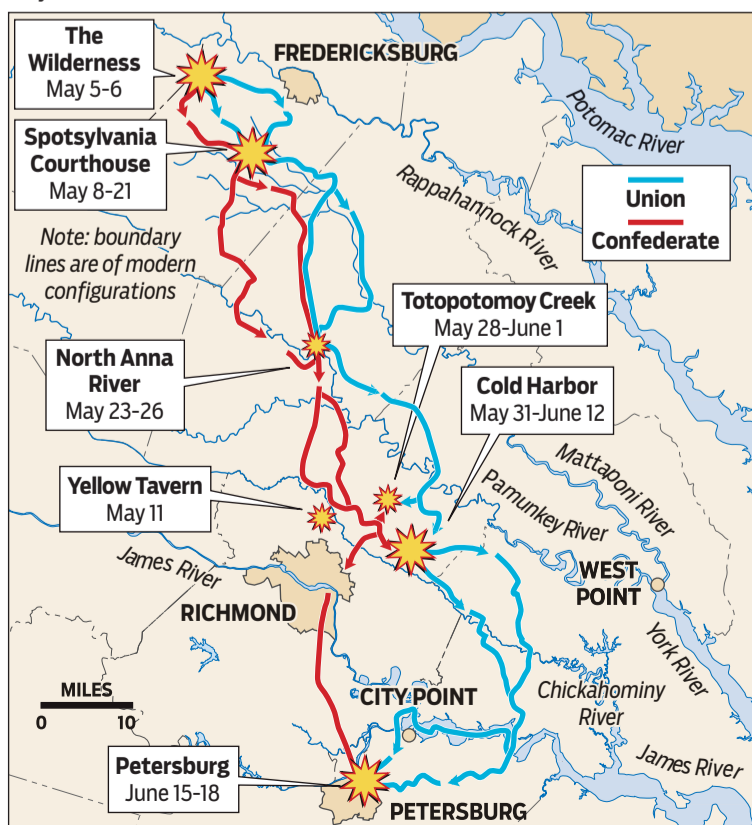
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The universal horror of the Wilderness was captured by Union Lt. Col. Horace Porter in his 1897 memoir, "Campaigning with Grant":

Continued, Page A13

The Overland Campaign

May-June 1864



Source: National Park Service

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