

OVER THE RIVER AND THROUGH THE WOODS

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## UNION CAVALRY CROSS THE RAPPAHANNOCK

During the day of April 29, 1863, ten thousand Union cavalymen crossed the Rappahannock River in Northern Virginia and headed south toward Richmond. Their mission was to get between the Confederate army of General Robert E. Lee entrenched at Fredericksburg, Virginia, and the Confederate Capital at Richmond. They were supposed to interrupt General Lee's communications with the capital, damage the Virginia Central Railroad, and force Lee to retreat in order to protect his lines of supply with his base. Formerly Union cavalry would not have been thought to be up to this assignment. Since the beginning of the war in 1861 they had been outtrode and outfought by the Confederate cavalry under General "Jeb" Stuart. But recently, the Union horsemen had been reorganized from scattered units into one single force on the Confederate model, and the Union command had reason to believe that they would be able to complete their assignment.

As they disappeared into the scrub forest of Northern Virginia messengers carried the word to Lee that the Union army had started to move. The Battle of Chancellorsville, one of the major engagements of the American Civil War, was under way. This news was also passed to President Abraham Lincoln back in Washington.

## LINCOLN'S PROBLEM

For President Lincoln and his administration this spring of 1863 was a period of the greatest anxiety. The dangers of 1860 and 1861, so well described by Frank Newell at this Club several weeks ago, had been successfully overcome. Bull Run, in July 1861, had been a terrible Union disaster, But the South did not exploit the opportunities of this military route and did not march north to occupy Washington. Early the next year the tide had changed. In January 1862 Ulysses S. Grant had broken the Confederate line in the West at Forts Henry and Donaldson on the Tennessee River and had successfully turned back the Confederate counter attack at the Battle of Shiloh. For a time in the early summer of 1862 it looked as though the forces of the North might be able to suppress the rebellion without great difficulty. All of this was altered, however, by the victories of the new Southern commander, General Robert E. Lee, in the East.

General Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia were able to turn back the Union assault on Richmond in the summer of 1862 and to follow up with a triumph at Second Bull Run and a draw at Antietam. December 1862 had found the Confederate Army entrenched at Fredericksburg on the Rappahannock. Union



assaults on this position had been turned back with heavy Northern losses and a decisive victory for the south.

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All through the Civil War the North's strategic problem was more difficult than that of the South. The South had only to defend; the North had to attack. The South operated on interior lines, and the North on exterior. Since most of the fighting in Virginia and in the West took place within states forming part of the Confederacy, the soldiers of the Union usually fought surrounded by a hostile civilian population. By the spring of 1863 peace movements in the North, promoted openly by Clement Vallandigham, a former Congressman, and the Knights of the Golden Circle, had to be countered by the Union administration at the same time that it needed victory at the front. The end or goal, of course, of the Lincoln Administration, was defeat of the Confederacy and restoration of the Union. The latter could not be accomplished without the former. Each day that the war went on without Union progress increased pressure on Lincoln and on his chief advisors. Serious defections of Northern Democrats from Lincoln's base of support came following the Preliminary Emancipation Proclamation in September 1862. Many Democrats, particularly in Indiana, Southern Illinois and the border states, became open opponents of the administration. The situation that winter of 1862/3 was dicey, to say the least.

In February 1863 Ambrose Burnside, the losing commander at Fredericksburg and famous for his side whiskers, had been replaced as chief of the Union Army of the Potomac by one of his subordinates, "Fighting Joe" Hooker. Burnside thus became another in the line of failed Union generals in the East. It's interesting to follow what happened to these men. Irwin McDowell was the first. He had attempted to turn the Northern home guards who poured into Washington in the spring and early summer of 1861 into some kind of army and had been routed at Bull Run in July. After Bull Run McDowell held some secondary commands, ultimately winding up after the war as one of the Northern major generals who ruled the defeated south as satraps during reconstruction. His final government post was that of park commissioner in San Francisco.

McDowell's successor, George B. McClellan failed in front of Richmond and partially at Antietam. He remained, however, highly popular with Democrats in the North and ran against Abraham Lincoln for Lincoln's second term in 1864. He must have remained popular and respected, for Princeton University gave him an honorary degree in 1878. Lincoln beat him there too, having gotten his own honorary degree from Princeton in 1864. Lincoln's citation notes as one of his qualifications that he had been Postmaster of New Salem, Illinois, in 1832.



As to the other losers, John Pope after Second Bull Run was assigned to fight the Indians in Oregon, and Ambrose Burnside after Fredericksburg took over military administration in Ohio. Hooker too would join this illustrious company, but not yet.

Joseph E. Hooker had graduated from West Point in the Class of 1837, along with classmates Braxton Bragg, John Sedgwick, and Jubal Early. Bragg was, for much of the War, Confederate Commander in the West. He was the victor at Chickamauga and later was defeated disastrously by Grant at Chattanooga. Jubal Early we remember as the Southern commander who almost took Washington from the north and was later on the losing side in Sheridan's famous ride from Winchester to Cedar Creek. The Northern and Southern generals in the Civil War mostly had been at West Point together and knew each other well. We shall meet both Sedgwick and Early again as we proceed with our story.

Hooker had a good record in the Mexican War but retired from the army thereafter and farmed until 1858 at Sonoma, California. He was snubbed by the War Department in his efforts to serve (as was Ulysses S Grant) as the armies were assembling at the beginning of the Civil War, but by May 1861 Hooker was a Brigadier General of Volunteers. As a subordinate commander he built up a fine record in the Penninsular campaign and at Second Bull Run. He was wounded at Antietam, but returned to the army in time to serve under Burnside at Fredericksburg.

After that engagement the disgusted Hooker had intrigued openly against Burnside in an effort (which turned out to be successful) to replace Burnside as commander. He also had semipublicly stated that affairs had reached the stage in the North where a dictator might be required, thus eliciting Lincoln's famous reply:

"I have placed you at the head of the Army of the Potomac," wrote the President. "Of course I have done this upon what appear to me to be sufficient reasons. And yet I think it best for you to know that there are some things in regard to which, I am not quite satisfied with you. I believe you to be a brave and skilful soldier, which, of course, I like. I also believe you do not mix politics with your profession, in which you are right. You have confidence in yourself, which is a valuable, if not an indispensable quality. You are ambitious, which, within reasonable bounds, does good rather than harm. But I think that during Gen. Burnside's command of the Army, you have taken counsel of your ambition, and thwarted him as much as you could, in which you did a great wrong to the country,



and to a most meritorious and honorable brother officer. I have heard, in such way as to believe it, of your recently saying that both the Army and Government needed a Dictator. Of course it was not for this, but in spite of it, that I have given you the command. Only those generals who gain successes, can set up dictators. What I now ask of you is military success, and I will risk the dictatorship.

And now beware of rashness. Beware of rashness, but with energy, and sleepless vigilance, go forward, and give us victories." /ABRAHAM LINCOLN

### HOOKER'S PROBLEM

The early spring of 1863 found the Union Army of the Potomac (130,000 men) north of the Rappahannock River facing Lee's 60,000 Confederates south of the river. In visualizing the war in Virginia one has initially to think of the whole battle ground bounded by the Atlantic Ocean to the east. The site of conflict was intersected by three great rivers running north-west to south-east and emptying into the ocean. The upper river was the Potomac, on the north bank of which was situated Washington. The Confederates crossed the Potomac in the Antietam and Gettysburg campaigns, but in general the action was confined well south of the river. The southern boundary was the James, which runs through Richmond. Grant crossed the James late in 1864; during most of the War it, like the Potomac, was inviolate. And between these two, and right on the battle line during much of the Civil War, was the Rappahannock

Visualize yourself on the north bank of the Rappahannock as was Hooker during early April 1863. Look south. Ahead of you is the river, a major military obstacle, but fordable in places. On the other side and to the west (or right) is the redoubtable wilderness of Virginia, then as now a region of second growth scrub pierced by a few country roads. Downstream and to the left, in the direction of the Atlantic, is the town of Fredericksburg. Lee and the Army of Virginia are dug in around this town. You know that the Union army has shattered itself just a few months before in an effort to dislodge those fine soldiers from behind the buildings and stone walls of that old town.

This was the situation which Hooker faced. Before moving he reorganized the army. As noted above, he grouped the scattered and ineffectual cavalry units into a hard-hitting squadron of ten thousand men. Discipline was tightened throughout the army, incompetent officers were discharged, and the health and morale of the troops improved. By the middle of April the Army of the Potomac



had again become an effective military force.

His problem as he saw it was twofold, to defeat Lee and to capture the capital at Richmond. Probably he put those in reverse order, Richmond first and Lee second. This was a common error of Union officers before Grant straightened them out. They tended to believe that the war was about territory and capitals. It wasn't, as Grant clearly saw. It was about armies and the will of peoples to fight.

Hooker developed a plan. He would send his cavalry around Lee's left flank. They would get behind the Confederates and disrupt their supply lines and interfere with communications. In other words, they would achieve the military goal of separating the Southerners from their base. Of course in doing this they would no longer be available to Hooker for scouting or pickett. Following the cavalry, the infantry would move upstream, cross the Rappahannock well west of Lee and fall on his left flank. In the meantime Hooker, having a large surplus of troops, planned to leave 40,000 men under Sedgwick at Fredericksburg to attack Lee in the front and keep him occupied while Hooker was chewing up his flank and getting between Lee and Richmond. All this would have been fine if Hooker had not faced one of the finest battle-field generals in world history and if that general had not had as his lieutenant the formidable Stonewall Jackson. But both contingencies were in fact the case.

#### OPENING

On Monday, April 27, 1863 Hooker started moving his infantry upstream and to the west. On Tuesday and Wednesday his seventy thousand men successfully crossed the Rappahannock and by noon on Thursday the 30th of April the host was assembled near the little town of Chancellorsville Virginia; as planned they were situated on Lee's left flank and prepared to crush Lee against the river and the remaining forces of General Sedgwick.

#### LEE'S PROBLEM

What should Lee do? By Wednesday April 29 Lee at Fredericksburg had pretty well determined that the Northern advance was not a feint but the real thing. Hooker had indeed jumped ahead of him by his long turning flank march and was now situated firmly on his left. His troops were depleted. The authorities in Richmond had authorized some weeks before the detachment of 15,000 of Lee's troops for guard duty and gathering supplies in southeastern Virginia, leaving in the main body a bare 60,000 soldiers.



It was generally considered foolish to divide an inferior force in the face of the enemy. But Lee did not hesitate. On Thursday he ordered part of his force to advance against Hooker, leaving ten thousand men in Fredericksburg to defend against the threat by Sedgwick. At noon on Friday the Union forces clashed with the Confederates on either side of the road between Chancellorsville and Fredericksburg.

#### HOOKER'S RESPONSE

At this point the subordinate Northern commanders were enthusiastic. Their men were moving forward appropriately and their tactical position excellent. Unexpectedly there came from Headquarters on the Union side the call to retire to a defensive position around Chancellorsville. In retrospect this has been thought by historians to be the turning point of the campaign. Had Hooker lost his nerve in battle against Lee? Probably. A year later, Grant, under almost identical circumstances in the Battle of the Wilderness, kept moving south. But also Hooker might have had notions of luring Lee to attack him in a prepared position, much as Mead successfully accepted Lee's attack at Gettysburg. Hooker's men reluctantly withdrew to a line around the Chancellor tavern at Chancellorsville and allowed the Confederates to surge forward toward them.

#### THE MIDDLE GAME

##### JACKSON'S 'FLANK MARCH

Among the commanders hurring west from Fredericksburg to meet the Federal threat was Lee's principal subordinate, Stonewall Jackson. Jackson at this time was 39 years old. He had been a teacher of mathematics at the Virginia Military Institute before the war, after army service which included time in Mexico. He was of Scotch-Irish descent, deeply religious, kind to his family and friends and a tough, hard-bitten and very effective soldier.

Late Friday night Jackson and Lee met on a country road south of Chancellorsville and planned the destruction of the Federal army. It had been determined by the Southern cavalry that the right or west flank of the Federals was "up in the air". That is, the flank rested on no natural defence such as a river or hill. The Federals apparently thought that the forest around their right flank was impenetrable so that no attack from that direction was possible. Lee and Jackson identified a charcoal burner's trail along which troops could move to get to the west of the Yankees. This move would require a further division of Lee's forces, a risk which he was willing to take. At dawn the next morning Jackson



and 18000 troops moved out, crossing in front of the Federal lines but hidden by the forest during much of their route. They were seen by Federal officers at one point as they marched to the west and the fact reported to Hooker, who misinterpreted their movement as a retreat toward Gordonsville. By late afternoon Jackson had his men in three successive lines of battle in the thickets to the west of the Union forces.

These forces were not the best in the Union army. They were commanded by OO Howard, the "Christian Soldier", who after the War administered the Freedman's Bureau to look after the interests of the newly-freed blacks. Howard's command was largely composed of German immigrants. It had not done well at Second Bull Run. At 5:30 PM Saturday afternoon the men had stacked arms and were preparing supper. A band was playing. Suddenly frightened animals, deer and rabbits, ran through the camp. In a few moments there came a crash of rifle fire from the woods, and three battle lines of veteran Confederate soldiers swept through the camp.

Back at Chancellorsville Hooker and his staff knew nothing of this until they became aware of the noise of battle from a totally unexpected direction, from the right flank where all was supposed to be quiet. Soon men in a total state of panic poured through the main Union camp. Many had thrown away their rifles and were running for their lives to the rear. No such general route had been seen on either side since the first battle of Bull Run. Jackson's people had taken Howard's 11th Division completely by surprise and had destroyed it. But the army as a whole was tougher than it had been at Bull Run. Hooker and Howard were able to set up a secondary line a couple of miles east of the initial point of attack. The Confederates themselves ran out of steam and became disorganized and incapable of further advance. Towards ten o'clock at night the battlefield started to quiet down.

Jackson, always aggressive, was out in front of his troops. He habitually scouted to work out in advance his next moves. As he and the few officers with him moved on horseback in the dark in front of the edgy Southerners, shots were heard. Each side expected further attacks, even at night, and neither was taking chances. Jackson fell, wounded in his arm in two places. With great difficulty he was carried inside his own lines and ultimately to safety in the rear. But his unique style of leadership was no longer available to the South. His place as commander of the left flank of the Confederates was taken by the cavalry commander, JEB Stuart.



## SEDGWICK'S ATTACK

Meanwhile back at Fredericksburg plenty was going on. Hooker, you remember, had left one of his best commanders, John Sedgwick, with 40,000 troops facing 10,000 Southerners in the same setting in which Burnside had come to grief in December. Sunday morning May 3 the Yankees attacked Marye's Heights behind the town of Fredericksburg. They were repulsed twice by fire from behind the stone walls, just as Burnside had been. But in the third attack, in one of the few bayonet charge of the Civil War, Sedgwick's troops carried the Heights and scattered the Confederates in front of them.

So Lee, after his sensational victory at Chancellorsville, still had Sedgwick in his rear to contend with. Of course this was an opportunity for Hooker to attack. Despite the route of his right flank Hooker still had more troops than Lee, and now Lee was turning audaciously away from him to face trouble in his rear. But Hooker did nothing, in a textbook case of demoralization. He and his men stayed inside the field fortifications which they had erected north of Chancellorsville; the river and its fords was in their rear.

## END GAME

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## RETREAT

On Monday May 4 Lee was able to devote his full attention to Sedgwick. The fight was inconclusive, but Sedgwick, now realizing that he would get no help from Hooker, retreated on Monday night across the Rappahannock. On Tuesday Hooker performed the same maneuver, getting his men safely across the river to the area from which they had come ten days before.

Where had the Union cavalry been? We left them disappearing in the direction of Richmond on April 29th. They did their assigned job. They tore up miles of the Virginia Central Railroad, and they came within sight of the church steeples of Richmond. They caused Lee to detach a few troopers to keep an eye on them. But they did not achieve their end. They did not cause Lee to hesitate or to call off his attack on Hooker because of trouble in his rear. Their chief function was to allow Lee to demonstrate his greatness as a battle field commander.

And other ends were achieved. This was practice for the Union cavalry in



working as a team and was a necessary preliminary to the professionalism and expertise of these troopers under Sheridan the following year. But they were not available to Hooker when he needed them at Chancellorsville to scout out the movements of the Confederates and to solve the puzzle of the destination of all those ragged gray-clad soldiers moving across his front on the fatal second of May.

## LINCOLN HEARS THE NEWS

On Tuesday May 5, the same day as Hooker's retreat across the Rappahannock, the news of the repulse of the Army of the Potomac was received in Washington. Lincoln, as one might imagine, despaired. Not only had another general been unable to lead the Army of the Potomac effectively, but also fresh comfort had been given to the enemies in his rear. Throughout the North Peace Democrats asked whether the fighting should not be stopped and the South allowed to go its own way. Russell and Palmerston in England were encouraged in their plans to recognize the Confederacy as an independent nation, as was Louis Napoleon in France. It looked as though the Union and all the hopes which attached to it might dissolve.

At this point Lincoln's greatness asserted itself, as it did so many times during the War. On May 8, three days after the retreat across the river, Lincoln visited the army and had words of encouragement and hope. The process of reconstruction began again.

## MEANWHILE DOWN SOUTH

On May 10, nine days after he had been wounded, Stonewall Jackson died of pneumonia. Why should pneumonia follow arm wounds and amputation? Presumably the diagnosis was correct. Physical diagnosis by stethoscope and percussion was available in the 1860's, although the chest x-ray was not. We must be talking here of a post-operative pneumonia caused by aspiration and perhaps associated with atelectasis. In any event, medicine in that era was not prepared to cope with this complication, and the great soldier was no longer available to the Confederacy.

## AFTER THE GAME WAS OVER

The American Civil War, from a strategic point of view, was really two wars, one east and one west of the ridge of the Allegheny Mountains. We have been



concentrating on the war in the east during the early spring of 1863, but what of the West? Since March General Grant had had the Confederate General Pemberton pinned down in the Mississippi River town of Vicksburg, but progress for Grant in April and May was slow. Direct attacks on the town's defences had only resulted in casualties, and Grant was resigned to seige. These events in turn presented a crucial problem to Jefferson Davis and the other Southern leaders: Should they transfer troops west and relieve Pemberton, or should they keep pressing the Union in the East. Influential voices backed the former western strategy, but they were swept away by the prestige of Robert E. Lee, who by now had achieved total dominance of the southern political consciousness. Lee maintained after Chancellorsville that a campaign in Pennsylvania would take his troops into an area in which they could recruit their supplies. They could also cut Federal communications between Washington and the west, demonstrate to the people of the north the military power of the south, and perhaps even take Washington itself from the north and west. Lee also maintained that Grant's northern soldiers around Vicksburg would as the season progressed be demolished by the heat and mosquitoes of a southern summer and would in this way be eliminated as an effective military force. Jefferson Davis' cabinet agreed, and Lee's troops prepared for invasion of the North.

As Lee's men started to move across the Potomac in mid June 1863 they were shadowed by Hooker and the Union army. Hooker's morale had not improved since Chancellorsville, and he showed both the disinclination to fight and the craving for additional troops which were the sins of leaders of the Army of the Potomac in the first half of the war. Finally Lincoln lost patience, and on June 28 relieved Hooker from command and named General George Gordon Meade in his place. Two days later elements of Meade's army clashed with Confederate units outside the little Pennsylvania market town of Gettysburg. In the next three days the Army of the Potomac showed all the class which it had been unable to summon up for Chancellorsville, and Lee was defeated in the greatest set piece battle of the war. Simultaneously Grant's smashing victory at Vicksburg opened the Mississippi River to the North and split the Confederacy in two. European intervention suddenly became politically impossible and the thrust of the war turned decisively in favor of the North, leading ultimately to victory at Appamatox twenty-one months later.

Defeat at Chancellorsville and victory at Gettysburg. Only two months apart. The same armies. Wherein lay the difference?

- 1) One has to give Hooker a good deal of credit for success at Gettysburg.



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although he had been relieved from command before the battle started. Hooker for all his faults (his headquarters was described by Oliver Wendell Holmes as a cross between a barroom and a brothel) was a first rate military administrator.

The Civil War was fought on both sides by armies of civilians, perhaps prefigured by the French armies of the Revolutionary Period but otherwise unlike anything in modern military history up to their time. Hooker during the winter of 1862/3 had been able to grind some professionalism into the amateurs of the Army of the Potomac so that the mechanical functions and discipline of an effective army were learned by erstwhile amateurs. He stressed the importance of good food and good medical care..

2) Even though the Union army had been defeated at Chancellorsville, it had not been destroyed. The increased professionalism of the army had allowed it to retreat in good order in the face of the enemy.

3) Leadership does make a difference. Hooker in some mysterious way did not have the personal qualities which enable a man to function effectively in periods of extreme stress and at the top leadership position. And yet he was a capable subordinate, which he had demonstrated before and would again under Grant at Chancellorsville. This moral quality of leadership Robert E. Lee used effectively time and again and left as a legacy to the South.

4) What is defeat and what is victory? At Chancellorsville the Confederates suffered 13,000 casualties and 22% of their force, while the Union suffered 17,000 and 15%. Obviously these figures would, in the long run, work only to the advantage of the North in view of the North's much greater reserves of men and materiele. When military defeat as at Gettysburg and Vicksburg was added to the arithmetic given above, the problems for the South were severe indeed.

Behind the numbers of killed and wounded lies the story of men on the fighting line. Steven Crane wrote "The Red Badge of Courage" as an account of the universe of a private soldier in the Battle of Chancellorsville. It still stands as the classic narrative of men at war.

#### CHANCELLORSVILLE TODAY

The battlefields of the eastern theater of the Civil War lie not far south of Washington. One can drive on interstate 95 south from the beltway. In about three quarters of an hour one comes to Fredericksburg. Turn left on the south side of the



river. The plain where the Union troops grouped before storming Marye's Heights is now covered with buildings, but right at the edge of the Rappahannock it's easy to visualize the terrain: the river, the plain, and the hills above. Three quarters of the way up the heights and parallel to the river is the stone wall which Sedgwick's troops stormed using the bayonet on Sunday May 3, 1863.

Take US 3 west from Fredericksburg. It used to be called the Orange Turnpike and was the road Lee and Jackson and their men took to meet Hooker and check his advance. Some miles down the road one comes to the ruins of the old Chancellor tavern, the key to the battle. Here Hooker had his headquarters when he called his advancing troops back on Friday May 1. The final Federal position from which Hooker retreated across the Rappahannock is north of the house.

South of the Chancellor tavern one can follow Jackson's flank march through the woods. Rural Virginia is still undeveloped, and these scrub timberlands probably look much as they did in 1863 when the troops pushed through them searching for military success. Jackson's 18,000 men overflowed the narrow country road, so much so that couriers moving back and forth had to make their way through the woods. From time to time one can look through clearings at the sites of the Federal positions. Finally one comes to the junction of the woods road with the Orange Turnpike. At this position Jackson's men assembled for the attack. Even now, one hundred and twenty five years later, it is not hard to visualize the lines forming to right and left of the road and to hear the rebel yell as the ragged Southern troops move out toward victory.

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