

Chapter 9: Into the Wilderness

May 1, 1864 through July 28, 1864

No maps have been generated for this work. The reader will have a much easier time following troop movements if one (or several) are referenced. The map for Fredericksburg – Spotsylvania National Park, located at there website, www.nps.gov/frsp, contains a very useful one for following the brigade’s actions in the Wilderness and at Spotsylvania Court House. Maps at Richmond and Petersburg National Parks (www.nps.gov/rich and www.nps.gov/pete) are also useful when following the campaign in those vicinities. Embedded maps are high on the priority list...

In early May of 1864, the Confederacy's Army of Northern Virginia, commanded by General Robert E. Lee, was posted in the vicinity of Orange, Virginia. Two divisions of Longstreet's I Corps, freshly returned from a long winter in the Tennessee mountains, was posted around Gordonsville. Ewell's II Corps, and Hill's III Corps, each with their full complement of three divisions, were on the south bank of the Rappahannock River, near Orange. In all, the army contained about 65,000 men. Lee was holding his army in readiness for the anticipated onset of the Union army's spring offensive. The Union Army of the Potomac, commanded by General George G. Meade, was based around Culpepper, Va, and had been reinforced by General Ambrose Burnside and the Union IX Corps. Together, these forces numbered around 120,000 men. The commander in chief of all Union Armies, General Ulysses Grant, was present and would accompany and presumably direct the coming offensive. The only open question for the southerners was where exactly the first blow would land. On May 2nd, Field's division of Longstreet's Corps, of which Benning's Brigade was a part, was moved to the north of Gordonsville, to meet an expected enemy advance, by way of Liberty Mills. No enemy was met, but Lee sent word to General Longstreet to bring the I Corps east into Spotsylvania County. Benning's brigade left Gordonsville with the rest of Field's division at 3 AM on May 4th, aiming for Spotsylvania Court House, the designated rendezvous point. Shortly after dawn, a Confederate observation post on Clark's Mountain sighted large columns of northern troops moving towards the crossings of Rappahannock River, near the site of the previous year's battle of Chancellorsville. General Lee immediately ordered his II and III Corps, closest to the enemy, to move to intercept the northerners. The I Corps continued to march east, as Benning's brigade marched ten miles, took a few hours rest, and resumed the march around 4 PM. After covering an additional sixteen miles, the brigade and the I Corps fell bivouacked near Brock's Bridge, on the North Anna River, crossed by modern day Virginia Route 669. Spread out a dozen miles to the north, the Confederate II and III Corps moved along a north to south line, closing on the northern army along two parallel roads that eventually intersected just west of Chancellorsville. The Confederate army was moving east, covering a front fifteen miles wide. Lee hoped one of his infantry corps would intercept Grant's line of march and bring him to battle before Grant got too far south.¹

On May 5th, General Lee awoke to learn that Grant's army was still strung out along the narrow roads that traversed the thick woods west of Chancellorsville. Lee was much closer to intercepting Grant than he had previously hoped. The infantry in Grant's host outnumbered

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Lee's by a margin of two to one, and the northerners had a significant qualitative and quantitative edge in artillery. The thick woods would limit the effectiveness of all artillery, and the dispersed state of northern infantry contrasted sharply with Lee's massed corps. Lee seldom passed up an opportunity to strike his foe on favorable terms, and this was one of those opportunities. The II Corps, under Lt. General Richard Ewell, was ordered east along the Orange Turnpike, towards Wilderness Tavern. This was the northern flank of the Confederate Army. To the south, Lt. Gen. A.P. Hill's III Corps moved east along the Orange Plank Road. Both columns had orders to make contact with the enemy. Longstreet's I Corps was redirected from Spotsylvania Court House to Richard's Shop, southeast of Verdiersville at the corner of Old Fredricksburg Road and Lawyer Roads. Here it might support either of the other two Corps, or threaten the Yankee army's southern flank. While the II and III corps engaged the northern army, opening the Battle of the Wilderness, Longstreet's I Corps marched northeast for twelve miles before bivouacking near Richard's Shop at around 3 PM. As the march progressed, ominous signs of nearby, large scale combat abounded. Starting around 1 PM, distant artillery fire, followed shortly by continuous rolls of musketry, could be heard. As they neared Richard's Shop, they began to encounter wounded soldiers. Rosser's cavalry brigade led the infantry's march, and skirmished intermittently throughout the afternoon, keeping a column of hostile cavalry away from the columns of infantry. The enemy cavalry, sent to find and harass Lee's southern flank, was instead driven back several miles to the main Union army, strung out along a north west to southeast running road, known as the Brock Road.²

The fighting that the I Corps missed on May 5 was heavy and savage. Furthest to the north, Ewell's Corps established a strong defensive line that commanded the frontal approaches to their position, and covered the Army of Northern Virginia's left flank along the Orange Turnpike. After weathering a few close calls early in the day, their position was secure. To the south, along the Orange Plank Road, A. P. Hill's corps fought stubbornly all day long, heavily outnumbered and facing the larger portion of the Union army. Hill's corps suffered heavy casualties repulsing sustained attacks. They were also badly disorganized, having spent the entire day fighting back and forth in the tangled woods. General Lee took stock of the situation that evening, and ordered Longstreet to bring his I Corps up to relieve Hill's III Corps.³

Field's division was awakened around 2 AM on May 6. As the men stirred, they could hear the band of Micah Jenkins' South Carolina brigade perform an impromptu serenade, in honor of their commander's birthday. Time, however, was short, as was the concert. The

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division resumed the march, following farm lanes northward, towards the Orange Plank Road. McLaws' division, now commanded by General Joseph Kershaw, followed. In the pre dawn darkness, Field's division made a wrong turn (or missed the correct one) near Parker's Store, but the mistake was discovered before Kershaw followed. Field's division doubled back, and found Kershaw's men moving east along the Orange Plank Road. Fueled by a sense of urgency, Field started his division alongside of Kershaw's, rather than waiting for Kershaw's column to clear the road. Two divisions, moving in columns of four, parallel to one another, on the same road at the same time, was at best highly unusual. The double column passed by the III Corps infirmary, where surgeons were busy with their bloody work by lantern light, and as a fresh stream of wounded began to appear. Sobering images for the veterans of Benning's Brigade to contemplate.⁴

As early dawn broke, and light began to filter through the canopy of leaves above, Kershaw's and Field's divisions were hurrying east, the head of Kershaw's column perhaps 100 yards in advance of Field's. The Confederate I Corps, now clear of the hospital and doubled up on the road, moved at a quick pace. A South Carolinian in Kershaw's division recalled "we walked fast and double quick as much as we could"; another soldier in the Corps called it a "turkey trot", the last two miles done at the double quick. Several miles further east, literally half the Union army had been massed to attack Hill's corps, and the fighting was already underway. Hill expected to be relieved by Longstreet during the night, and rested his men, rather than shuffling them around to reorganize his battered commands. As a result, his troops were ill prepared to resist any organized attack, let alone one containing four times their number. Despite his men's best efforts, and continued displays of extraordinary courage, Hill's corps began to give way, slowly at first, then in a torrent, as their disjointed lines completely collapsed.⁵

As the Confederate I corps approached what had been Hill's lines, they were nearly overwhelmed by the broken masses of the III Corps, streaming over and through them towards the rear. To their credit, given space and distance from their foe, these III Corps troops would quickly reform and rejoin the battle. But at this stage of the contest, the chaos bore all the signs of imminent and complete disaster. I Corps veterans, surely including Benning's men, gave Hill's troops grief, with such comments as:

"Do you belong to Lee's army?"

and

“You don’t look like the men we left here. You are worse than Bragg’s men”⁶

Despite these quips, it was obvious – especially after passing A. P. Hill’s Corps, going the other way, while two divisions shared the same road, at the double time – that a desperate situation lay ahead. Suddenly the last mass of Hill’s fugitives passed by, and a wide, open field loomed ahead. It was a storybook moment – Hill’s Corps had been run off the field, victorious Federal troops were advancing to crush whatever might remain of Lee’s right flank, and, just in the nick of time, Longstreet’s I Corps arrived. It remained to be seen if Longstreet’s men had made it in time. Yet already the troops had won praise, Longstreet recalling his men, “With considerable difficulty, but with steadiness, opening their ranks to let the retreating divisions through”, and Longstreet’s staff officer, G. Moxley Sorrel, “I have always thought that in its entire splendid history the simple act of forming line in that dense undergrowth, under fire and with the Third Corps men pushing to the rear through the ranks, was perhaps [the I Corps’] greatest performance for steadiness and inflexible courage and discipline”⁷

Kershaw’s division, which had been marching on the southern half of the Orange Plank Road, deployed south of and perpendicular to the road. For the purpose of studying Benning’s Brigade, suffice it to say these men secured the southern flank of the Confederate army and fought magnificently throughout the day. Field’s division, on the north side of the road, moved towards the open fields, known as “The Widow Tapp Farm” and today incorporated into the Wilderness unit of the Fredericksburg-Spotsylvania National Park. The Texas brigade, the first one up from the division, marched into the field and began to deploy in front of a III Corps artillery battalion, facing east. Benning’s brigade was behind them, and marching into the field to deploy immediately behind the Texans, as one of the fabled moments in the history of the Army of Northern Virginia occurred. General Lee, sensing the fate of his army and the perhaps the Confederacy was at stake, attempted to personally lead the Texas brigade in a counterattack against Federal troops, who were by now appearing in numbers at the edge of the woods across the field, and preparing to advance further. A chorus of shouts, “Lee to the rear”, began to rise from the enlisted men. Exactly what happened next is, and likely will remain, a mystery, but it ended with a delay in the Texans’ advance, followed by a Texan leading Lee’s horse, and with it Lee, to the rear. As Lee passed rearwards, the Texans charged forward.⁸

Benning's Brigade deployed behind the Texans and likely witnessed the entire episode with General Lee. Lee began to regain his balance as he was led rearwards, though he remained "among the thick flying balls on the front lines, waving his hat and encouraging the men", as Benning's troops deployed. At the influence of General Longstreet, Lee moved further to the rear, where he encountered General Field, and paused to discuss troop dispositions. The Georgians were unable to savor their encounter with General Lee, as they stepped off across the wide, open field, almost on the heels of the Texans. The northern troops, despite winning a victory over Hill's Corps, were themselves quite disrupted by their fighting advance through the woods. The shock of the Texans' attack drove the Federal vanguard back on its main body, but the northern force retained considerable numbers and inflicted severe casualties on the Texas Brigade. Benning's men crossed Widow Tapp's field behind them, advancing parallel to and north of the Orange Plank Road. As Benning's men neared the woodline on the far (eastern) side of the Tapp farm, they crossed over what remained of the Texas brigade, its numbers already depleted to that of a skirmish line's. Then it was the Georgians' turn to crash into the northern force. The charge by the Texans had noticeably slowed the advancing northerners, and added tremendously to their already confused condition. Benning's charge, following 50 yards or so behind, was akin to the second blow of a sledgehammer, and stopped the bluecoats' forward motion completely. The northerners inflicted heavy casualties on the advancing Georgians, but this was an instance where being in the open may have provided a psychological edge – one could see the entire brigade pushing forward, as opposed to seeing whatever comrades were within the five yard field of view the woods allowed. Despite their mounting casualties, Benning's men drove the enemy far enough that both of the brigade's flanks were exposed to severe enfilading fire. After a few minutes of this punishment, the brigade drifted back a bit on the right. Law's Alabama brigade then came up on the left, and these two details allowed the survivors to regain their equilibrium. The fighting was close range and personal, with little sense of what happened outside the mens' own immediate selves. Unable to see anything through the black powder smoke and thick brush, men fired at muzzle flashes and hints of blue uniforms. Members of the brigade recalled an "incessant and deafening" rattle of small arms fire, and that "There were no commands given after the deadly contest began", because "they could not have been heard." Some of the lack of command came from severe casualties, including General Benning, who was wounded early in the fight. A ball dismounted him from a huge, iron gray horse, passing through his left shoulder and shattering bones. He was taken from the field, abruptly leaving the brigade in the hands of Colonel Dudley DuBose, of the 15th Georgia. The

Toombs family again controlled the brigade, this time through Toombs' more military minded son-in-law.⁹

It was only around 8 AM. Having followed up a 5 mile march with a desperate, bloody charge, the men settled into their work. Reinforced by the Alabamians, the Texans and Georgians were able to maintain a see-saw slugfest that surged back and forth and back and forth and back again, through the smoky tangle of woods. After three long, bloody hours, word was received that a strike force was swinging around and preparing to strike the Yankees' southern flank. In a coordinated movement, Field's division pushed ahead with a series of frontal attacks, driving eastwards along both sides of the Orange Plank Road. The flank attack proved wildly successful. Combined with the frontal assaults, the northern assault columns were driven back, slowly at first, and then, as the flankers rolled up the Union line, in a rush. Once the northerners broke, they continued retreating for $\frac{3}{4}$ mile, until they ran into their reserve. This in effect pushed the Yankees back to their original line of departure for their recent attack. The woods behind them were littered with dead and wounded, the fallen northerners far outnumbering their counterparts in gray.¹⁰

The southern leaders, especially Generals Lee and Longstreet, were anxious to exploit their success of their flank attack. Field sent his only unfought brigade, Micah Jenkins' South Carolinians, east along the Orange Plank Road, intending Jenkins' men to provide temporary relief for the Texas, Benning's, and Law's brigades. Once the southern lines were reorganized, Jenkins' men would spearhead whatever fresh attack was ordered – Field realized that his other three brigades were hurt. (There was a fifth brigade in Field's division, Anderson's, and it had led the division's march that day. It had deployed before reaching the Tapp farm, then participated in the flank attack, and was temporarily beyond Field's reach). This was Longstreet's general plan, to reform the flank column and then resume the attack. Unable to foresee what conditions might exist at the front, but anxious to exploit whatever those conditions were, Longstreet accompanied his advancing infantry, riding at the head of Jenkins' brigade as it moved towards the enemy. A few score yards after passing the advanced line of Benning's and the others, Jenkins' column was spotted by some of the Confederate flankers. In the smoke and confusion, Longstreet, his staff, and Jenkin's brigade were mistaken for Yankees. More volleys cut through the woods – friendly ones, this time – and a number of southern soldiers fell to friendly fire. Among them were Brigadier General Jenkins, mortally wounded in the head, and General Longstreet, wounded severely, and initially feared mortally, in the neck. (Longstreet was wounded on the front of his neck, on right side of larynx. The ball carried away part of “the

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spine of scapula” and exited behind the right shoulder). The follow up attack was thus delayed, finally getting off in the afternoon. While Jenkins’ men pushed forward past the cover of woods and attempted to storm northern breastworks, most of Field’s men, presumably including Benning’s, were content to push forward only until reaching the edge of the woods, from where they opened a scattered, temporary skirmish fire on the northern line. Jenkins brigade, commanded now by Colonel John Bratton, was ultimately repulsed, after which the Confederate line slowly melted back through the woods, westward to their own works. Fighting at various levels of intensity continued, even though both sides seemed to have had enough of the heavy fighting, until darkness finally ended “one of the severest engagements” that a veteran member of the 20th Georgia remembered.¹¹

By sunset, Field’s division was perpendicular to and south of the road, facing east. Reformed units from Hill’s corps had secured the area around the Tapp farm. Rest would have been welcome, but the darkness brought its own special horrors. G. Moxley Sorrel, Corps Staff officer, remembered the night of 6 May “was hideous. The brush and undergrowth had taken fire from the musketry and flames and smoke were obscuring everything”, and especially impeded troops from both armies who ventured out into the burning forest, looking for wounded and missing comrades, many of whom could be heard screaming in agony from wound and or fear of approaching fire. The activities of several members of the 15th Georgia were representative of what went on that night - German Culver, Captain Edgeworth Bird (serving as brigade quartermaster), and Bird’s slave Sam found Tom Culver’s body, brought it out on mule, then buried it in a freshly dug grave. Afterwards, Bird, at least, found a quiet spot to pen a note to his wife.¹²

The men in the ranks were proud of themselves, their achievements, and their unit. General Field, commanding their division in battle for the first time, impressed them. A Georgian recalled, “Maj. Gen. Fields (sic) endeared himself to every man of his command, by his cool daring & efficiency as a div. Commander”. The brigade had been well led, and continued to perform, after Colonel DuBose assumed command, which doubtless helped to ease concerns about the continued leadership of the brigade. Of their own performance, Captain Bird wrote, “the Yankee loss must be tremendous. Our boys gave them “hankens” today.” These “hankens” were especial gifts from “Gregg[’s Texas Brigade] and Benning[’s Brigade who] ...bore the brunt of the action. Both were small brigades and their casualties were heavy,” according to Col Alexander of the I Corps artillery. The men agreed with Alexander’s casualty

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assessment; Bird wrote “Benning’s brigade suffered a great deal”, and put the brigade’s losses at 208 wounded and 10 killed, though at least this last number is low. Colonel Wesley Hodges of the 17th Georgia was severely wounded; Captain, and later Major, James Moore took over the unit. The 20th Georgia entered fight with 265 men, and lost 6 killed and 60 wounded, though many of these wounds appeared light, and many of the wounded would make quick returns to the ranks. Some of the men of the 20th who became casualties were Lt. Samuel Cleghorn, who besides having his leg amputated was wounded in the arm, and a Lt. Bostic. Lt. Theodore Fogel, 2nd Georgia, who couldn’t bring himself to tell his mother that he had killed at Sharpsburg, was himself killed in action. Company C, of the 15th Georgia, lost T. C. Harmon, E. J. Allgood, John W. Hubbard, William J. Smith, Richard M. Willis, Edward M. Roberts, and Captain Hudson, all wounded. Others from the same regiment included “Joe Wright hurt badly in arm. Dud Alfriend, contusion on hip. Joe Hines killed. Bill Seals wounded in hand. George Waller in one hand and slightly in other hand. Matt Parker, leg amputated below knee...”. General Benning, utilizing some of the privileges that accompanied his rank, had word of his wounding and condition transcribed from the doctor, then telegraphed to his wife. Benning was transferred to an army hospital in Orange Court House, Virginia, and it is likely that most wounded from his command were sent there, as well. Benning was accompanied, or maybe in the charge of his slave “Old Billie”, who later took charge of transporting Benning back to Georgia to recuperate.¹³

At some point during the day’s fighting, a red fox, doubtless as frightened by the din and chaos of combat as the men, ran up to a member of the 15th Georgia, who took time off from the shooting to secure the non combatant. The fox was named “Gavroche” by the men, after a redheaded character in Victor Hugo’s *Les Miserables*, which at the time was popular and circulating through Lee’s army. Gavroche quickly ingratiated himself into the unit as the brigade pet, a position he retained or at least five months. Besides dealing with innocent surprises, such as Gavroche, and morbid ones, such as taking stock of their losses, the brigade performed some more immediately practical tasks that night, namely straightening their lines, reorganized their units, and improving the rough breastworks they had improvised during the fighting. Fortunately for the brigade, there was little need for these works the next day, as combat operations on its front were limited to brisk skirmishing. After two days of heavy, yet inconclusive fighting in the Wilderness, General Grant had decided to disengage the northern army to attempt a march around the southerners’ right flank, drawing Lee’s army to a new, less advantageous location, where Grant’s troops might have a better opportunity to smash them. Grant ordered up increased

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activity on his skirmish line to mask the repositioning of his troops, prior to moving. Cavalry from both armies were also screening their respective southern flanks, and increasingly aggressive and powerful northern probes tipped Lee off to Grant's intentions.¹⁴

Sometime during the 7th, the men learned that Major General Richard Anderson was assuming command of the wounded Longstreet's I army corps. At 10 PM that night, marching orders arrived at the brigade, and by 11PM the men had turned over their works to members of Hill's III Corps and were on the move. The men may have overheard that their destination was Spotsylvania Court House, but they probably could not have imagined what this march would be like. Leaving their fieldworks, they marched west along the Orange Plank Road for a mile or so, where they turned south on what has become known as "Pendleton's Road". General Lee had foreseen the potential need to move his army quickly to the southeast, and noted that the only road that would support such a move, the Brock Road, was firmly held by the northern army. To compensate, Lee ordered the army's artillery chief, General Pendleton, to oversee construction of a road through the woods, paralleling the Brock Road. Pendleton had completed his assigned task, but had done so in a day's time, which explains what the men using the road would encounter. The Brock Road ran mostly straight into Spotsylvania Court House, entering the crossroads from the northwest. Pendleton's bore more to the south before it struck the Catharpin Road, west of the crossroads. The Confederate I Corps had a march of about 11 miles ahead of them. The northern troops had a shorter distance to cover, but their route would be contested.¹⁵

Pendleton's Road was where the march started to get rough. In a time and locale known for narrow, overgrown roads, men remembered this as a narrow road. It was filled with stumps and rocky areas, ran through swamps and thickets, and crossed through (not over) several streams. Scattered forest fires, started by the fighting, lit the way for the first half of the march. While these forests provided intermittent light, they also filled the men's eyes and lungs with thick smoke from burning pines and brush and, occasionally, human flesh. Anderson had been ordered to stop the I Corps at any suitable camp spot he found along "Pendleton's Road", but he found the woods "in every direction on fire and burning furiously, and there was no suitable place to rest". As the forge on, the fires became smaller and less frequent, and the men were left to stagger almost blindly through the dark – this march through the forest was made by the dark of the moon. The march continued through the night, and the head of I Corps column emerged from the forest around dawn, along the Catharpin Road and a mile or two west of the Po River. Anderson ordered his tired troops to fall out for rest when they reached the west bank of the Po at Block House Bridge (also known as Corbin's bridge), a mile and a half west of Spotsylvania

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Court House. Benning's men, being towards the end of the column, arrived at the bridge around 8 AM, and broke ranks for a quick breakfast. To the northeast, scattered sounds of combat could be heard, emanating from the opposing cavalries contesting control of the Brock Road.¹⁶

The brigade had hardly broken ranks when the sounds of fighting crescendoed. Riders came into Corps headquarters, with bad news on two fronts. First, the friendly cavalry was hard pressed by enemy cavalry, infantry, and artillery, and in critical need of reinforcements. Second, a Yankee cavalry column had separated from the Union army and ridden into Spotsylvania Court House, effectively cutting Lee's army off from the main route to Richmond. General Anderson reacted decisively to the dual threats. One brigade from each of his infantry divisions was sent north to support the cavalry's delaying action. The rest of the I Corps, including Benning's brigade, headed towards town, intending to clear the Yankees and thereby re-secure the army's right flank and line of communication. The opposing force consisted of a division of cavalry, backed by sixteen pieces of artillery. They possessed adequate firepower to have put up a stout defense against the tired, bloodied I Corps, and maybe shortened the war in doing so. Instead, they withdrew from town without firing a shot. Sounds of heavy fighting behind the bulk of the I Corps indicated that two detached brigades were heavily engaged. With the crossroads secured by the departure of the enemy cavalry, most of the southern infantry – again including Benning's men – turned around, and followed the Brock Road two miles north to support their comrades. Field's division deployed southwest of the intersection of Brock Road and Courthouse Road, forming line around Law's Alabama brigade, commanded by Col. William Perry, which had been detached earlier that morning and now held a long ridge known as Laurel Hill. Starting at the road, the division's line followed the ridge and ran west for half a mile, then turned south for about the same distance, ending on the Po River. Jenkins' brigade, now led by Col John Bratton, held the sector that touched on the road; next, going west, were Benning's men, centered a quarter mile west of the Brock Road – Courthouse Road intersection. Law's Brigade, commanded by Colonel Perry, held the turn in the line, followed by G. T. Anderson's brigade to their south, then the Texas Brigade, holding the division's and army's left flank. Kershaw's division deployed north of the road, generally facing west – northwest.¹⁷

Perry and his Alabamians, along with Henegan's brigade of Kershaw's division, a battery of horse artillery, and some cavalry, had repulsed a series of uncoordinated Federal assaults, the last one only minutes before the arrival of Field's division. Benning's officers and men looked out over fields to their north that were strewn with fallen bluecoats. Beyond the fields, which were farmed by the Spindle family, enemy lines were seen forming in the woodline half a mile or

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so away. A heavy skirmish line was sent out, and the rest of the men got to work building breastworks of fence rails and logs. Benning's Brigade, along with most of Field's division, was posted on a ridge, in the shelter of woods, with fields extending several hundred yards to the front. They had good cover and excellent fields of fire. The Corps' artillery, which had not had much opportunity to even deploy in the Wilderness, came up behind the infantry and found advantageous positions in which to deploy. The batteries wasted no further time, and engaged in an artillery duel that raged over the heads of the infantrymen from around 11 AM to 1 PM. The rest of the afternoon passed by with skirmishing and no major fighting. Around 6 PM, the Union Army launched another assault along the Confederate lines, which had been extended another mile or two north of the I Corps with the arrival of the II Corps. On Field's front, the attack was made on an artillery battery astride the Brock Road, a few hundred yards from Benning's men. The southerners allowed their foe to approach within fifty yards of their lines before scorching them with a series of heavy volleys that followed them as they tumbled back across the fields. Benning's men were not directly attacked, but almost certainly poured a heavy oblique fire on the northerners.¹⁸

The next morning, May 8, provided an increasingly rare dose of quiet for the men. Skirmishers were deployed and set about their work, while most of the brigade worked on improving their defenses. Skirmish activity brewed up during the afternoon and led to another Union attack against, and bloodily repulsed by, Field's division. This sort of fighting often generated only light casualties, but these were casualties nonetheless. It also generated a number of near misses. Not necessarily one to learn from his past, John Bowden, 2nd Georgia, volunteered for skirmish duty; after firing his allotted forty rounds, he dropped back from his advanced skirmish post to behind the main defensive lines to clean his gun. Removing his hat to help cool himself off, he found a spent minie between the felt of his hat and the hatband. At least this time the bullet failed to draw blood.¹⁹

A similar pattern continued on May 10. More artillery bombardments were opened on the southerners, and were followed by heavy attacks, but the defender's works were continually improving. By now the Georgians had abatis and entanglements in front of the lines, head logs over the rifle pits, and artillery sited to sweep all exposed approaches. After a busy morning of skirmishing, Union infantry began to mass opposite Benning's men. Artillery opened on the northerners around 3:30, encouraging them to either get on with their attack or disperse. They advanced, and were shredded by southern canister as they crossed the open Spindle farm fields.

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Some of the attackers made it to the abatis in front of the brigade, but here the massed rifle fire was too much, and the survivors stumbled back across towards their lines. The fighting caught the fields on fire, burning a number of dead and wounded northern soldiers, and several cedar trees close in on the brigade's front were similarly ignited. The attack was shattered and over by 5 PM, but a glorious field of victory this was not. Yet another assault, around 7 PM, temporarily succeeded in piercing a portion of Field's line, held by the Texas brigade, and corresponded to another Union attack, planned by Colonel Emory Upton, that temporarily broke a portion of Ewell's line. Elsewhere along Field's smoldering front, these assaults never materialized into more than temporary upticks in skirmish activity. Additional Federal attacks, or at least probes, were launched at around 10 PM and again at 4 AM, and kept everyone from getting solid rest. A member of the 20th Georgia summed up May 9 and 10 as repulsing many attacks and inflicting severe casualties, while the Georgians suffered only lightly. Even so, members of Benning's brigade continued to be hit and to die. Among them, Private Joseph Wright, 15th Georgia, who died of wounds on May 9, and Privates Adam Dawson and Isaac Maudlin, both from the 15th, Company C, and both killed in action on May 10.²⁰

Southern infantrymen were, by this time, policing up spare guns dropped on the battlefield and keeping them in their defenses, to increase their rate of fire when defending against an attack. Their officers had learned to further increase that firepower by standing a few feet behind their troops and reloading for them. These tactical adaptations, when coupled with the frequency of firing, led to several moments when ammunition was in short supply, but also a serious increase in firepower during the first several minutes of a defensive action. May 11 passed without an opportunity to use these tactics, though the skirmishing became particularly heavy for the 20th Georgia, demanding five companies out on the skirmish line for three hours. The 20th lost two men killed and eleven wounded in the process. Toward evening, the enemy skirmishers drifted away and broke contact.²¹

In the early morning hours of May 12, those men in Benning's brigade not on picket and already awake were roused around 5 AM, as sounds of fighting rolled in from the direction of Ewell's front, a mile and a half to the northeast. The northern army had massed two corps, or about 50,000 men, to attack a salient in Lee's lines. The salient, known as "the Mule Shoe", was shaped like an upside down horseshoe in the center of the Army of Northern Virginia's line, bulging forward half a mile. The northern attack was initially successful, and by the time Union artillery opened on Benning's men, at 6 AM, it had virtually destroyed General Edward

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Johnson's Division of Ewell's Corps, roughly 1/8 of the infantry Lee had available. The sound of combat at the salient would echo towards Field's division for the next 20 hours, as first a ferocious southern counterattack regained most of the salient, then Confederate diehards held the line for twenty hours, while Lee and Ewell directed the construction of a more defensible line across the base of the salient. To limit Lee's ability to re enforce his shattered center, Grant ordered his whole army to attack, all along the Confederates' line. Benning's men would not have to face the fight at what became known as "the Bloody Angle", but they would have their own troubles to deal with.²²

The men of Benning's brigade faced two storms on May 12th. One came from mother nature, in the form of rain that fell throughout the day, and the other from the federal army. By 10 AM, Field's division "sustained two violent assaults on a part of his line, which are again easily repulsed with great loss to the enemy." In the first of these, Cutler's V Corps Division, USA, hit square on the defensive line Colonel DuBose had helped to lay out. A Yankee survivor recalled crossing the Spindle farm fields, then abatis, then running into a gulley, opposite the main Confederate line. He continued, "suddenly [there] loomed up in our front three lines of works, literally a tier, one above the other, bristling with rifles...again and again did the brigade charge, and as often came those terrible sheets of flame in our faces". Cutler was pinned in the gulley almost immediately. Another survivor, from the 150th Pa, remembered "In less than fifteen minutes after we became engaged the ravine lay full of dead men, while hundreds of wounded men were on their way to the hospital". Benning's men reportedly had collected as many as four rifles each, and held their fire until the foe was within fifty yards. The firepower of four volleys in rapid succession, at this close a range, devastated the attacking formations. A second "handsome" assault was made against DuBose's front later in the morning, by U. S. Regulars. This attack hit around 10:15 AM, and targeted Bratton's Brigade, to the immediate right of Benning's men. Again, both the artillery and infantry held their fire until the Yankee line approached to within 50 yards, then let everything rip. E.P. Alexander noted dryly that "the line was driven back with heavy loss to them, but little or none to ourselves". The brigade was under fire all day long, though incidents such as Cutler's and the Regulars' attacks stood out. The serious assaults against Field's line were over by late morning. Field wrote the enemy "made a determined effort to break through my line...but they were repulsed with great slaughter". A rebel cannoneer added that "We have given them the worst whipping they ever got on the 12th". Dead Yankees littered the brigade's front.²³

During the afternoon, Bratton's Brigade, on the right if Benning's, was withdrawn from line and moved to support the fighting at the Bloody Angle. DuBose directed his men to stretch to the Brock Road to cover all of the lines. The men complied, though this action drew them into lines running through an open field, where they needed to be much more cautious if they meant to avoid catching northern lead. Benning's losses du jour included Sergeant James Russell, Company I, 20th Georgia, and Lieutenant George Worsham, Company F, 17th Georgia. Both of these men were killed in action. Enemy bullets were not the only thing that was thinning Confederate ranks. This same day, three men of the 15th Georgia were taken prisoner. They told their captors of being "on quarter rations, and no forage for their horses" which may reflect increasingly futile Confederate attempts to maintain full supply capacity in the field.²⁴

While the shooting on Benning's front quieted down with day's end, the roar of combat around the Bloody Angle did not fade until after midnight. The rain, which had fallen all day long on the 12th, continued overnight, and left the trenches somewhere between muddy and flooded. After passing through the miserable 24 hours of May 12th, corps' staff officers thought the 13th was pretty quiet. Private Fuller of the 20th thought there was lots of sharpshooting going on, including a heavy skirmish that flared up at 3 AM. A lot must depend on one's proximity to the foe. The following day, May 14th, brought its share of skirmishing, but by afternoon it was clear that the northern skirmishers were pulling back. Soon it appeared that they were abandoning their main lines, as well, and a heavy group of skirmishers from Benning's Brigade went forward to hasten their departure. A group of Yankees escaped detection by the main skirmish line, and ambushed the skirmishers' reserve force. This little ambush put a temporary end to DuBose's aggressive moves. The northern troops were pulling back, but they clearly were not whipped.²⁵

The eyes that were watching the departing northerners were now more observant, but an hour or so after the ambush, it was clear that the Federal troops were gone from the brigade's, and even division's, immediate vicinity. Another skirmish line swept forward to the enemy's works, this time staying there unmolested. General Field, suddenly having time to look around the fields in front, recalled "we were astounded at the great slaughter we had made. The graves were very numerous, and the dead bodies in some places which were under fire, and could not, therefore, be removed, were black, jet black, and swollen, and presented a horrid spectacle." Sergeant William Houghton of the 2nd Georgia remembered a similar case, where "a federal was shot through the stomach and lay between the lines for two days, groaning and begging for

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water. His comrades kept up an incessant fire and did not allow us to aid him.” Having finally retrieved him, they found it was too late. “Mortification had set in, and he was as dark as an African” That evening, Field was ordered to move his division to Spotsylvania Court House proper. General Lee was expecting Grant to try another maneuver around Lee’s right flank; the Yankees having disappeared from Field’s front on Lee’s far left, Field’s division was the obvious force to place in reserve to counter the next northern maneuver. At midnight, Gen. Field started his division from Laurel Hill. Heavy rains fell, adding mud to the difficulties faced by the men, but they reached Zion Church, half a mile south of the Court House at the intersection of modern day Courthouse and Massaponax Church Roads, at dawn on May 16th. During the day Field’s division established a line along the Courthouse Road (Va Route 208), facing east, running south from the church to the Po River. Benning’s Brigade was in the center of this line. There were no enemy troops in sight, so the men could concentrate on entrenching. E. P. Alexander described the line they created as “too good, so good that the enemy never attacked them.” Sad news made it to the men this day, perhaps earlier. “The announcement of the death of Gen. J.E.B. Stuart has been received with universal sorrow by the Army of Northern Virginia. . .men may differ in their estimates of his abilities as an officer, all accord to him the purist patriotism, an ardent zeal, a talent for organizing forces, great powers of endurance, and a cheerful and sanguine temper”. Union cavalry had made a break towards Richmond, drawing Stuart and half his cavalry corps after them. Stuart’s men met their foe in battle at Yellow Tavern, where many southerners fell with their chief, before the Northerners ran them off of the field entirely. Stuart was wounded on May 12, and died the following day. The earliest dated commentary on his death was on the 16th.²⁶

The brigade held its post along Courthouse Road until May 22nd, experiencing varied amounts of activity. It was a fairly quiet, stretch of line, but not entirely safe. Private John Wesley Smith of the 2nd Georgia was killed on the 17th. At 4:45 AM on the 18th, the brigade was awakened by a brief but furious cannonade as Grant’s forces struck unsuccessfully against Ewell’s Corps, now several miles to their north. The 19th passed by with just a spotting of northern scouts on their front, whose appearance was followed the next day by the arrival of regular bodies of enemy troops. Skirmishing flared up with these newly arrived federals on the 21st, the 20th Georgia losing 2 men wounded, against northern losses of one killed, one wounded and seven captured. It is significant that a battery posted behind Benning’s Brigade was forbidden from firing due to ammunition supply constraints. The Army of Northern Virginia was being worn down, manpower wise and material wise.²⁷

Since Benning's men withdrew from Laurel Hill, the lines of both armies had been slowly reaching south and east, as Grant attempted to work around Lee's right, and Lee successfully prevented Grant from accomplishing this goal. Grant was growing frustrated, and laid plans for a large scale turning movement of Lee's army. General Lee had stalemated Grant's first blow in the Wilderness, and Grant had responded with a major shift to flank the Confederate army on the southerners' right. This led to the fighting at Spotsylvania, where Grant was stymied a second time. The northern army continued to make less dramatic efforts to turn the Confederate right, but several attempts failed to alter the strategic situation, and Grant had another large scale turning effort drawn up. By May 21, Lee had received enough indications of another major Union Army maneuver against the Confederate right to allow him to take countermeasures. The entire Army of Northern Virginia was ordered to displace south, twenty miles or more, to the southern banks of the next major river then in their rear, the North Anna. High command believed that Grant intended to slip behind Lee's army, seize the railroad bridge that crossed the river, and cut the rebel army off from Richmond and the supplies that routed through it. Field's division began the march in the afternoon. Edward Porter Alexander, Corps artillery chief, noted that "there was none of the usual joking and chaffing among the men though all were in good humor". Benning's brigade marched from Traveler's Rest (modern intersection of Va 606 and Va 208, following 606 east) to Mud Tavern where it turned south on the Telegraph Road (US Route 1). The column halted at 3 A.M. on the 22nd, and the men fell out by the roadside and got whatever rest they could before being roused two hours later to resume the march. The sun rose, and was found to be "so oppressive we could barely live". The march continued through the heat until 4 PM, when the brigade went into bivouac on the south side of the North Anna River, opposite and a mile south of the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Petersburg Railroad Company's trestle bridge. This area is less than half a mile east of modern day US Route 1.²⁸

The men partook of some sorely needed rest into the next morning, but by noontime reports were coming in of the enemy advancing south along the Telegraph Road. Around 2 PM, the enemy appeared on the opposite side of the river. Georgia officers shouted commands, and the brigade assembled and moved forward (north) into the woods near the river bank. At dusk, a line of battle was formed near the southern end of the railroad bridge. After remaining in line but inactive for several hours, a detail from the brigade was sent forward to set fire to the span. After this little excitement, the brigade withdrew a mile to the southwest (Field's division set up

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their line just west of Telegraph Road) and, throughout the rest of the night, laid out a defensive line. The actual act of entrenching began at daybreak on the 24th. The main works were completed around noon, but men continued to embellish the works throughout the afternoon. The troops were now experienced enough with fieldworks to turn out masterful defenses, although no amount of experience could really reduce the labor that was required to build the works. The men typically started with trenches, then piled wood and dirt into ramparts several feet high in front of the trenches. They often mounted logs eight or ten inches above the rampart to protect their heads; constructed entanglements in front to slow any attackers; and added traverses – walls perpendicular to the front face of the works, spaced every fifteen feet – to contain any breakthrough the enemy might effect.²⁹

At the army level, this engagement held the promise of success for Lee's army. Having crossed the North Anna River, Lee deployed his men in the shape of an inverted V. The apex of the V was on a hill on the south bank of the river, dominating the northern bank, and both flanks were well protected by the swamps of the Pamunkey River, now in the Confederate's rear. Topping things off, General Grant unknowingly sent his troops across the North Anna on both sides of the apex in Lee's line, effectively splitting his army in half. Due in part to the heavy casualties Lee's army had suffered thus far in the campaign, especially among its officers, the southerners were unable to exploit the situation and assault either of the isolated portions of the Union army. The 25th and 26th of May saw no major combat on the brigade's front, though skirmishers deployed before dawn on both mornings and remained active as long as the sun was up. By the 26th, General Field had seen enough that he ordered his skirmishers, which included Benning's, to return to their main lines, after which things quieted down. Locally heavy fighting occurred on some segments of the Confederate lines, but the fighting, known as the battle of "Ox Ford" or the "North Anna" was to these Georgians just two more days spent skirmishing. A storm rolled in the afternoon of May 26, soaking everybody. As the storm passed, a portion of the brigade was detailed for fatigue duty and spent the night building abatis in their soaking wet clothes.³⁰

The picket lines were also busy that night, as first the northern army, covered by its skirmishers, worked itself back across the North Anna River. General Grant, concluding that Lee had stalemated him again, had initiated yet another strike around Lee's right flank. By daylight of May 27, both the rain and the Yankees had disappeared from the Army of Northern Virginia's view. Once again, Lee directed his troops to fall back southward, across another river

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(the Pamunkey this time) to a position from where they could effectively counter Grant's most likely moves. Benning's brigade took up its division's line of march around 9 AM, heading south along the Telegraph Road (US Rte 1) for fifteen miles before going into camp on a farm road six or seven miles north of Ashland. The troops were roused early the next day to resume the march. The Confederate I and II Corps were both assigned to use the same road at the same time, and the resulting traffic jam led to Benning's men marching cross country towards Old Church. The day's march came to a close on high ground along Shady Grove Road (modern day names are Pole Green or Meadowbridge or Newmans Road, depending on exact location), between Pole Green Church and Shady Grove Church. Battle smoke and occasional glimpses of combat could be seen two or three miles to the north, as dismounted cavalry from the two armies engaged in a brisk fight at Haw's Shop (also called Enon Church). Ultimately the brigade had traversed another twenty miles.³¹

The reengagement of the two armies on May 28 took place on opposite banks of the Totopotomoy Creek, which lent its name to the several days of fighting that took place there starting on the 28th. The creek, or small river, was itself not particularly deep or wide, and a number of fords offered easy crossing. But instead of obvious banks, rising from the creek, swamps blurred the line between the water and solid ground, stretching fifty to one hundred yards, in some places a quarter mile or more, from the center of the waterway. Swamp gave way inland to rises in the ground, ridges running east to west on both the northern and southern banks of the stream, ridges along which both armies deployed and faced each other, ten to twelve miles northeast of Richmond. The 28th of May was clear and cool. Field's front, running west from the Pole Green Church Road, remained quiet, except for the ever present, scattered skirmish fire, and Benning's Georgians were able to get some quality rest and recover from their march. The 29th was also unusually cool, and Field's division moved a bit to the north and deployed above the swampy marshland that bordered the southern bank of the creek. Field's line started around Pole Green Church Road (modern Rural Point Road) and ran west for half a mile or so. Orders to move were received that night, but were cancelled as the brigade was forming.³²

The next day, May 30, the federal V Corps launched an attack on Early's II Corps, holding the Confederate right flank. Early in turn counterpunched at the federal left, now across the creek and somewhat exposed. Pickett's division was sent to Early's support in the morning, followed by Field's, with a member of the 20th Georgia marking noon as the time he started quick timing to the right. Benning's brigade arrived near the scene of the fighting late in the

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afternoon, stood under fire for an hour – owing to the approach of darkness and the rapidity with which the northern troops had dug in, their attack was cancelled – and, after dark, marched back to their old lines. Once back, the pickets had a very busy night; a northern soldier in the US IX Corps, posted opposite Field's men, recalled "The pickets seemed only a few feet in front of us and were firing away like mad." The Yankees got even the next day; May 31 was excessively hot, and the northerners made it hotter with near continuous skirmishing. Around 11 AM a hot little fight erupted on Benning's front. The southern pickets were driven into the main line, and before order could be restored, the 20th Georgia lost five men wounded and one captured, with similar losses in the other three regiments. That night the brigade shifted right a mile and a half, relative to the line, the same distance south and east, geographically.³³

The oppressive heat of May 31 continued overnight. June 1 opened hot and oppressive, only to get muggier and buggier as the day wore on. General Anderson was ordered to move the I Corps east to secure the vital road crossing at Cold Harbor, which otherwise could provide the enemy access to the southern army's right flank and rear. Grant, stalemated along the Totopotomoy Creek line, had already started his own flanking column towards Cold Harbor, in yet another thrust to his left. Kershaw's division led the Confederate I Corps' march, followed by Pickett's division, then Field's. Field's division, and Benning's brigade, began the day's march in mid morning, from along Old Church Road, a mile west of Bethesda Church. They followed the Confederate line of works, moving behind Early's II Corps, until around noon. From here, they marched south a few more miles, finally deploying on "Johnson's farm" south of Walnut Grove Road. (The general vicinity is the housing development southeast of the intersection of modern day Va 156 and Creighton Road). Northern observers who watched the movement of the Confederate I Corps recalled rebel flankers passed directly in front of their skirmishers; at some point during the day, the opposing sides got close enough to each other that a portion of the 15th Georgia mixed it up with their blue coated counterparts, driving them back.³⁴

Anderson's assigned objective, securing the Cold Harbor crossroads, was not met. Union cavalymen got there first, and easily repulsed a clumsy attack by one of Kershaw's brigades that was intended to dislodge them. Union infantry was close at hand, so Kershaw dug in west of Cold Harbor, roughly 2 miles southeast of Benning's position (and in the northern portion of the Cold Harbor unit of Richmond National Park). Additional Confederate units filled in a solid line running from the Chickahominy River (south of Kershaw) to north of the II Corps (north of Field). In the late afternoon Benning's men heard the sound of heavy firing to their south. An

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attack by Union infantry temporarily ruptured the Confederate line, but re-enforcements were able to seal the resulting gap. Most of these re-enforcements came from Field's division, though Benning's and Jenkins' maintained the division's front. During the night and into the wee hours of the morning, Field's other three brigades were moved south to the threatened sector. Benning's brigade was left with Bratton's South Carolina brigade to redeployed in a wispy line north of Walnut Grove Road (the section of Modern Va 156 between Creighton Road on the west and Mechanicsville Turnpike on east). One man recalled the line as earthworks in the middle of a wheatfield, with enemy skirmishers in woods 500 yards away.³⁵

Benning's brigade executed this redeployment shortly before daybreak, but other than being in a new position, the men noticed little difference from the previous day. It was still brutally hot, and heavy skirmishing continued all along the lines. A heavy late afternoon thunderstorm briefly slowed the exchange of lead, but sounds of heavy combat resumed as the Confederate II Corps, just north of Benning's men, attacked and forced back the northern army's right flank. Still later, Union artillery could be heard as they unleashed a furious cannonade to the south. The Georgians were stretched extremely thin, to the point that they would be dependant upon supporting artillery if they were heavily attacked. They were not disappointed when none came.³⁶

Heavy rains started after dark, and filled many of the trenches with water. Another downpour hit just before dawn, creating a dense, low hanging fog that limited visibility to a few yards. The anticipated battle began early in the day against this backdrop, with heavy attacks launched against Kershaw's, Breckenridge's, and Hoke's divisions, anywhere from half a mile to two miles south of where Benning's brigade manned its share of line. These assaults were handily and bloodily repulsed by the defenders, and constitute what is generally considered to be the main battle of Cold Harbor. Benning's brigade, posted generally north of Creighton Road, on land that today is north of the National Park Unit and mostly developed, was attacked lightly by Cutler's division of the Army of the Potomac's V Corps. Cutler's men drove the brigade's skirmishers into the main line, but were stretched too thinly themselves to push the attack any further. Skirmishing filled the remainder of the day.³⁷

Following the repulse of the massive federal attack on June 3, activity gradually tapered off. Heavy skirmishing continued along Field's front through June 4th, but was barely noticeable on the 5th. The brigade awoke on June 6 to find organized groups of the enemy gone from it's immediate front. Skirmishers from the brigade swept forward and captured around seventy-five enemy stragglers before locating the Federals' new lines, half a mile or more back from the

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previous one. An armistice was arranged for June 8 to allow the northerners to bury their dead, strewn along the Confederate lines, after which the northerners withdrew again. On the 9th of June, the units shuffled around a bit as General Early's II Corps, holding the southern army's left flank, was pulled out of line. Benning's men ultimately found themselves on the division's left, near a connection with Pickett's division. Union cavalry surprised the brigade's outposts on June 11th, driving the Georgia skirmishers all the way back to their main trench line before they were stopped. Prisoners taken in this little scuffle spoke of infantry, in the form of United States Colored Troops, in the vicinity, but no engagement with them was in the offing.³⁸

On June 12th, there was preaching in the brigade's camps at 11 AM and 3 PM. After all of the fighting, the morning's text was appropriately Jeremiah 10:23, "O LORD, I know that the way of man is not in himself: it is not in man that walketh to direct his steps" The steps the brigade had taken since the campaign opened had been costly ones. The brigade numbered 320 men less than it did when it formed line of battle in Widow Tapp's field the morning of May 5, just over a month previous. The 2nd Georgia had suffered 19 killed, 45 wounded, and 2 captured; the 15th Georgia, 21 dead, 46 wounded, 6 captured; the 17th Georgia, 19 dead, 65 wounded, 2 captured; and the 20th Georgia, 20 dead, 71 wounded, and 4 captured. Though the *Savannah Republic's* "Tout le Monde", of the 2nd Georgia, wrote that Grant's army had "been badly [roughly] handled...[and] need rest and an opportunity to recuperate", the campaign showed no signs of ending. The same correspondent blamed Grant's "dogged perseverance and hardheaded will" and "courage to venture [risks]...if there is the slightest prospect of success, and cautious enough to guard well against exposure."³⁹

The arrival of dawn on June 13 brought with it another surprise for the Army of Northern Virginia. The Northern armies had, again, disappeared from its front during the night. Unbeknownst to the southerners, General Grant decided to break the stalemate at Cold Harbor with a lunge towards Petersburg, hoping to cut Richmond and Lee's army off from the rest of the southern states and the supplies they provided. To this end, Grant ordered a pontoon bridge laid across the James River. During the night of June 12, he disengaged most of his troops and sent them first across the lower Chickahominy, then over the bridge across the James. General Lee made his best guess as to Grant's intentions, namely that Grant was attempting to turn his right again, to get at Richmond. To detect and deflect this perceived northern move, he ordered the I Corps – the far left portion of his army, furthest from the perceived threat – to block the eastern approach to Richmond. Benning's brigade, with the

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balance of Field's division and the I Corps, crossed the Chickahominy at Grapevine Bridge and, by midafternoon, were resting at Dr Trent's Farm, ground familiar to them from the spring and summer of 1862. The march resumed down the Charles City Road to Frasier's Farm, where the entire corps bivouacked. One of Benning's veterans noted that their camp was near where they camped on July 30, 1862.⁴⁰

The men were able to rest for most of June 14, as army headquarters struggled to positively locate Grant's army. By the end of the day Lee was fairly certain Grant was moving south of the James River. June 15th started slowly enough for the brigade, with preaching in the camp of the 15th Georgia, based on James 1:25, "But the one who peers into the perfect law of freedom and perseveres, and is not a hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, such a one shall be blessed in what he does." Marching orders soon arrived, and by early afternoon the brigade had passed eerily familiar rallying points below the crest of Malvern Hill. The day's march continued to New Market Heights, where at least some of the brigade's officers expected a fight. There are no extant complaints that this expectation was not met, and the brigade set up camp. Camps were broken, and the troops back on the march, by 4 AM, June 16th. Grant had stolen a march on Lee, and the bulk of the Union army was in front of Petersburg, while most of Lee's was still a day's march away. The men shuffling along in the darkness only knew it was awful early, and that they probably had a long day of it ahead of them.⁴¹

The route of the march led to the River Road, just north of and parallel to the James River, which they followed west to a pontoon bridge across the James at Drewry's Bluff. From here, they marched another six or seven miles south to Chesterfield Station, for a total distance of around fourteen miles that day. The end of the march did not herald the end of their day – there were reports of Yankees ahead. Chesterfield Station lay towards the north end of the Howlett Line, a Confederate line of defensive fortifications, intended to bottle up a Union base located at Bermuda Hundred. The fortifications were strong, but their defenders had been stripped away and sent to defend Petersburg against the vanguard of Grant's armies. In the absence of these defenders, the Union troops at Bermuda Hundred had ventured forth and now threatened to cut the road the Army of Northern Virginia needed to use to march to Petersburg. These were the northerners Benning's men heard of, and they needed to be swept back into Bermuda Hundred and out of the southerners' way.⁴²

Fortunately for the Confederate cause, these Northern troops were commanded by one of the least competent generals the war produced, Ben Butler of Massachusetts. Also fortunate for the southerners, half of Butler's force was participating in the attack on Petersburg, led by Butler's most competent subordinate, General William "Baldy" Smith. Federal troops had ventured into the Confederate works comprising the Howlett Line, and would indeed be encountered, but they, or at least their leaders, were not prepared for a meeting with aggressive Confederate troops. The afternoon of June 16th, Benning's men, and the rest of Field's division, deployed into line and advanced. The first line of works they encountered was completely abandoned, at least on the brigade's front, but once it was occupied, the advance temporarily stopped. Half an hour later, Benning's men advanced 200 to 300 yards farther and secured a second line of works against token opposition from enemy skirmishers. They remained there on high alert all night, every man ready to make or defend against an assault. As it worked out, there was no additional fighting that night, but the men were greatly fatigued all the same.⁴³

Skirmishing erupted with the rising of the sun on June 17, and continued into the late afternoon when Field's and Pickett's divisions attacked all along the line. Colonel DuBose led the 15th and 20th Georgia Infantry Regiments forward, and the northern skirmishers in their front broke off their daylong efforts, abandoning the works to them, and enemy fled in "considerable rout". Union artillery then opened on the Georgians, as if warning them to go no further. As darkness fell and put an end to the day's events, the 2nd and 17th Georgia Infantries joined the 15th and 20th in the works. Heads were counted, and surprisingly, there were no casualties in the 20th to report and few, if any within the brigade. The story was similar for all of Field's and Pickett's men, the Howlett Line was retaken, and the road to Petersburg cleared.⁴⁴

The men had no time to savor this relatively easy victory. Kershaw's I Corps division hit the road for Petersburg around 3 AM, followed by Field's Division an hour or so later. Between sunset and the start of their march, Pickett's division assumed control over the whole of the Howlett Line, relieving Field's men from their posts and allowing them to form column and march off. This exercise likely occupied Benning's men for an hour or two in the middle of the night, ruining any chance for meaningful rest, which was sorely needed after maintaining an alert vigil all of the previous night. The men had to march at least seven miles along a wagon road to get to Petersburg, but were in the city by mid morning, and

“marched through the streets with shouts and huzzahs, while banners and handkerchiefs waved from every side to welcome them”. Despite being in the middle of their third day of near constant marching and skirmishing, powered by only a few hours’ rest, the men were lucid enough to pay special notice of the ladies of Petersburg, out and about and clearly excited by the arrival of additional southern soldiers. The brigade rested in town for an hour before moving to defensive lines southwest of town. A few hours later, they were relieved by men of A. P. Hill’s III Corps, which had followed Field’s division into town. The brigade was then ordered to a position supporting the rest of Field’s division, on the eastern side of Petersburg. The supporting position was in an open field; after ten minutes exposure to enemy fire, the brigade advanced to within 20 feet of the main line. This gave the men the benefit of the cover provided by the line, while obeying orders to maintain a “supporting” position. Several men were hit before the brigade sheltered itself.⁴⁵

Skirmish fire and sharpshooting continued to be exchanged between the armies, finally ending with darkness of night. After a few relatively quiet hours, which the Georgians used to improve their defenses, hostile fire resumed at dawn on the 19th, and continued until dark, when the firing slowly sputtered out. A heavy fog developed overnight; its’ presence delayed the now familiar resumption of sharpshooting until 6 AM on the 20th. That night some of the men in the 20th Georgia got their hands on some cannon fuse, which they found resembled fireworks when fired out of their rifles. Boys will be boys, whatever their circumstances. June 21st brought more of the same skirmishing, wounded, and dead, but the evening finally brought relief for some of the men, as the 17th and 20th Georgia were pulled out of line, sent to the rear among the supply wagons, and given a full day of rest. They returned to the front the evening of the 22nd, allowing the 2nd and 15th regiments their turn at a day off of the front lines. While the men of the 20th had been absent from the trenches for only twenty four hours, one of its members reacted to his reacquaintance with the intense sharpshooting with the comment, “[we] couldn’t put our heads above the ground”. These were long, hot dry days, exposed to the sun but stuck in trenches below any breezes, and nothing to do besides taking potshots at entrenched bluecoats and trying to keep low.⁴⁶

Preparations were made by army headquarters for an attack on the Federal troops on June 24th. Hoke’s division, posted between the Appomattox River to its north and Field’s division to its south, was to be the strike force. Field’s men were to support the main attack. To effect their part, Field’s division was to be relieved from the front line during the night of the 23rd, and move

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a bit north to get behind Hoke's division, where it would be in position to support the morning attack well before any activity got rolling. Those portions of Field's division manning the front line – as example, the 2nd and 15th were resting on the 23rd – were not able to clear their trenches until dawn the next morning, and were barely settled into position when the Confederate artillery barrage opened around 7 AM. Then Hoke's infantry started forward, Johnston Hagood's brigade at least, which was posted adjacent to the river. Hoke's other three brigades failed to join the attack, leading to comments by Confederate I Corps staffers that the attack was a "fiasco" that was "not continued". Benning's men observed the attack, and Colonel DuBose led them forward towards Hagood's trenches, which they reached as Hagood was being repulsed. There being no reason to push an attack, the Georgians didn't even attempt to move further forward than Hagood's works. Advancing behind the main attack was pretty tame, as Civil War combat went, but even it could also be treacherous. John Bowden of the 2nd Georgia had a premonition of death the morning of June 24th. During the advance, he stopped at a fence line and immediately made an emergency breastwork out of his hard tack laden haversack, placing his canteen on top of it for good measure. No sooner had he done this than a minie ball blew apart his canteen, exploded through his hardtack, and buried itself in the ground, within easy reach of his fingers. Another close call for another lucky soldier.⁴⁷

Field's division was to have followed Hoke's attack with one of their own, had Hoke's succeeded. This not being the case, Field's attack was cancelled. Leaving Benning's brigade where it was, occupying what had been Hagood's Brigade's sector between the Appomattox River and the City Point Road, Field took the rest of his division to a reserve position. Benning's brigade spent the 25th of June making abatis and generally improving the defenses of the sector of line they now held. It was oppressively hot, and at least one man was lost to sunstroke. An unnamed member of the 20th Georgia picked this time to desert, was taken in by Union skirmishers, and on the 26th accurately laid out the disposition of Confederate troops to his captors. His former comrades in the 20th spent that day making "portholes" in their works to combat enemy sharpshooters. That same night the brigade was relieved at 8 PM and marched to a rest camp on the outskirts of Petersburg.⁴⁸

In the absence of General Longstreet, wounded in the fighting in the Wilderness, the staff officers of the Confederate I Corps maintained a campaign diary. The entry for June 27, 1864 was pretty simple – "Some mortar-firing." Veterans would remember the mortars for years, and not in the flippant manner mentioned above. They remembered watching the shells spin as they

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approached, and fragments showering in all directions when they blew. One afternoon outside Petersburg, it may have been this one, Private Bowden and a group of men from the 2nd Georgia were watching a mortar shell approach, wondering if it would strike their location. As the other men scattered, Bowden concluded the shell would pass overhead. Instead, the shell exploded when it was fifteen feet above his head. The concussion blew Bowden face down into the bottom of the trench. A piece of shell the size of a fist brushed his ear and buried itself a foot into the ground. His companions approached, fully expecting to scrape him up and bury him. One was even heard to say, "It got Bowden that time". They were surprised to see Bowden work himself upright, unhurt save for being knocked temporarily unconscious. So passed the days around Petersburg, when the shapshooting slackened enough for the men to move.⁴⁹

Night time in the trenches was developing its own new pattern. The brigade was relieved from its temporary posting just south of the James River the evening of June 26, then rested for two days before resuming a post on a portion of the division's line on June 28, relieving another brigade. This time, the maneuver that took all night to accomplish. The 20th Georgia, and maybe the other units, passed the evening of the 29th in relative quiet, recovering a bit from the lack of sleep the night before. They made up for the break the following night, when fatigue parties – 17 men served that night as pickets, the balance of the 20th as laborers - dug a covered way to the rear. Private Joseph Fuller, 20th Georgia, noted in his diary, "There was considerable grumbling among the men". The night of July 1 brought additional heavy fatigue details, and the night of July 3, the men assisted in the construction of supports for a mortar battery behind their lines. One must also remember that these construction details imposed "double shifts" on the men, who were occupied with sniping with the enemy during the day.⁵⁰

The troops on Benning's front lines expected July 4, 1864 to be accompanied by a storm of fireworks - directed at them. Instead, it turned out to be a surprisingly quiet day. At sunset the enemy bands struck up Yankee Doodle and the National Anthem, both of which elicited thunderous cheers from the Northern troops. Next morning at sunrise, a Georgian identified only as "a good soldier named Tom", was a few steps behind the works, having coffee. He was suddenly and randomly sniped by an enemy sharpshooter, and quietly sank to the ground, dead. That evening the exhausted brigade was relieved from the front, having been there seven days without relief and, several of those nights, without sleep. The brigade trudged half a mile to the rear to a rest camp, and Tom's friends buried him. The following day many of the men took the opportunity to wash – it had been at least a week since any had had such an opportunity, let alone exercised it – then drew two months pay. The summer had been very dry, and newspaper

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correspondent Peter Wellington Alexander counted only one or two showers since leaving Spotsylvania. This drought contributed to an overabundance of dust. Everything - men, roads, horses, cornfields, wagons, forests - was dusty. Alexander continued, “we breath it; we sleep in it; we eat and move in it”. “Tout le Monde” also complained that the last rain had fallen on him on June 3, and “with the eternal and ubiquitous dust, the beaming, sultry sun, the doleful sight of parched and wilted vegetation, one feels like inviting the somnolancy of Rip Van Winkle”. Washing must have been quite a relief. On July 7, relief of another sort arrived when the camp was visited by women, loaded with cakes, stews, and other foods for the troops. Soon after the women departed, a staff officer came for his own visit; instead of food, he brought orders for the brigade to return to the trenches.⁵¹

July 8th, the first day back in the trenches, was especially hot. One of General Field’s staff officers, Richard Corbin, recorded the temperature as 98 degrees in the shade at division HQ. Corbin continued his commentary, “when my duties take me down to the trenches I generally come to the conclusion that this is a mild temperature...this heat, [is] rendered still more disagreeable by the total stagnation of air behind our breastworks.” A staff officer at Corps headquarters recorded that on this hot day “We make in the afternoon something of a Chinese demonstration in the way of shooting and artillery firing to ascertain the enemy's strength”, to sate General Lee’s appetite for information. A member of the 20th Georgia remembered that around “5 o’clock there was considerable excitement on our line – heavy cannonading musketry & cheers – the object of this we can’t imagine”, though he and his fellows kept busy with their sharpshooting. This episode was followed by work details throughout the nights of July 9th and 10 – among the improvements made to the lines, brush was placed atop the works to provide an element of camouflage – and sharpshooting during the days, until the brigade was relieved from the trenches on the evening of July 11th.⁵²

The men passed the 12th resting in relative quiet, though on the 13th an unusual amount of incoming artillery disrupted the mens’ rest. A cache of clothing had been left in Petersburg the previous year, probably as the men hurried north from Suffolk, eventually on to Gettysburg; it was recovered and distributed to the men on the 13th. Orders to return to the ditches were also received, again around 4 PM, although cooking details set up in the rear of the lines. This would prove to be another typical stint in the trenches; on the 14th, men received “great news” of General Early, then leading the army’s II Corps on a raid in Maryland, and 8 miles from Baltimore. No noteworthy events took place along the brigade’s lines, but life and death

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continued as it typically did in the trenches. On the 15th, James M. Hukins, Company G, 17th Georgia, was killed; on the 17th, Captain A. M. Jones, 17th Georgia, and a private from the 2nd Georgia, passed each other as they moved along the trenches. Each raised his head a bit too high, and a single bullet from an enemy sharpshooter brained both of them. The brigade was relieved July 18th by Jenkins' South Carolina Brigade. The time off was somewhat washed out by a rainy deluge, most of July 19th – the first rain that had fallen on the armies in seven weeks.⁵³

Captain Herman H. Perry, Benning's brigade adjutant, described his unit's experiences at Petersburg as "the duties here are simply to occupy the trenches from day to day being relieved for two days every six days that a brigade remains in". It was back to the trenches, back to the all night fatigue parties, back to the all day sharpshooting from July 20th to July 24th, when the brigade was relieved "after waiting an unreasonable time". The stress was showing. On the evening of July 27th, the brigade shuttled back into the lines, but was pleasantly surprised to be relieved the following evening by troops from Bushrod Johnson's division. Since leaving Cold Harbor on June 13th, the brigade had suffered 58 casualties. The 2nd Georgia lost 3 men killed, 2 wounded; the 15th, 5 killed, 14 wounded; the 17th, 7 killed, 5 wounded; and the 20th, 16 killed, 5 wounded, and one missing. Except for possibly a few casualties taken while recovering the Howlett Line, all of these men fell on the Petersburg lines, east of the city. A small portion of the lines the brigade served in are preserved within the modern boundaries of Petersburg National Battlefield Park.⁵⁴

Document History: Initial Draft, March 12, 2004

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