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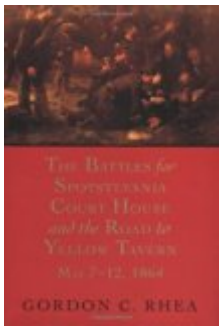
Gordon C. Rhea. *The Battles for Spotsylvania Courthouse and the Road to Yellow Tavern, May 7-12, 1864.* Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997. xii + 483 pp. $34.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8071-2136-8.



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In this work, Gordon Rhea has set out with high expectations to provide the most comprehensive account of six important days in Civil War Virginia. He begins this account where he left off in his critically acclaimed work *The Battle of the Wilderness, May 5-6, 1864* (1994). This volume, however, is not simply a follow-up to the first book. It stands on its own and compares quite favorably to William D. Matter's *If It Takes All Summer: The Battle of Spotsylvania* (1988), which renewed interest in this important engagement between the Army of the Potomac and the Army of Northern Virginia.

Rhea approaches the battle within the analytical framework of the great clash of generalship between Ulysses S. Grant and Robert E. Lee. He asserts that the battle of the Wilderness introduced the two generals to each other in the bloodiest of fashions, but the battle of Spotsylvania proved to be even more informative about how the two men approached war and how war was to be fought from that point forward. "Lee's and Grant's intricate and bloody dance from May 7 through May 12," writes Rhea, "left a permanent imprint on the face of warfare and constituted a watershed in the accommodation of military doctrine to technology" (p. 5). In the battle of the Wilderness, Lee's troops had learned the value of digging and building earthworks, but Grant's men had also learned how to attack them.

As Rhea assesses each side coming out of the battle of the Wilderness, he points out that Grant recognized problems with his chain of command. Grant had tried to remain the grand strategist and allowed his field commanders to make tactical decisions. But Grant also knew that President Abraham Lincoln had placed him with Maj. General George Meade to make the Army of the Potomac more tenacious. The terrain of the Wilderness had exacerbated communications problems between the Union commanders, but after the battle of the Wilderness, claims Rhea, Grant "must have harbored serious doubts about his field commanders' ability to execute his plans" (p. 10). Lee, on the other hand, faced a different problem. His command structure was solid, but the Wilderness campaign had simply gutted his numbers, seriously hampering his ability to wage any sort of of-

fensive war. Such problems set the stage for both men as they entered the Spotsylvania campaign beginning on May 7th.

Grant decided that moving south toward Richmond would draw out the Confederates where they could be met on ground more favorable to the Federals. Rhea masterfully describes the level of exhaustion and confusion among both Federal and Confederate commanders as each tried to divine the movements and intentions of the other. May 7th was a day of poor planning and execution for the Federals and luck for the rebels. Rhea describes Grant's plan to evacuate the Wilderness as "workmanlike"--he sent cavalry south to clear the way to Spotsylvania Courthouse, while the infantry was to withdraw in a complicated, coordinated manner designed to "keep a stern face to the enemy." Rhea concludes, however, that the plan "failed miserably in execution" (p. 44). Grant gave little thought to the maneuver's logistics, and the units moved slowly in virtual traffic jams as they moved south. The cavalry also failed to clear away Confederate Maj. General J.E.B. Stuart's cavalry corps, which obstructed the path to Spotsylvania Courthouse. Rhea discounts postwar descriptions of Robert E. Lee's supposed clairvoyance in determining that Spotsylvania Courthouse was Grant's destination. From contemporary accounts, it becomes clear that Lee believed Fredericksburg to be the more likely Federal target. He did want to cover both bases, but saw no need for haste. He ordered Maj. General Robert Anderson's First Corps to Spotsylvania Courthouse, but stated that they could delay the move until 3 o'clock the next morning. The smoke and stench of the Wilderness battlefield, however, impelled Anderson to begin his march five hours early, fortuitously placing him in a footrace with Grant for Spotsylvania Courthouse and positions for the next day's confrontation.

By the morning of May 8, Union Maj. General Gouverneur K. Warren's V Corps encountered Confederate Maj. General Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry division west of Spotsylvania Courthouse at Laurel Hill. Union Maj. General James Wilson's cavalry division swept into Spotsylvania Courthouse from the east and threatened Lee from the rear. Rhea describes the surprise of Federal troops ordered to charge Laurel Hill when they discovered that Lee's cavalry was not alone. Anderson's corps had arrived to defend the hill and routed the Federals in their first attack. The rebels had won a footrace which they had clearly begun at the disadvantage. Rhea asserts that the blame for this mistake must fall to all levels of the Union command. Neither Grant nor Meade had given proper attention to logistics. Rhea concludes: "Grant had fumbled into the Wilderness. As he groped toward Spotsylvania, there was no sign that he had learned from his mistakes" (p. 59). Rhea, however, also gives credit to Stuart and Fitzhugh Lee for their delaying action and to Anderson for his quick response to Fitzhugh Lee's summons for help. The rest of the day was characterized by intense artillery duels, the arrival of a constant stream of exhausted Federal reinforcements directed by seemingly confused commanders, and the construction of increasingly formidable breastworks by the rebels. When the Federals did finally attack that evening, the assault failed.

As the Union and Confederate lines stretched east and west on May 9, the rebel lines on the right swung north to protect high ground and created an uneven curve for about a mile. The resulting salient would later be dubbed the Mule Shoe, and Lt. General Richard Ewell's Confederates felt uneasy about the position. May 9th brought another significant development. Union cavalry Maj. General Phil Sheridan began a sweeping move toward Richmond, and Stuart's rebel cavalry followed. Sheridan was determined to lure Stuart into open ground and crush the Confederate cavalry, but, as Rhea points out, this action deprived the Federals of valuable reconnaissance and intelligence about rebel movements. To make matters worse for the Federals, in the morning, Maj. General John Sedgwick died after being shot by a

rebel sharp- shooter. Grant, believing that Lee was reconcentrating his troops to the east, designed an aggressive assault plan against the Confederate left flank. Rhea argues that the plan failed because Lee was not moving to the east, and Grant had not made the "vigorous nature" of the assault plan clear to Meade, who "instead conducted timid operations at odds with the spirit of Grant's aggressive plan" (p. 121). For Lee, the day had many concerns--most notably the safety of his flanks. However, he met the assault on the left, and by nightfall he had secured them.

The morning of May 10th opened with Union Maj. General Winfield S. Hancock probing for openings across the Po river on Lee's left. Lee, however, had made preparations in the night for such a maneuver by sending Maj. General Henry Heth to flank Hancock. While Hancock's maneuvers took place, Warren opened with artillery against the Confederate middle and followed with weak a assault. When Grant realized that Lee was sending troops to meet Hancock, another opportunity opened up. Believing the Confederate troops had to be coming from the salient and from Laurel Hill, Grant decided to recall Hancock and have him attack Laurel Hill. He also realized, however, that Lee must not know of Hancock's movements, so he left one division along the Po. As the day wore on, Heth's division began enfilading the decoy Union division, under the command of Brig. General Francis Barlow, who only narrowly escaped being crushed completely. In addition, Warren ordered an ill-advised attack at 4 P.M., an hour before Grant's plan had dictated, and also before Hancock's divisions were in place. The result for Warren was utter devastation in the face of Confederate artillery. After removing Warren's dead and wounded from the field, the main assault across Lee's entire formation began at 7 P.M.

The assault, asserts Rhea, was an example of what was wrong with Grant's entire strategic concept. Grant believed in keeping Lee on the defensive by hurling heavy columns at the weakest point in the rebel line. But, as Rhea explains, Grant also left little time for preparation, and without the cavalry, thorough reconnaissance was impossible. In the failed assault, Union casualties equaled about 4,100 killed and wounded, making May 10 the bloodiest day since leaving the Wilderness. Rhea asserts that Lee "fought a splendid defensive battle" and that he provided "a textbook example of a smaller army deflecting a larger one" (p. 187). The lone bright spot for the Union was a brief break in rebel lines at the west end of the salient, executed by Col. Emory Upton's brigade. Grant learned from this minor success and formed a new plan that entailed using a entire corps to assault the tip of the salient.

In the meantime, the cavalry faced off south of Spotsylvania Courthouse on the way to Richmond. Sheridan commanded three divisions, compared to Stuart's three brigades. Stuart decided to divide his force and send Fitzhugh Lee's brigade toward Richmond, hoping for infantry support from troops guarding the capital. Stuart set up his lines on May 11th with Fitzhugh Lee positioned at a crossroads six miles north of Richmond near Yellow Tavern. At 9 A.M., he repulsed Sheridan's first assault. In the afternoon, however, Sheridan attacked with overwhelming success. The Confederate line fell to the Union cavalry's superior numbers. In the battle, Stuart received a mortal wound to the abdomen. Rhea asserts that "Yellow Tavern had been a crushing defeat for the Confederates," not only because their cavalry had been beaten, but because the now dead Stuart had represented "the rebellion's resilient spirit," and now he (p. 211). Nevertheless, Rhea also argues that Sheridan's raid was a "costly mistake" because it was merely a "sideshow" for the real campaign. Sheridan hurt Grant by depriving him of the vital reconnaissance he so desperately needed at Spotsylvania, "much the same way that Stuart's absence from Gettysburg had handicapped Lee" (p. 212). Farther north, Grant spent the rest of the day deploying his troops and making preparation for a full assault on the Confederate salient at sunrise

the next morning. He ordered Maj. General Ambrose Burnside's corps to prepare to attack from the eastern side of the salient while Hancock's corps struck the middle. Lee spent the day trying to determine whether the Federals were retreating to Fredericksburg or preparing an assault. The suspense ended at 4:35 A.M.

The Federal assault, benefited by fog, was a success. The eastern angle of the salient fell early in the morning on May 12, giving a half-mile stretch of the Confederate line to the Federals. Rhea provides a lively description of the action and builds the drama of the battle to a crescendo. After the Federals captured the salient, contends Rhea, Lee's only option was to seal the gap before Grant could press the opportunity. The "contest of wills" between the two commanders, asserts Rhea, "was building to a climax of heroic proportions" (p. 246). Confederate Brig. General James B. Gordon provided the saving action for Lee's rebels. His division pushed back against the salient's eastern leg and regained the position. By 6 A.M., Grant's assault had stalled, but he still had two corps in reserve poised to continue against the weary rebels. Wright's VI Corps began the second wave of Grant's assault.

The western bend in the salient became the disputed area, and Lee moved more troops there to meet Grant's threat. Rhea describes in vivid detail the deadly combat at the "Bloody Angle." By 10:30 A.M., the armies had clearly reached an impasse. Grant, Rhea contends, fell back to a familiar strategic pattern. Desperate to gain the advantage, and reasoning that Lee had weakened his flanks to reinforce the salient, Grant ordered Warren to attack Laurel Hill. Rhea makes a convincing argument that Warren has been unfairly criticized for his slowness in assaulting Laurel Hill on May 12. Rhea concludes that Warren had accurately assessed the strong Rebel position, and that when he finally bowed to the pressure from Meade and Grant, the resulting attack "ended in slaughter, just as Warren had predicted" (p. 288). As it turned out, Grant's assumption that Lee had weakened Laurel Hill was wrong.

The blood-letting at Laurel Hill was still not the most gruesome part of the battle. By late morning, Lee had decided to abandon the salient, but he needed time to prepare earthworks. Grant continued to concentrate his fire and men against the Bloody Angle. Rhea contends that the carnage at "the Bloody Lane at Antietam, the stone wall at Fredericksburg, and the Wheat field at Gettysburg" all paled in comparison to the Bloody Angle at Spotsylvania (p. 291). Things only got worse by early afternoon, when both Lee and Grant, coincidentally, chose to launch renewed attacks on the eastern side of the salient. The result "was a confused and bloody muddle completely in keeping with the day's fighting" (p. 294). When Grant realized his attacks against Lee's flanks had failed, he decided to once again push against the Bloody Angle. The fighting remained constant until evening, when Grant called off another assault. The Confederates finally withdrew from the salient around three o'clock the next morning.

In the end, May 12th had cost the Federals about 9,000 soldiers and the Confederates about 8,000. In Rhea's judgment, Grant's strategy had vision, but both the conception and execution of his tactics "left much to be desired" (p. 313). Rhea argues that Grant's impulsiveness was his weakness. Even though Grant correctly assessed that the salient was Lee's weak point, he ordered assaults against the position with little preparation for the troops. Grant also failed because he did not send fresh troops into the breach when his forces first captured the salient. But overriding all of these failures, argues Rhea, was Grant's misjudgment in allowing Sheridan to leave with the cavalry, thus depriving himself of his "eyes and ears." Regarding the competition of generalship between Grant and Lee, Rhea squarely asserts that Lee won the day. Lee had commanded a solid defense against Grant's superior force. Lee also had better communications with his subordinates than did

Grant. Lee did take chances with the integrity of his defensive line when he removed troops at key times to amass a force against the Federals. Rhea excuses these decisions, however, claiming that they were just part of Lee's "firm determination to seize the initiative" and that Lee accepted the responsibility for the possible consequences of these actions (p. 321).

In the end, there was no clear victor at Spotsylvania Courthouse. The rebels had blocked the Federals, but they had paid a terrible price in men to do so. The result for the Confederates was that they no longer had the resources to go on the offensive, thus guaranteeing that a defensive strategy would be their only option in the future. For Grant, he had failed to defeat Lee, but he took the longer view that these defeats were merely tactical setbacks. He had weakened Lee and knew that he could continue on to ultimate victory.

This book is characterized by lively writing and detailed research. Rhea is masterful in his use of diaries and letters to describe the thoughts and actions of the common soldiers, while never losing sight of the larger strategic and tactical picture. He has included a thirty-page bibliography--a gold mine for those researching the campaign. The Order of Battle appears in the appendix, and thirty detailed maps by George Skoch add tremendously to the understanding of maneuvers and decisions made in the conflict. Gordon C. Rhea set out with high ambitions. He wanted to tell the story of this complex battle as a classic clash of generals, and he pulls it off in convincing style.

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