Central Virginia Battlefields Trust

P.O. Box 3417
Fredericksburg, VA 22402
540-374-0900
www.CVBT.org

You Are Part of the Future for Battlefield Preservation in Central Virginia

2020 HAS BEEN A CHALLENGING YEAR. Through it all, CVBT has found ways to innovate, communicate and continue pursuing the mission: saving hallowed ground.

Looking ahead at the new year, there will be new chances to save and interpret battlefield land and learn about Civil War history. Just as we're re-imagining the Wilderness in this edition of *On The Front Line*, events and opportunities can be adapted to keep the mission focus.

A social-distanced, out-door conference is on the schedule for April 16–18, 2021, and you're invited to come out and celebrate CVBT's 25th anniversary. (More details included with the magazine and always on our website **www.cvbt.org**.)

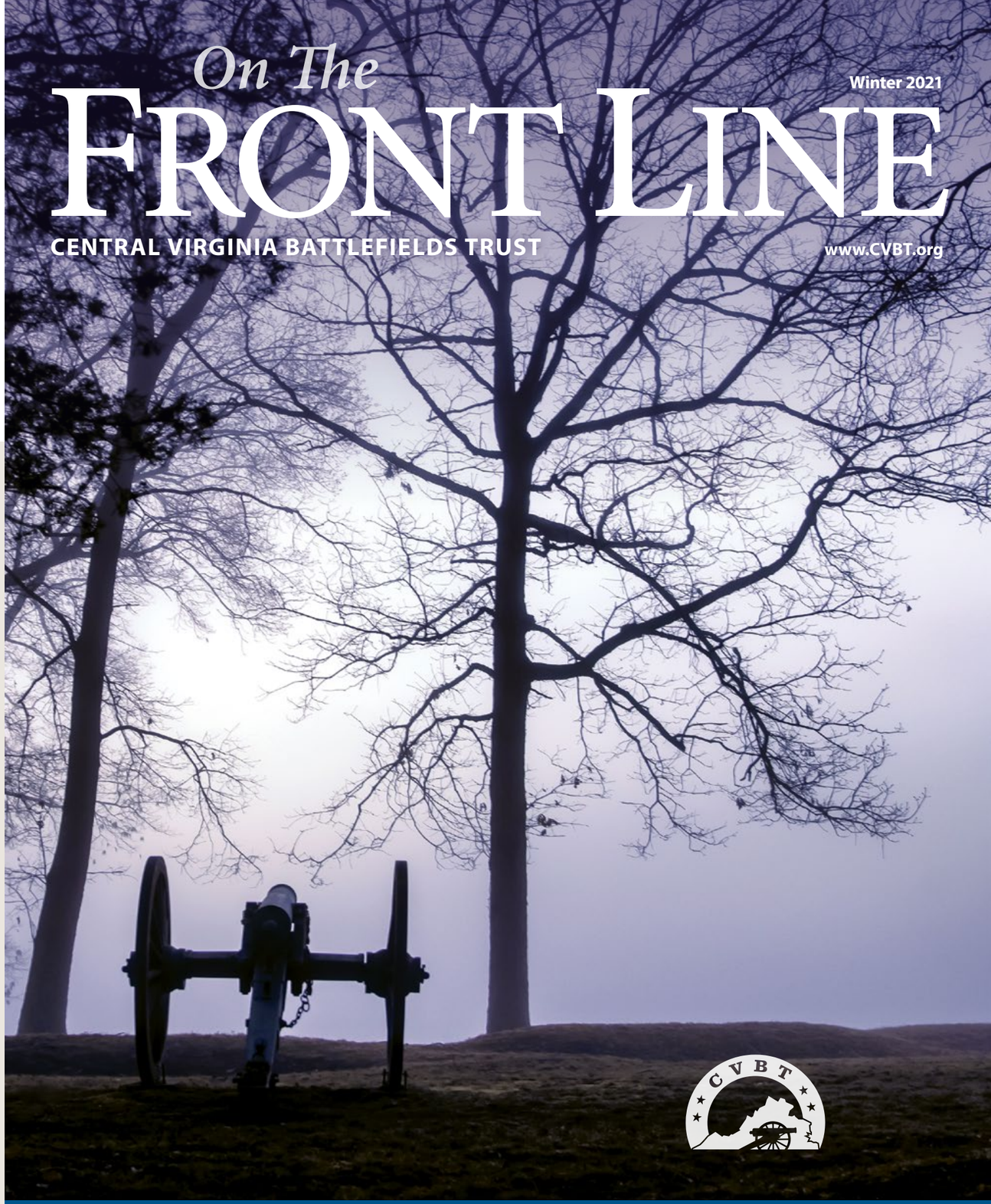
It may have felt like marching through a "close, dark wood" in these past months, but let's take courage, keep focus, stay informed and get ready to charge ahead into the new future that awaits!

Keep up with CVBT's news through twice-per-month emails that include preservation announcements, history notes and more. **bit.ly/CVBTNewsletter**

On The
FRONT LINE
CENTRAL VIRGINIA BATTLEFIELDS TRUST

Winter 2021

www.CVBT.org



An Unintended Battle, Turning Point & Preservation Challenge ... Re-imagined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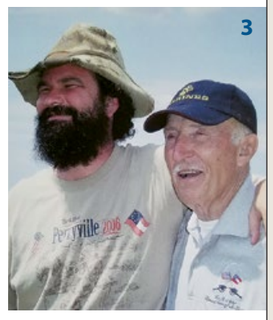
President Harding (far left) seemed excited to arrive at Marine Headquarters on October 1, 1921, to observe military maneuvers.
Library of Congress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This photo shows ruins of the Wilderness Tavern and overlooks the Wilderness Crossroads land that has been preserved.
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Central Virginia Battlefields Trust

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CVBT: On The Front Line
Executive Editor, Thomas Van Winkle
Editor, Sarah Kay Bierle
Creative Direction, Communication Design, Inc.
Editorial Board:
Peter R. Kolakowski
Chris Mackowski
Thomas Van Winkle

Cover Photo:
The Wilderness
Photograph by Buddy Secor. Used with permission.

Dispatch from the President

It is hard to believe that the holidays are already upon us. Where did summer go, did we have one? I did get some time on the battlefields, though it was minimal at best, and I saw a lot more of the four walls of my work-from-home office. I hope you were able to get out, relax and explore some historic sites during the summer and autumn.

We at CVBT have been quite busy working on preservation projects and continuing to negotiate them. Thanks in a large part to you, our Partners, we were also able to announce the mortgage has concluded on the 73 acres of Myer's Hill on the Spotsylvania Court House Battlefield. We were awarded two grants from the American Battlefield Preservation Program and another from the Virginia Battlefields Preservation Fund. It is important to understand that the announcements from these entities does not mean CVBT has received their checks. This process of awarding the funds takes months, and CVBT continues to pay the mortgages until those funds are received.

This time of year always makes me reflect on the holidays, both past and present. I am not sure what they will look like this year, but I hope we all can manage quality time with our family and friends. We may have some roadblocks before us when it comes to physically getting together, but we still have that choice, unlike the soldiers enduring the Civil War. One Thanksgiving, an Illinois infantryman described his holiday meal in a letter home: "hard bread" and salt pork. He added that "during the day I thought of you at home having your nice dinners." Lewis Crater of the 50th Pennsylvania logged in his diary that the Sanitary Commission "issued three fine apples to every man."

The Christmas holiday fared no better for the men in blue and gray. "You have no idea how lonesome I feel this day. It's the first time in my life I'm away from loved ones at home," wrote James Holloway, composing from Dranesville, Virginia, to his family. Johnny Green, of the 4th Kentucky's Orphan Brigade, expressed this sentiment, "Peace on Earth, Good will to men should prevail. We certainly would preserve the peace if they would go home and let us alone."


Tom Van Winkle

No matter what we may experience this year, the soldiers of wars past and present longing for home and family must be present in our minds. Yes, we all have that one uncle — and I fit this category — who shows up and imprints himself on the memory of that gathering. Yet, we have that opportunity to be together.

Preserving Civil War battlefields is CVBT's mission, and with that comes the responsibility of telling the stories of the men and women who fought and served on those fields. With more than 1,350 acres saved to date, we are poised to continue that effort, to do more and convey more history.

Without understanding where our country has been and how we came to be, we will repeat the errors of our past and not learn. As I have said many times before, our history is not always pretty, but it is important. Erasing or rewriting this nation's history will serve no one. Taking the time to learn and understand it, this is the path to a better future.

To all our CVBT Partners in Preservation, have a safe, happy and joyful holiday season. And as always, thank you for your support!

Tom Van Winkle
President, Central Virginia Battlefields Trust

Executive Director Letter

As 2020 comes to a close, I've been thinking about all that has transpired this year. It was my first winter outside of Alaska since 2007, and it was strange to not deal with snow or any real, bitter cold. The winter climate here in central Virginia makes spending time on the battlefields much more pleasant.

Terry Rensel

The pandemic hit and threw a monkey wrench into our world. Sarah (CVBT's Assistant to the Executive Director) and I began working from home in late March, and the annual conference in April had to be canceled. Thankfully, we were able to keep the wheels turning remotely and continue moving forward with the work of preserving battlefields. I returned to the office on a full-time basis in August. Through all the challenges, we have been encouraged and sincerely grateful for your support, kind notes and gracious understanding.

Being adaptable is probably the lesson of 2020. We did our first-ever Virtual Gala in August with our Red Badge of Courage event, and through the continuing generosity of you, our Partners, as well as a successful application to the American Battlefield Protection Program (ABPP), we've successfully saved the 73-acre tract at Myer's Hill. I'd also like to thank Michael Clarke and the Liberty Rifles for holding a benefit event for CVBT and Myer's Hill in July.

With social distancing most of this year, I was able to do in-depth reading and learning about our battlefields and what took place upon them. Having battleground land here in the local community offers the opportunity to get out for exercise and leaves me with a better understanding of what I'm reading in the history books. As I walk in the places where history happened, feel the land under the soles of my feet and understand how it appeared in the 1860s, I can deeply appreciate and understand what took place there.

Thank you for being our Partner in preservation. May the new year find you safe, happy and well. See you on the battlefield.

Historic battleground at Myer's Hill has been permanently preserved. *Sarah Bierle*

Victory in Spotsylvania!

On May 18, 2018, just six days short of the 154th anniversary of the actions that took place at Myer's Hill during the Civil War battle of Spotsylvania Court House, the Central Virginia Battlefields Trust (CVBT) signed the purchase contract for Myer's Hill. A total of 73 acres of pristine battlefield was preserved forever. The cost, a hefty $450,000.00.

CVBT President Tom Van Winkle issued a challenge to the nonprofit's Board of Directors: pay for the land within 36 months. Thanks to the generosity of CVBT's preservation Partners, a preservation victory has been declared in just 28 months — far ahead of the projected deadline! It is another chapter of success for the CVBT and its preservation Partners in its almost 25-year history of saving threatened historic battleground at Fredericksburg, Chancellorsville, the Wilderness and Spotsylvania Court House.

Two major grants aided in the early retirement of the land mortgage. The American Battlefield Protection Program and the Virginia Battlefields Preservation Fund awarded CVBT monies toward the acquisition after months of working to navigate this more complicated federal and state arena for preservation. These funds will be scheduled to transfer to CVBT in the coming months, according to the grant process.

What took place on May 14, 1864, at Myer's Hill has been woefully neglected through the years. The hill changing hands several times from one army to another, valiant charges, the near capture of Maj. Gen. George Gordon Meade and the remarkable tale of the Myer's family are just a few of the narratives CVBT anticipates interpreting through this newly preserved land. In the coming months and years, the CVBT will be researching and planning the next steps in the interpretation of this site. Access, trails and interpretive signage are just some of the areas to tackle, and it all takes time and funding.

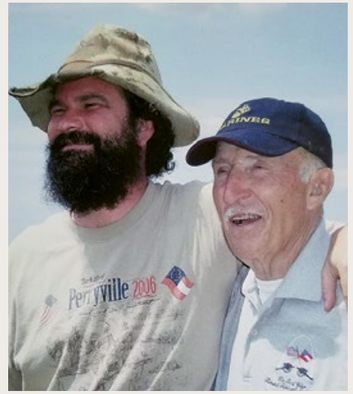
Ed Bearss: His Voice Will Be Missed

On September 15, 2020, legendary historian, author and battlefield guide Edwin C. Bearss "crossed the river." For 97 years, he lived to appreciate and serve his country — as a Marine during World War II, in a long career with the National Park Service and as a teacher of history in open-air classrooms. His unique and inspiring storytelling style captivated audiences, and his voice made the fields, woods and trenches echo with the heroic tales of courage and patriotism.

Ed Bearss was a long-time supporter and advocate for battlefield preservation, working most notably with the American Battlefield Trust. For years, he also supported CVBT and was always a welcome speaker at several conferences and events. A few of the CVBT Board members wished to share memories and respect for their friend, fellow preservationist and historian:

Tom Van Winkle: "I met Ed back when I was president of the Friends of Wilderness Battlefield. Ed was giving a tour and, of course, I followed, as I was on duty as interpreter at Ellwood. Ed stopped at the Stonewall Jackson arm burial site and spoke. After he was done, he turned to me and asked, "Tom, do you have anything to add?" Petrified, I realized I actually did have an offering regarding recent information of other military burials in the cemetery. Since then, I was involved in many events with Ed over the years. Ed was a partner and supporter of CVBT, and he will be truly missed."

Eric Wittenberg: "Ed was a unique man: part showman, part computer memory bank and part Pied Piper. The man forgot more about military history than most of us could ever possibly hope to know. His loss is not only tragic, it is one for which there is no replacement. We won't see the likes of Ed again."



Ed Bearss and Robert Lee Hodge, who serves on the CVBT Board of Directors (left), were close friends and worked together to create a special program for CVBT's 20th anniversary. *CVBT Photo Archives*

Chris Mackowski: "My first Ed Bearss encounter came in the Wilderness. Kris White and I were leading a group of interns on a tour across Widow Tapp Field, when we heard a voice booming across the battlefield as loud as William Poague's artillery. As we advanced into the field, we finally saw the source: Ed, ringed by a tour group, growling out the story of Longstreet's fortuitous arrival on the field. I felt like ours had been the fortuitous arrival, because I finally had the chance to hear Ed in person, on the field. I'd seen him on TV, most notably on the Ken Burns series (where I felt Burns had unfortunately tethered Ed to a chair that could barely contain him), and everyone I knew seemed to have an Ed Bearss story of some sort or another. I'd felt like I was missing out.

"A few years later, Kris and I gave a talk on the Battle of Second Fredericksburg and Salem Church for a Chambersburg Civil War Seminar program. Ed, in attendance, came up after and told us it was one of the best talks he had ever heard (and there were witnesses, too!). The next day, he tagged along on our tour, nodding along appreciatively as Kris or I told a part of the story that Ed apparently enjoyed as if it were an old favorite tale. I felt like I'd been given a gift to be able to spend some time with Ed in that way, as if we were somehow old friends passing the day in a shared pastime.

"As a historian, writer, speaker and tour guide, Ed served as the very model of an exceptional public historian in all ways, including his passion and accessibility. He set a high bar for all of us, and then inspired us to reach it."

Hiking the Wilderness

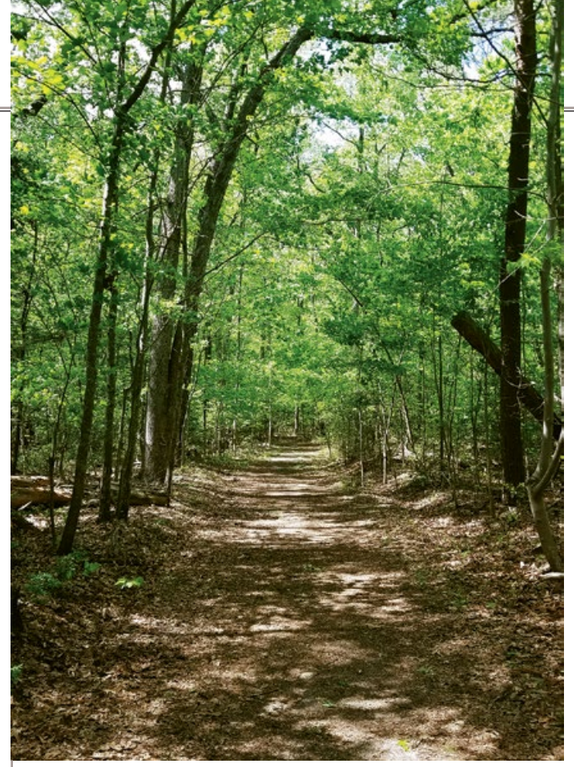
BY CHRIS MACKOWSKI

The most common view of the Wilderness comes at 65 miles per hour as cars bullet along State Route 20 between Sheetz and Robinson's Tavern. A little to the south, the Orange Plank Road offers a slower view, thanks to long lines of cars that caterpillar from and to one of the two large subdivisions that sprawl through the woods. The Wilderness, once 70 square miles of second-growth forest, isn't so wild any more.

But one can get a closer view — a view from the inside, really — by walking the Wilderness. A system of trails crisscrosses portions of the battlefield, letting visitors plunge into the forest and imagine what it must have been like when the armies traversed the same wild ground by foot.

"I have always believed that the Wilderness offers a unique opportunity to 'see' just what the combatants saw in 1861–1865," says Bob Johnson, a former park volunteer who spent more than a decade helping to maintain the trails as part of a group known as the Wilderness Battlefield Ground Force (WBGF). "As I walked through many of the other sites, the signs, the interpreters, the trails seemed to be there, but not real. I did not feel I touched history. In the Wilderness, a visitor can 'experience' the real thing."

Dorse Counts (left) and Bob Johnson (right) bridge one of the waterways that winds through the Wilderness. *Bob Johnson*



Part of the trail within Wilderness National Battlefield interpreting Gordon's Flank Attack. *Sarah Bierle*

I have always believed that the Wilderness offers a unique opportunity to "see" just what the combatants saw in 1861–1865.

WBGF consisted of about 10 members who were affiliated with the Potomac Appalachian Trail Club (Johnson gives special shout-outs to Dorse Counts and Paul Alderman). WBGF's mission: coordinate with the maintenance staff of Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park to make the park safe and beautiful.

"The maintenance staff were wonderful, supportive, capable, and wonderful mentors and trainers," Johnson says. "While they did all the mowing, we were available to do the jobs they did not have time to do." Those jobs included clearing the trails of blowdowns and trash, repairing fences and paths, building bridges over Wilderness tributaries and mapping all the trails with GPS.

This work, Johnson hopes, has helped people better enjoy, and better understand, a complicated landscape. Some examples he offers:

- "The blowdowns make a 'real war zone' to me. They were there during the war. Today, you can trip over trees and branches just like they did — only they had cannon and wagons to move through the mess."
- "The catbriers were and are a real problem. There is a wonderful patch at the top of Saunder's Hill with a bunch of them. I often told visitors to envision charging through them."
- "The upturned earth balls of blown-down trees offered perfect shelter from mini balls a-flying."
- "The water tributaries. The mud."
- "The 'unmarked farm trails.' Our map of the Parker Store Road is a unique, yet lonely path that seems long lost — except we have a pretty good GPS to guide a visitor."

Dorse Counts of the Wilderness Battlefield Ground Force "suits up" for trail maintenance. *Bob Johnson*

The Lake of the Woods Study Group maintains a webpage that archives all of WBGF's work, including extensive trail maps and excellent research that tells the history that happened along each trail: **www.civilwarstudygroup.org/Pages/Resources/DrivingTour_Wilderness.html**

Most notable among the battlefield's trails:

- The Gordon Flank Attack Trail, which extends in a two-mile loop from the Wilderness Exhibit Shelter parking lot
- The Federal Line Trail, which extends 3.6 miles from the picnic area along Hill-Ewell Drive to the site of James Longstreet's wounding
- The Wilderness Crossing Trail, which extends 1.4 miles from Ellwood to the site of the Wilderness Tavern
- Plus a number of shorter trails that wind across the battlefield at Widow Tapp Field, the Vermont Monument at the Brock Road/Plank Road intersection and at the Higgerson and Chewning Farms.

While some volunteers still work the trails, WBGF has since disbanded as members have "aged out." But the Wilderness remains dear to Johnson. "I have always loved 'the woods,'" he says, "and wherever I've lived, I walked, cleared trails and picked up trash along the way. The Wilderness adds history to the walk."

Hiking through the fields and woods of the Wilderness is a rewarding experience, and the dedicated work of volunteers through the years has helped make this possible. *Sarah Bierle*

The Wilderness Crossroads

Reimagining the Wilderness requires a starting place, and it is just one of the locations that CVBT has preserved. Called Wilderness Crossroads, the 174 acres saved around the modern intersection of Route 3 and Route 20 is rolling land, holding history's traces of hurried preparation, battle command and painful aftermath. The land also has a connection to the Chancellorsville Campaign and field hospitals after that battle, overlapping history from multiple years of the Civil War.

Officers and soldiers recognized the landmark buildings of Wilderness Tavern and Ellwood Manor, within sight but a little distanced from the crossroads area. Traces of the historical roadbeds still line the land, including the Germanna Plank Road and Orange Turnpike. Those roads leading into the Wilderness also served as the evacuation routes for Federal wounded.

Wilderness Tavern itself had been used as a stagecoach stop and was the home of William Sims at the time of the Civil War. The main structure, built around 1810, was destroyed after the battle, and the site is believed to be located under modern Route 3. A small remnant of a tavern outbuilding remains and is preserved — visible from a small National Park pulloff. This location is also a good place to view the Wilderness Crossroads lands that CVBT has preserved.

On May 4, 1864, leading elements of the Army of the Potomac started crossing the Rapidan River, heading east toward Wilderness Crossroads. The army paused in the open ground, allowing the wagon trains to catch up; this delay gave Gen. Robert E. Lee and the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia a little extra time head for the Wilderness to strike advancing Federal columns.

The following day — May 5, 1864, Union Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren acted on the received cavalry reports and headed his infantry divisions into the Wilderness, not realizing that Confederates had been rushing toward the same area. Battle erupted as the infantries clashed. As the fighting increased, more and more troops of the V, VI and IX Corps passed through on the crossroads, heading into the blazing battle. Supply wagons clustered near the tavern, bringing the logistical and medical first-aid support for the thousands embroiled in the conflict farther south and east.

Col. William F. Bartlett, commanding the 57th Massachusetts Infantry, which was part of the IX Corps, jotted in his journal on May 5: "To Germanna Ford. Cross Rap[idan]. We shall fight to-morrow. I hope I may get through [the battle], but hardly expect it." He would survive, though suffer an injury that would temporarily force him from command.

The land around Wilderness Crossroads served as an important supply, command and medical post for the Union army during the battle on May 5–6, 1864. *Sarah Bierle*

Alfred Waud sketched this scene probably near Wilderness Crossroads showing Generals Grant and Meade in the foreground. *Library of Congress*

The ruins of an outbuilding are all that remain from Wilderness Tavern, an important site mentioned in reports and primary sources. *Sarah Bierle*

For many soldiers in blue, Wilderness Crossroads was the last semi-peaceful place they saw for many hours or forever. Others returned — staggering or hauled by jolting ambulances — to seek medical aid. During the Battle of the Wilderness, the Wilderness Tavern and the area around the crossroads were the location of several Union field hospitals. The Fifth Corps hospitals were slightly east of the tavern, and Sixth Corps slightly west near the modern intersection of Routes 3 and 20. Pvt. F.L. Palmer of the 146th New York Volunteers received a head wound on May 5 in the Wilderness. He made his way to the field hospital of the First Division, V Corps, where his injury was treated with "simple dressings." Palmer moved to other hospitals farther north, and his wound eventually healed, though there was "great impairment of memory, sight, and hearing" for the rest of his life.

The crossroads area also served as a command center for the Union army. Grant's headquarters, located on the knoll which now bears his name, overlooked the roads, wagons and hospitals. Warren made his headquarters at Ellwood Manor. Generals Meade and Sedgwick, and numerous others with stars on their shoulder boards waited and plotted the battle unfolding at the front.

Confederate attacks did not reach Wilderness Crossroads, but Southern soldiers came through as guarded prisoners. Some of the Confederates told their captors that it was a "great surprise that our army had not fallen back as usual, and commented almost with enthusiasm, upon the cool and determined manner in which their most furious charges had been repulsed. They were evidently at a loss to understand what such invincible resolution might portend, and seemed depressed and chagrined at its results."

The starting place, the supply and command posts, the field hospitals and the columns of prisoners tell pieces of the Battle of the Wilderness and the sacrifices of the soldiers. The 174 acres of Wilderness Crossroads started as two separate preservation efforts in 2009 and 2012, after the attempted Walmart superstore project had been relocated to another area. Currently, CVBT retains the majority of the acreage and leases some of it to local farmers for authentic use. The saved land within the authorized boundary for Fredericksburg and Spotsylvania National Military Park is now under its permanent protection.

Today, Wilderness Crossroads rests quietly while traffic rushes along the highways. The land is preserved and the history is remembered, echoing back to those days when wagons rumbled, generals studied maps, prisoners arrived and wounded found relief where roads met before stretching into the trees and battle beyond.

Revisiting the WILDERNESS

BY ADAM PETTY

About halfway between Washington, DC, and Richmond, Virginia, loomed the forested region known as the Wilderness of Spotsylvania. It was — and remains — notorious for being a difficult battleground. From the spring of 1863 to the spring of 1864, the Federal Army of the Potomac and the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia conducted three campaigns, wholly or in part, within the Wilderness. These include Chancellorsville (April–May 1863), Mine Run (November–December 1863) and the Battle of the Wilderness (May 1864). However, focusing on the last of these engagements, particularly on the nature of the Wilderness and how this landscape affected a battle's combat, allows a new look at this fighting and how this battlefield came to be remembered.

The Wilderness was a patchwork of open areas and forest of varying density that reflected a long collaboration between man and nature. Its topography was not uniform either, some areas being flat and some hilly, with runs and swamps thrown in for good measure. The Wilderness Battlefield provides a good example of the variety of topography and vegetation within the Wilderness. Men fighting on the northern part of the battlefield encountered hilly terrain with a fairly diverse covering of vegetation. In contrast, those fighting farther to the south near the Orange Plank Road found a flat or gently rolling landscape whose dominant feature was dense growths of saplings.

This region was also a changing landscape, although it might well appear timeless to anyone first encountering it. However, it was a poor, sparsely populated area, in which nearly everything — from the soil, to the vegetation, to the buildings, to the roads — was in decay. While mining enterprises and ironworks certainly caused some deforestation, they were not the only culprits. Tobacco cultivation stripped the region early on and sapped the soil's fertility. The planters then abandoned the exhausted fields, allowing the forest to reclaim the land. Abandoned fields covered in stunted trees, like those in the Wilderness, were hardly unique, although they might seem so to the uninitiated. In fact, they were present in various parts of Virginia, even on other Civil War battlefields. With the tobacco fields exhausted, enterprising men then turned to mining and ironworks to squeeze a profit from the worn-out land, clearing additional acreage in the process. The construction of several plank roads during the 1850s resulted in another, smaller measure of deforestation and subsequent second-growth woodlands. This last round of cutting probably gave the Orange Plank Road corridor, where much of the heaviest fighting took place during the Battle of the Wilderness, the extra-thick covering of saplings the troops so often recounted. The combination of these activities — tobacco cultivation,

In this post war photograph, bones protrude from soldiers' graves in the Wilderness. The horrors of the battle added to the mysticism and legends of the area. *Library of Congress*

Currier and Ives prepared its own version of the Battle of the Wilderness, adding another piece of memory and commemoration. *Library of Congress*

mining and road building — left the land forested on the whole, but with thickets in various stages of maturity and density.

While postwar commentators employed many colorful phrases to explain what made combat during the Battle of the Wilderness so distinct, the challenges the armies faced can be boiled down to two key factors. First, a lack of open space within the Wilderness prevented the armies from using much artillery and made maneuvering a challenge. Troop formations were disrupted — or at times disintegrated altogether — making it necessary to stop and reform units. Second, the forest limited visibility. The men in the ranks often could not see friend or foe, and the commanders had difficulty directing their troops, knew little about their own position or the enemy's and found it difficult to judge the course of battle. Because of the limited visibility, the opposing forces often stumbled into each other, resulting in heavy and continuous musketry at close range. It should come as no surprise that casualties in the battle were high and that the intense combat did great damage to the forest. The seemingly endless volleys of lead mowed down trees, and fires ravaged the forest and the wounded alike.

While these descriptions might suggest that the Wilderness prevented the armies from functioning at all, it is important to realize that, despite such conditions, the armies continued to operate, albeit not at peak efficiency. They advanced despite the vegetation, although at a slower rate and in a less orderly manner than might be expected on an open battlefield. Moreover, when the lines became disordered, unit commanders did their best to dress them by calling a halt or reforming in an open area after a chaotic march through the woods. It was not parade-ground standards, but the soldiers made their tactics work and continued to fight despite being in the Wilderness's tricky thickets.

As a region, the Wilderness lent itself to mythmaking, and the myth that has come to define the region as well as the Battle of the Wilderness contains five assertions. First, the Wilderness was a distinctive and nearly unbroken forest made up of thick, second-growth trees and underbrush. This unique vegetation resulted from the local iron industry, which had cut down the original forest to provide fuel for furnaces, leaving the scrubby, thick woods to grow up in its place. Second, the Wilderness's extraordinary characteristics imposed certain conditions on military actions that created a unique and unprecedented combat experience. Third, the Wilderness exuded a mystique, for it was a wild, gloomy, weird and woeful region associated with death and destruction, fire and hell and even the supernatural. Fourth, because of the

Along the Orange Turnpike, these rifle pits were occupied by U.S. Regulars on May 5 and the Union's VI Corps on May 6; the scene was sketched by Alfred Waud. *Library of Congress*

Confederates' superior knowledge of the region and the forest's ability to neutralize the Federals' superiority in numbers and artillery, the rebels held an edge in any combat there. Fifth, Robert E. Lee trapped the Federals in these tangled thickets in May 1864 to exploit these advantages.

This Wilderness myth began to take shape during the war but truly blossomed in the postwar years. Union soldiers came away from the battle recounting the difficulty of fighting in the tangled landscape. The question lingered: Why had they failed to defeat Lee's army there? William Swinton, a wartime correspondent for the *New York Times*, sought to answer this question in a report published only days after the battle's conclusion. In it, he, too, described the many natural obstacles the soldiers faced, but he also drew some conclusions that were to have a lasting influence on how historians portrayed the battle, as well as the Wilderness itself. Swinton argued that it was a unique engagement, citing the lack of visibility, the inability to maneuver and the impossibility of employing artillery and cavalry effectively as reasons for the Federals' failure to obtain victory. He suggested that the possibility of fighting a battle in the Wilderness produced a major drawback to Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's selected route of advance south, an option the Federals would have avoided had the Confederates not forced the issue. He then wondered whether Lee had meant to delay the Union advance or had desired all along to engage in a decisive confrontation in the Wilderness. Swinton ultimately reasoned that the fierce nature of the fight, as well as the advantages the Confederates enjoyed there — such as crowding the Union forces into unfamiliar woods to cancel out their strength in numbers — suggested that Lee meant to force a fight in the Wilderness.

Swinton later perfected his interpretation in his 1866 *Campaigns of the Army of the Potomac*, which was one of the first histories of the war in Virginia and also the first to convey the Wilderness myth. Much of what he wrote echoed the sentiments of his wartime report, but Swinton made a few key additions. He emphasized that the Wilderness formed an unusual, if not unique forest, a byproduct of local mining operations. It was also a terrible place to fight a battle. Swinton no longer surmised but now affirmed that Lee had tried to trap the Union army there to benefit from the advantages it would give the Confederates. To these conclusions, he added the element of mystique, calling the Wilderness "a region of gloom and the shadow of death," a "horrid thicket" where "lurid fires played" and in which "the crackle and roll of musketry like the noisy boiling of some hell-caldron … told the dread story of death." Here, then, the basic Wilderness myth emerged, fully formed within a year after the war's end.

Overlooking Saunder's Field, where desperate attacks and counterattacks raged during the Battle of the Wilderness. *Sarah Bierle*

The steady stream of historians and memoirists who followed then repeated, and often embellished, Swinton's interpretation, perpetuating the Wilderness myth to the present day. Ultimately, the Wilderness myth was the product of hindsight. The need to make sense of the May 1864 battle drove its formation, but the longevity of Swinton's interpretation depended upon the undeniable appeal of his creation. Not only did the Wilderness myth make a great story, it also provided different constituencies with reasons to embrace and perpetuate it. Former Confederates used it to glorify Lee's generalship and his army's performance while denigrating Grant. Union critics employed it to excuse the Federal army's shortcomings while disparaging Grant's generalship. Friends of the Union general used it to explain away his failure to win a decisive victory at the outset of the Overland Campaign. All veterans of the war in Virginia, however, could glory in having fought on the worst battlefield of the war under the most trying conditions. Even well after the passing of these groups, Swinton's Wilderness myth remains compelling to both historians, who retell it, and readers of Civil War history, who love the epic tale of a terrible battle between the two great generals of the war in a malevolent landscape. For these reasons, the Wilderness myth has endured.

Edwin Forbes sketched this scene at Germanna Ford on the Rapidan River as Union troops crossed and headed into the forbidding Wilderness. *Library of Congress*

Many components of this myth, however, are simply not true. Contemporary sources suggest that the Wilderness was not the continuous second-growth forest of legend, but instead a complex forest containing a variety of different types of vegetation, with densities ranging from near-impassable thickets to open fields. It was also not a unique landscape created by the local iron industry, for Wilderness-like forests could be found in other parts of Virginia where tobacco cultivation had taken place. Nor did the Wilderness create unique battlefield conditions. Chancellorsville, although it was fought in the same region, was a very different type of contest than the Battle of the Wilderness, while Chickamauga — despite being fought in a different forest in a different state — created many of the same tactical problems traditionally associated with combat in the Wilderness. Moreover, the Wilderness mystique grew over time as soldiers accumulated experiences in the region but hardened — after the battle — into the exaggerated aura that has characterized the Virginia forest to this day. Furthermore, conditions in the Wilderness did not favor the Confederates. The rebels did not know the landscape any better than their Union opponents, they experienced the same tactical problems as the Federals and any advantages they gained can be credited to their aggressive pursuit of the few opportunities this difficult battlefield offered. With this case, it should come as no surprise that Lee did not attempt to trap the Union army in the Wilderness, and that Union commanders, from Joseph Hooker to Ulysses Grant, made no effort to avoid the region. In the end, the only truly unique characteristic of the Wilderness was the myth that grew up around it.

Adam Petty is a historian and documentary editor for the Joseph Smith Papers and the author of the *Battle of the Wilderness in Myth and Memory*.

Widow Tapp's fields are still bordered by the trees of the Wilderness, similar to the setting for the 1864 battle. *Sarah Bierle*

President Harding speaking to Civil War veterans during Marine maneuvers at the Wilderness Battlefield, Virginia, October 1921. *Library of Congress*

Fighting Again in the Wilderness

BY TOM VAN WINKLE

After hearing deafening rifle fire and artillery blasts, the president peered out of the White House and was astounded to witness thousands of troops battling all around him. Where had they come from, and why were they fighting here?

No, the president was not Abraham Lincoln, and the White House was not located in Washington D.C. In fact, the year was 1921, and President Warren G. Harding was observing the U.S. Marines from his temporary headquarters in the Wilderness of Virginia.

In the post–World War I era, the Marine Corps faced drastic manpower reductions. In fact, active manpower strength decreased by 56 percent between 1919 and 1921. Budget cuts also seriously jeopardized the Marines' standard of fighting readiness.

United States Marine Brig. Gen. Smedley Butler had been appointed commander of the Quantico Marine base after World War I. Butler, a commander commemorated since the Spanish American War, had fought in many other battles from Cuba to France and had also been awarded two medals of honor. Now, he faced another challenge, trying to maintain his Marines.

Involved in the publicity, as well as in the political aspects of promoting the need for the Marines, Butler realized that he needed to dramatically prove the abilities of his skilled men. How best to do this? A full-scale demonstration. Although he needed to validate the Marines' capabilities to those politicians who controlled the money, he billed the drills predominantly as a training exercise.

Thus, on September 26, 1921, at 7:00 a.m., four thousand Marines of the East Coast Expeditionary Force began a three-day march from Quantico, heading for the Wilderness of Virginia. Their column stretched over three miles along the roads. This particular area of Virginia — including the intersection of Orange Turnpike, modern Route 20 and the Germanna Plank Road, modern Route 3 — had seen ferocious fighting and the beginning of the clash between Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee and Union Gen. Ulysses S. Grant during the Civil War in May 1864.

The modern marching force in 1921 was predominately infantry, but also included signal troops, engineers, air service and artillery. Butler packed a punch when it came to the equipment he transported. Among the available gear rolled light and heavy machine guns, 75-millimeter howitzers, 155-millimeter guns, and anti-aircraft guns not to mention a few tanks.

Though the Wilderness was a dense tangle of underbrush and regrowth that wreaked havoc on the combatants in the 1864 Battle of the Wilderness, Butler took advantage of the few clearings in this area to camp and conduct maneuvers. The Wilderness Tavern, Payne property, Tanner Farm and Willis home (more commonly known today as Ellwood) allowed room for the reported 1,000 spectators and dignitaries to view the spectacle.

Early on the morning of September 29, the maneuvers began. On the day's agenda? Amphibious landings. The Wilderness Run represented the shoreline, while all the land to the west was considered open water, with a "small island" to the east. From the fields at Ellwood, artillery fired, acting as a naval bombardment.

Later that evening, Butler filled the skies with planes, depicting an aerial onslaught. Along the Wilderness Run, the outlines of a battleship and an aircraft carrier were painted. An unleashed squadron of Martin MB-2 bombers, accompanied by many scout planes, attacked the "battleship." Flares took the place of real bombs. From the battleship position, anti-aircraft guns and search lights fought to repel the attack. Aerial maneuvers, with different variations, continued the next morning and evening.

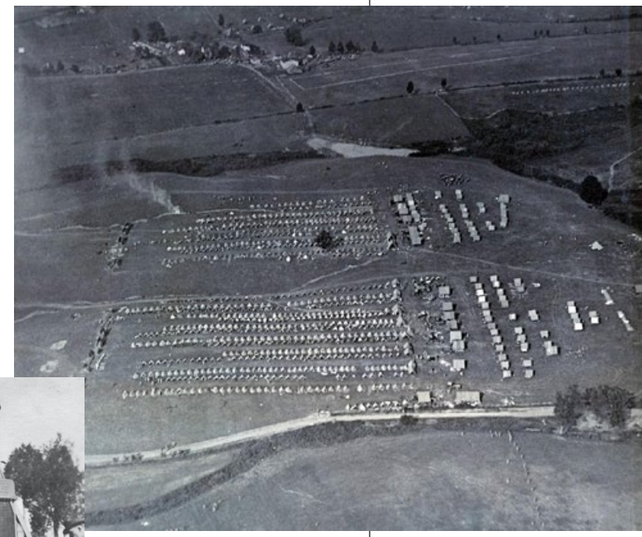
While the onlooking press and assorted dignitaries all seemed to beam with approval, Butler awaited his most important guest. President Warren G. Harding and his entourage arrived on Saturday morning, October 1.

Understanding the importance of the president's approval and appreciation of the need to maintain Butler's Marine forces, he made sure he placed President Harding's "Canvas Whitehouse" next to his own headquarters. "Camp Harding" consisted of a three-room tent with hardwood floors. Harding had an additional tent for a bathroom, adorned with a sunken tub, shower, and hot and cold running water, as well as electric heat.

Civil War veterans were guests of honor at the Marine maneuvers in the Wilderness. Some shared reminiscences about the conflict decades earlier. *Library of Congress*

President Warren G. Harding speaking with Gen. John Lejeune during the Marine maneuvers at the Wilderness Battlefield, Virginia, October 1921. *Library of Congress*

Knowing the importance of publicity for his cause, Gen. Butler invited President Harding to witnesses the Marine maneuvers, greeting him with military honors when he arrived. *Library of Congress*



Once again, the Wilderness played host to military force ... but in 1921, no blood was shed. *Library of Congress*

President Harding addressed the Marines while General Butler looked on. *Library of Congress*

Not long after the president's arrival, Butler, Harding and his party lunched in the officers' mess. Butler, aware of the history of the area, invited several Civil War veterans, both blue and gray, to meet the president.

On Saturday, the final maneuvers were played out for the president. Harding looked on as nearly two thousand Marines concluded the last phase of the land exercise. Standing in the orchards of the Ellwood property, Butler and Harding watched the Marines as they made their way up from the low ground. As the exercise progressed, the general and the president followed the action. A final evening aerial bombardment concluded the East Coast Expeditionary Force training exercises.

The next day, Sunday, October 2, President Harding and the Marines gathered for Sunday services, provided by Chaplin Edward B. Niver. After the services, Harding climbed upon the flatbed truck that served as the pulpit before exclaiming, "No commander in chief in the world can have a greater pride nor more affection for an arm of national defense than I for you."

As the president and his party left the battleground, the entire East Coast Expeditionary Force passed in review. In a final, and notably creative tribute to the president, thousands of Marines formed to create a living portrait of Harding.

On Monday morning, Butler's forces exited the Wilderness to begin their trek back to Quantico. Although Butler successfully impressed members of Congress, Cabinet members and, of course, the president, his overall goal to save the Marines from active duty, reductions failed. Congress ultimately reduced the readiness of the Corps.

Brig. Gen. Smedley Butler conduct several more training exercises — notably at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania in 1922, and New Market, Virginia, in 1923. In 1925, the exercises ceased on a grand scale becoming considerably more modest in nature.

For a more in-depth story of Marine Brig. Gen. Smedley Butler's exploits in the Wilderness, refer to the CVBT Fredericksburg History & Biography, Volume Eleven *(2012) and read Historian Eric J. Mink's detailed account. Also watch for our coming CVBT e-book!*

Laurels Won: A Confederate Cavalry Brigade & the Battle of the Wilderness

BY SARAH KAY BIERLE

Infantry in a desperate fight in blazing woods is likely the image that first comes to mind for the Battle of the Wilderness. However, cavalry opened the campaign and fought around the infantry flanks on May 5–6, 1864. For one Confederate brigade, it was a name-forging moment.

This unit, comprised of the 7th, 11th and 12th Virginia Cavalry Regiments, 35th Battalion Virginia Cavalry, and Chew's Battery, traced its war record to early volunteerism in 1861 and organization by Col. Turner Ashby in the Shenandoah Valley in 1862. In the spring of 1864, Gen. Thomas Rosser took the brigade from Madison County to join the Army of Northern Virginia, arriving on May 4.

Gen. Thomas L. Rosser commanded the Laurel Brigade. *Public Domain*

Rosser's cavalrymen spent the next days battling over the area around Catharpin Road, Todd's Tavern and the Po River, blocking Federal cavalry and fighting to retake extended flank positions. General Lee summed up this cavalry action, writing: "A large force of [enemy] cavalry and artillery on our right flank was driven back by Rosser's brigade."

The troopers had gone into combat with limited ammunition, since their supply wagons lagged behind. A regimental history recorded the scene: "As a regiment of Yankees galloped down in their front, Captain Meyers … turned to Colonel White and asked, 'Colonel, how can we fight those fellows with no ammunition? We'd as well have rocks as empty pistols.' But the Colonel replied so grimly, 'What are our sabres for?' that the men drew their blades without further hesitation, and charged square at the Yankee column, which wheeled about and retired faster than it came."

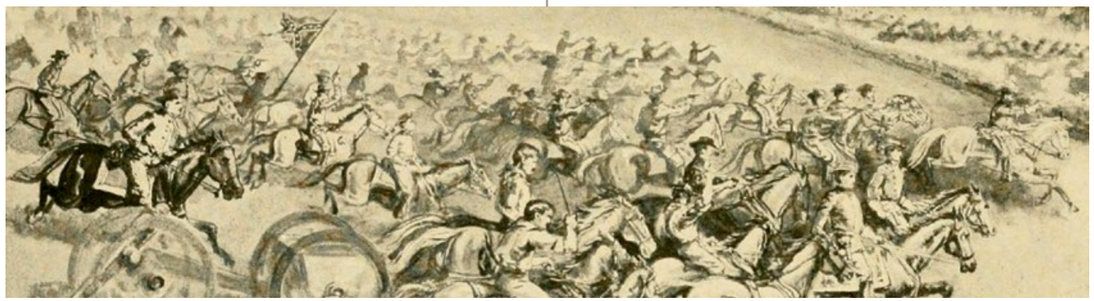
Laurel still grows on the central Virginia battlefields, and perhaps it was sprigs like this that decorated the cavalrymen's hats. *Sarah Bierle*

According to William N. McDonald, an ordinance officer of the unit: "The brigade, in this all-day conflict, had more than sustained its previous reputation, and earned the name of 'Laurel,' by which it was thereafter known." The veterans never quite settled if the new nickname came from pieces of laurel worn on their hats or if General Rosser gave the nickname for the "winning of laurels." However, the soldiers were quite clear that the Battle of the Wilderness was the first time the brigade received and used the name.

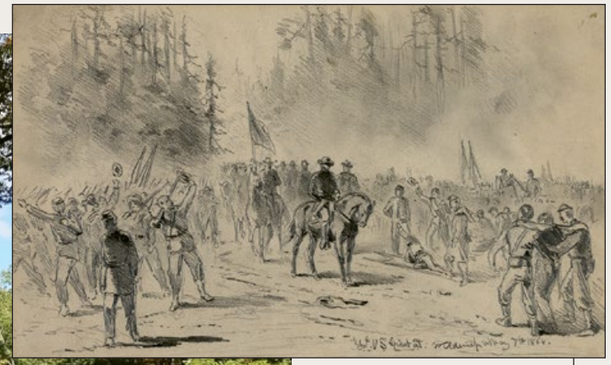
On the following day, the Laurel Brigade battled Gen. George A. Custer's troopers, who managed to halt the Confederate horsemen's advance. The cavalry flank fighting prompted General Sheridan to withdraw and consolidate his Union cavalry brigades, abandoning Todd's Tavern and opening the door for another round of fighting along the roads as the infantry raced toward Spotsylvania Court House.

The Laurel Brigade and flank fighting shaped the Battle of the Wilderness, set up the fight at Todd's Tavern on May 7 and had far-reaching effects on the Overland Campaign. Though they did not battle in the Wilderness itself, this brigade of Confederate cavalrymen did their duty and earned a nickname that became synonymous with hard fights and courage on numerous other battlefields.

An artist's depiction of the Laurel Brigade charging into battle, from William N. McDonald's *A History of the Laurel Brigade*. The flank cavalry fights during Battle of the Wilderness shaped the Overland Campaign.



Then and Now



Edwin Forbes sketched General Grant (center) as he paused in the Wilderness. *Library of Congress*

Brock Road meets Orange Plank Road in the Wilderness, creating a (usually) busy modern intersection at a historic crossroads. *Sarah Bierle*

Brock Road and Orange Plank Road: A Turning Point

Today, it is a busy intersection where cars pause at a four-way stop. In 1864, the location presented a very different scene, though as many believe, the Civil War reached a turning point when a general and his staff paused here. Historic Brock Road and Orange Plank Road cross in the Wilderness, and both were two of the rare, good roads in the area that made troop movements easier.

During the Battle of the Wilderness, fought May 5–6, 1864, Gen. Winfield S. Hancock's men of the Federal II Corps had been near the intersection, and charging Confederates had "rolled them up like a wet blanket" almost to the trench lines still visible along the road. As darkness fell on May 6, Union commanders readied to move. This intense battle, which opened the Overland Campaign, had already resulted in more than 17,000 casualties from the blue-clad ranks and at least 11,000 fallen in the opposing Confederate army. Would the Union's Army of the Potomac advance or retreat?

The decision rested with Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant. Arriving in the Eastern Theater that spring, he still seemed mysterious and untrusted to many of the veteran soldiers within the Army of the Potomac. They had speculated that he was a great fighter in the West, but he had not strategized against "Bobby Lee," who had a reputation for outwitting many generals. By the evening of May 6, many of those still-standing veterans had just survived one of the hardest battles yet. Some lined Brock Road and clustered near the intersection, watching as General Grant rode to the crossroads and paused.

Burning woods lit the scene. The Union soldiers waited. Would the general turn to the left onto Orange Plank Road and begin a retreat? No. Grant urged his horse forward and continued straight — down Brock Road toward Todd's Tavern and Spotsylvania Court House. The campaign had only started, and, unlike some of the previous commanders, Grant would not retreat after the first fight. The soldiers cheered wildly, and some believed that the subtle action at the crossroads, symbolizing a significant decision, won the veterans' hearts for the new lieutenant general.

Through the years, the intersection has remained a little time-capsule. Remains of the trenches still line the road. The Vermont monument stands yards deeper in the woods, a visible memorial to the sacrifices of that brigade over the blood-soaked ground. The roads are paved, but still lie in the same tracks, while the corners of the intersection are preserved by the National Park Service.

The Civil War had many turning point moments, and many of those events and places are cannon-marked and marbled. Perhaps there is something special about the understated little intersection. It's still a place where vehicles pause and drivers decide to go on or change direction. Sitting still, watching the passing traffic and remembering the battle and Grant's arrival at this point allows reflecting on change and turning points — then and now.