

Episode 134: The Battle of Chancellorsville

<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>

During the spring of 1863, Major General Joseph Hooker made a point of repairing the morale of the men in his new command, the Army of the Potomac. He improved camp sanitation, rations and the furlough system. All of these went a long way toward restoring the troops who had lived through the disastrous Battle of Fredericksburg and Burnside's Mud March.

On April 27, Hooker set his troops in motion to once again attack the Army of Northern Virginia commanded by Robert E. Lee. From Falmouth across from Fredericksburg, over 50,000 Union troops headed up the north bank of the Rappahannock River to cross at Kelly's Ford and U.S. Ford. While about 25,000 men remained at Falmouth as a diversion, another 40,000 Union troops would attempt to cross the river south of Fredericksburg. Opposing this onslaught would be only 60,000 Confederates.

The Union troops headed upriver crossed without trouble and by May 1 Hooker had over 70,000 men gathered in the vicinity of Chancellorsville, about 10 miles west of Fredericksburg. Finally aware of Hooker's plan, Lee set into motion one of military history's most audacious maneuvers. Defying age old doctrine, he split his forces in the face of superior numbers. Leaving about 10,000 men to hold off the Union forces at and south of Chancellorsville, he took the remainder of his army westward to clash with Hooker.

On the morning of May 1, the two armies fought near Chancellorsville and the stunned Hooker called for retreat. His furious subordinates could not believe they had given up their favorable position to withdraw into the forest. George Meade exclaimed "My God, if we can't hold the top of a hill, we certainly can't hold the bottom of it!"

On May 2, Lee divided his army again in a plan that would live in the annals of military history. Leaving only 11,000 men to face Hooker's 70,000 near Chancellorsville, he sent Stonewall Jackson with 20,000 men along a 12-mile back road to attack the Union right flank. Starting in early morning, by late afternoon Jackson had his men in place and they swept down on the Union forces in a devastating flank attack. The first indication the Union soldiers had that something was amiss was the sudden onrush of animals from the surrounding woods. Moments later the terrifying Rebel yell burst from the woods along with Jackson's Confederates. The Union forces were completely overrun.

Sadly for the Confederates, one of their greatest moments in the war would be followed by one of the worst. Wanting to keep pressure on the Union, the aggressive Jackson insisted on keeping the fight going even into nightfall and he was mistakenly shot by some of his own troops in the confusion. He would die from his injuries 8 days later.

Heavy fighting continued on May 3 with little gain for either side and after two days of lighter fighting, Hooker withdrew his men back across the Rappahannock on the night of May 5. Lee had won his most memorable battle facing an enemy force twice the size of his army. But his losses were considerable. In addition to losing over 20% of his men as casualties, he lost his most trusted subordinate in Jackson. In the upcoming Gettysburg campaign, Lee would feel the absence of Jackson quite acutely.

On the Union side, the public and Lincoln were horrified at yet another embarrassing defeat. Lincoln exclaimed "My God! My God! What will the country say?" Having lost faith in his commander, he would remove Hooker from command of the Army of the Potomac just before the battle at Gettysburg two months later.