

The Overland and the Atlanta Campaigns Begin

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During the first week of May, 1864, major campaigns opened in both Virginia and Georgia, which would ultimately result in the capture of Atlanta and the Union army besieging Petersburg. They were part of newly-appointed General-in-Chief Ulysses S. Grant's strategy to pressure the Confederacy at a number of points along its borders. In Virginia the Army of the Potomac, commanded by General George Meade but accompanied by Grant, crossed the Rapidan River to the west of Fredericksburg. They hoped to quickly pass through the heavily forested region known as the Wilderness, near where the battle of Chancellorsville was fought the previous year, and fight Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia in open territory to the south. The Federal army of nearly 120,000 men began its movement on May 4, which led Lee to move his 60,000 man army from its encampments near Orange to the threatened area.

After crossing the river the previous day, the Federals continued their advance through the Wilderness early on May 5. Moving such a large army through an area with few roads slowed its movement, and gave the Confederates time to reach the region. Fighting soon broke out along the Orange Turnpike between elements of the Union Fifth Corps and Richard Ewell's Confederates. Farther to the south, Lee advanced A.P. Hill's Corps against a portion of the Union's Sixth Corps, in an effort to capture a road junction that would split the Union army in two. Confused, bitter fighting ensued, with neither side gaining a major advantage. The next day, Union troops under Winfield Hancock attacked Hill's position and nearly overwhelmed the outnumbered Confederates, but James Longstreet's recently-arrived troops launched a counterattack that stopped the Federal advance. Meanwhile, Ewell's men also counterattacked and a Confederate brigade under John Gordon advanced some distance before the fighting died

out. During the engagement a particularly horrifying event occurred when underbrush caught fire, and wounded men died in the flames before they could be removed from the field. Also, in an eerie coincidence, General Longstreet was accidentally shot and seriously wounded by his own men not far from where Stonewall Jackson had been shot by his troops the year before.

Though Lee had stymied Grant's intentions of slipping quickly through the Wilderness, the Union commander, rather than retreat, instead ordered his men on a flanking march to reach an important road junction near Spotsylvania Court House. Bloody fighting would last there for the next two weeks. During the Wilderness fighting, Grant had lost about 18,000, while Lee suffered 10,000 casualties—even more grim losses awaited both armies.

While heavy fighting took place in Virginia, in north Georgia, William T. Sherman commenced his operation to capture Atlanta. He commanded nearly 100,000 men organized into three armies, while he was opposed by about 60,000 men under General Joseph Johnston, who held a strong position along a high ridge near Dalton. The Union commander determined that Johnston's main position was too strong for a direct assault, so he launched a diversionary attack against Tunnel Hill and Rocky Face Ridge, while sending General James McPherson and his Army of the Tennessee to Snake Creek Gap thirteen miles to the south in order to flank Johnston.

On May 8, General George Thomas' Federals began a series of attacks on the main Confederate line, and by the next day they had occupied nearly two miles of the ridge's crest. Other fighting took place at Dug Gap, where northern troops nearly broke through into the rear of Johnston's line, but they were finally stopped. General McPherson, meanwhile, had taken advantage of these diversions, and occupied Snake Creek Gap, threatening Johnston's entire position. He did not, however, move quickly to cut off the Confederates, and Johnston was able

to withdraw his army to the south towards positions he had prepared near Resaca. The campaign for Atlanta would continue for the next three-and-a-half months.