

## **Spotsylvania, New Market, and Resaca: A Bloody Week of Combat**

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During the week of May 11-17, 1864, major fighting occurred at a number of locations in Virginia and north Georgia, as the Overland and Atlanta campaigns continued. Following the heavy fighting at the Wilderness, Ulysses Grant ordered the Army of the Potomac to make a march around the right flank of Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, in an effort to capture the road junction near Spotsylvania Court House. The Confederates reached Spotsylvania first, and began the construction of strong defensive positions. After preliminary skirmishing on May 8 and 9, which led to the death of Union corps commander John Sedgwick, Grant ordered a major assault on the rebel line, including the exposed "Mule Shoe" salient, on May 10. A Union division under Emory Upton briefly penetrated the Confederate position, but was eventually repulsed. On May 12, Grant launched an even bigger attack with most of the Union Second Corps and elements of three others. The assault broke Lee's line at the Mule Shoe, and threatened to destroy the southern army. Lee desperately formed a new position while hand-to-hand combat raged at what became known as the "Bloody Angle." Historian Robert Krick has written that the fighting, which continued for the next twenty-four hours, "would establish a new standard for intense, short-range savagery." The firing was so severe that an oak tree twenty-two inches in diameter was felled solely by musket fire. Fighting continued along the opposing lines for the next week, until Grant again moved southward around Lee's flank. In the ferocious fighting at Spotsylvania, Lee lost about 12,000 men, while the Federals suffered 18,000 casualties.

While the two armies were engaged at Spotsylvania, the south would suffer a grievous loss on May 11, when Jeb Stuart, commander of Lee's Cavalry Corps, was mortally wounded in

an engagement at Yellow Tavern near Richmond. While attempting to stop a raid led by Grant's cavalry commander Philip Sheridan, the colorful Stuart suffered a gunshot wound from which he died the following day. During this bloody week, fighting in the Old Dominion also took place in the Shenandoah Valley and at Drewry's Bluff near Richmond. At New Market on May 15, Confederates under John C. Breckinridge stopped an advance up the Shenandoah Valley by Federal forces led by German-born Franz Sigel. Included in the 5,000-man rebel force were 247 cadets from the Virginia Military Institute. The Confederates drove Sigel's force from the field, but at a cost of nearly 600 casualties, including ten cadets killed. Meanwhile, at Drewry's Bluff on the James River, a hastily-gathered Confederate force under Pierre Beauregard stopped an advance of the Union Army of the James, commanded by the infamous Benjamin "Beast" Butler, which threatened Petersburg and Richmond and the rear of Lee's army. Total casualties in that engagement numbered approximately 6,500.

In addition to the combat in Virginia, the next phase of the Atlanta Campaign took place in Georgia. Following his withdrawal from defensive works around Dalton, Confederate General Joseph Johnston had positioned his Army of Tennessee at Resaca, guarding both the town and the railroad line that passed through it. By May 13, Union General William Sherman had positioned his three armies near the rebel lines and launched a series of attacks which took place over the next two days. The Federals were repulsed with heavy losses, but by the fifteenth a Yankee division commanded by General Thomas Sweeney had crossed the Oostanaula River behind the Confederate positions and was threatening their line of retreat. Johnston skillfully extracted his army and withdrew southward. Once again Sherman had failed to trap and destroy his opponent, but he was also moving dangerously close to his goal of Atlanta, and Johnston

appeared unable to stop the Union advance. The bloody week of May 11-17 came to an end with the Federals still on the offensive in both Virginia and Georgia.