

Episode 191: The Battle of Cold Harbor

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As May 1864 turned into June, the Overland Campaign of Union general Ulysses S. Grant continued to plod southward toward Richmond. Following the bloody but inconclusive battles at Spotsylvania and the Wilderness earlier in May, Grant continually moved his army around the right flank of Robert E. Lee's Confederate army. As before, Lee moved his army south to keep up with Grant. By late May, the two forces were gathering on almost the same ground where the Battle of Gaines's Mill had been fought two years earlier. Some soldiers found skeletal remains from that battle as they entrenched for the possibility of an impending fight.

On May 31, Union cavalry secured the crossroads known locally as Cold Harbor. The name had nothing to do with water, but rather that it had long been a place where travelers could find lodging but not a hot meal. During the next day, both sides brought reinforcements to the site and by the evening of June 1 the Union had approximately 108,000 men ready to fight. Lee had only half as many, fielding 59,000.

Grant ordered an assault that began on the evening of June 1 and ended after dark without victory but with roughly 2,000 casualties on each side. As June 2 dawned the two armies were dug in only yards from each other. Lee took the day of the second to reorganize and strengthen his defenses. His orders resulted in a 7-mile long line of intricate trenches and barricades, with multiple angles of fire and layers of protection.

The next Union assault began at 4:30 am on June 3. Lee's defenses proved quite formidable and Union losses were heavy. By the end of the day, close to 7,000 men in blue were casualties while a little over 1,000 Confederates had been killed or wounded. One of the Union

soldiers later wrote: ““We felt it was murder, not war, or at best a very serious mistake had been made.”

Despite his success, Lee was living on the edge of disaster since he had no troops in reserve. If he shortened his lines to keep troops in reserve, Grant would turn the end of his lines. If he pulled men out of the current lines, they would be thinned to the point where Grant would break through. Luckily for Lee, Grant did not conduct any more assaults. Over the next week, the men on each side suffered in the hot trenches, with many being picked off by opposing snipers. Worse still, between the lines were the suffering Union soldiers wounded during the June 3 assault. It was not until June 7 that Grant and Lee were able to agree on a short truce to enable Union men to recover the survivors. By then, many of the suffering soldiers had died lying in the scorched field.

Despite losing more than 10,000 men at Cold Harbor, Grant was not daunted. He was perfectly willing to engage in a war of attrition with Lee since he had so many more men in reserve. As it turned out, Cold Harbor would be the last battle of the war in which Lee could claim victory. From this point forward, the war would degenerate into trench warfare until the final weeks of the conflict.

On June 12, Grant pulled his men from the trenches and Cold Harbor and continued his march south, this time crossing the James River to threaten Petersburg. His new strategy would be to press upon both Richmond and Petersburg, continuously lengthening and weakening Lee’s lines until he could finally break through.

