

Episode 90: Seven Days of Fighting in Virginia

<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>

After J.E.B. Stuart's wild ride around the Army of the Potomac in early June, Robert E. Lee began to put together a plan to push George McClellan's forces away from Richmond. Since taking over the Army of Virginia after the Battle of Seven Pines in late May, Lee had his men strengthen their defensive position around the Confederate capitol. Although useful, this activity had done nothing to encourage Lee's numerous detractors. His defeat at Cheat Mountain and the failure of his defenses at Fort Pulaski outside Savannah to hold off Union forces, Lee had acquired an undeserved reputation in the South as a cautious and possibly ineffective general.

Lee knew that he could not just sit and wait while McClellan laid siege to Richmond, especially with troops under Irvin McDowell due to reinforce McClellan any day. Stuart's reconnaissance indicated that the Union right flank was weak and could be attacked and this is where Lee decided to concentrate his efforts. Lee was also expecting reinforcements in the form of Stonewall Jackson's men from the Shenandoah Valley. Jackson arrived at Lee's headquarters on June 23 with his men exhausted from their efforts to get to Richmond quickly. Lee held a meeting and informed Jackson and fellow generals James Longstreet, A.P. Hill and D. H. Hill that he intended to attack McClellan's right flank at daylight on June 26.

Lee's plan called for A.P. Hill to attack as soon as Jackson's troops had joined him near Mechanicsville. Unfortunately and uncharacteristically, Jackson was hours late and Hill eventually decided to attack on his own. His frontal assault on the Union lines was a failure with heavy Confederate casualties. On the bright side for Lee, McClellan now began to fear that he was outnumbered and began withdrawing his forces toward the James River to the southeast.

As McClellan began to pull back, Lee attacked again on June 27 at Gaines's Mill. It was the biggest Confederate assault of the war, with 57,000 men attacking through a swamp and up a hill. The Union forces under Fitz John Porter held the Confederates off valiantly for most of the day and with heavy Southern losses. Late in the afternoon, Southern forces under Brigadier General John Bell Hood finally broke through and sent Porter's men toward the Chickahominy River in a rout. The defeat served to enhance McClellan's fears and he ordered his men to continue to a defensive position at Harrison's Landing on the James River. McClellan called this large scale movement a "change of base" and the phrase would come to be something of an object of derision as a euphemism for full-scale retreat.

Over the next two days, Lee continued to pursue with the intent of destroying the Army of the Potomac. He eventually caught up to McClellan on the morning of June 29 at Savage's Station. A chaotic battle ensued, with orders being misinterpreted on both sides. Each side would suffer about 1,500 casualties at Savage Station and during the night the Union forces began to retreat through the White Oak Swamp toward the James River. The next morning, Lee attacked again and as on the previous day his orders were not followed properly. This time the imposing terrain of the swamp added to the confusion. As at Savage's Station, this fight at Glendale was inconclusive though losses on both sides were heavy. Many Confederates would lament the lost opportunity of June 30, 1862 for decades after the war. In their minds, at no other time during the war did the Confederates have such a chance to actually destroy the Union army and end the war. Instead, the fight would continue the next day at the horrible and bloody Battle of Malvern Hill.