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*The last strategic offensive of General Lee
October 8 - November 10, 1863*

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Adapted into English by Gerald Hawkins

INTRODUCTION

The complex Bristoe campaign in Virginia took place in the autumn of 1863. Regarded as a little known and minor military episode, it is almost overlooked in the history of the American Civil War.

AFTER GETTYSBURG

After the epic battles fought from July 1 to 3, 1863, General Lee's army is beaten at Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, forcing him to retreat on the next day. On July 14, the southern army crosses the Potomac River and finds a sanctuary in Virginia. On the 24th, it is concentrated at Culpeper, south of the Rapidan River, but finds no rest there. On August 3, under intense enemy pressure, the Army of Northern Virginia falls back south of the Rappahannock River.

Lee sets up his headquarters at Orange, an important railway station of the Orange & Alexandria railroad where his supplies are regular and abundant. The army recovers and the lightly wounded return to their regiments, joined by new recruits.

Remains the continuous problem of countless desertions. In September, Lee is forced to detach troops to track down the renegades, especially in North Carolina. He hopes this undertaking will assist him in winning a military victory, but we are far from this at the present moment.

Twenty-eight thousand soldiers have been lost during the previous campaign and their replacement becomes more and more difficult, not to mention the loss of many generals and officers, which greatly disrupts the organization of the army.

Facing the Army of Northern Virginia is its eternal foe, the Army of the Potomac, now under George Meade since June 27, 1863, its fifth commander since July 1861.¹

The authorities in Washington and especially chief of staff Henry Halleck scorn poor Meade for not pursuing Lee more aggressively and permanently defeating his army. It was obviously easier said than done! Yet, Meade had progressed to the Rappahannock River, which was already a feat in itself.

However, all is not rosy in the Army of the Potomac. During the previous year, the victorious North had recorded some 23,000 casualties. On top of that, it had been necessary to divert several units to New York to quell violent riots² never seen before in the United States. The police had been quickly overwhelmed by the mob and the army had to intervene to restore law and order.³

Desertion is also significant in the North. In 1863, the average was about 5,000 deserters per month. Fortunately, the wounded veterans were now rejoining their ranks, and conscripts and substitutes⁴ were beginning to boost the army numbers. However, their military skills were poor and their commanders had limited confidence in them.

Unlike in the South, the reservoir of men in the North seems inexhaustible because of its vast population⁵ and the almost forced incorporation of thousands of immigrants⁶. These means easily enabled to compensate for the losses.

LONGSTREET IS TRANSFERRED TO THE WEST

The triggering of the Bristoe affair is not the situation in Virginia itself. The problem comes from Tennessee where Braxton Bragg is suffering under strong pressure from Rosecrans' army. President Jefferson Davis is seriously concerned about this state of affairs.

On September 5, it is finally decided to transfer reinforcements from the Army of Northern Virginia to that of Tennessee. Lee could have done without this depletion of his forces. Anyhow, he has to accept the fact, and as of September 9, 1863, James Longstreet leaves the Rapidan front with the divisions of Hood and McLaws and an artillery battalion. George Pickett's 3^d Division, which was decimated at Gettysburg, is sent to Richmond to recover.

Lee's army is thus divested of 11,700 troops and 26 guns. Finally, this move proved justified since Longstreet's Corps arrived just in time to participate in the second day of the victorious battle of Chickamauga, on September 20, 1863.

In the aftermath, two days later, the Confederates began the siege of the Federal position of Chattanooga in southern Tennessee.

¹ Meade's predecessors were Irwin McDowell (1861), Georges B. McClellan (1862), Ambrose Burnside (1862) and Joseph Hooker (1863).

² The New York City draft riots were caused principally by the new conscription law. Moreover, blacks were considered responsible for all ills and became the defenseless scapegoats of a raging mob. They were the victims of extreme violence and many were lynched.

³ The film *Gangs of New York* illustrates these extreme scenes.

⁴ This legal system allowed the wealthy avoid being conscripted by paying poor citizens to take their place in the war.

⁵ 22,300,000 inhabitants and 802,000 immigrants in the North in 1860-65 against 9,100,000 inhabitants in the South, of which only 5,500,000 whites.

⁶ Idem 3.

SEPTEMBER 13 – BATTLE OF CULPEPER COURT HOUSE

As of September 11, Meade learns that Lee has been weakened by the departure of Longstreet. It would have been incomprehensible that Washington did not take advantage of this favorable situation.

Thus, on September 13 at dawn, the imposing Union cavalry corps crosses the Rappahannock and easily seizes Culpeper and some artillery pieces. The cavalry is supported by the IInd Corps.⁷ Opposite, General Lomax Lunsford and the three small cavalry brigades of Fitzhugh Lee's Division cannot do more than oppose a symbolic resistance. Subsequently, the Union's IInd Corps enters the city without firing a single shot.

Immediately after, the Federal cavalry advances up the Rapidan River but it is met by fierce rebel artillery fire. Pleasonton does not insist. Lee's army appears to be firmly entrenched and a break through is not possible. At nightfall, the US cavalry camps near Cedar Mountain.

In the following days, the seven infantry corps of the Army of the Potomac occupy the region between the Rapidan and Rappahannock Rivers and on September 20, Meade moves his headquarters to Culpeper.

During the following two weeks, the area between Culpeper and the Rapidan River becomes a no man's land where cavalry of both sides battle in numerous skirmishes. The confident northern cavalry is more aggressive than ever.

TRANSFER OF THE XIth AND XIIth FEDERAL CORPS TO THE WEST

Meanwhile, the Federal situation in Chattanooga has significantly deteriorated. President Lincoln and his government must take the same type of decision that the Confederates took three weeks earlier. On September 25, 1863, the 23,000 men and 45 guns of the XIth and XIIth Corps of the Army of the Potomac are transferred to the West. Joseph Hooker, the former army commander, leads this important force.

The troops pass through Washington and use the Baltimore & Ohio railroad. On the 27th, Major Harry Gilmore of the Maryland Partisan Rangers conveys this information to Lee. However, until October 1, the Confederate general remains skeptical.

LEE DECIDES TO RENEW THE OFFENSIVE – GLOBAL PLAN

The Confederates are still besieging Chattanooga and Meade remains idle along the Rapidan River. The time seems ripe for Lee. On October 3, he summons his main army commanders, Generals Ambrose Powell Hill, Richard Ewell and Jubal Early to a meeting at the top of Clark's Mountain. The general in chief has finally made up his mind: he will resume the offensive. The overall plan consists of a large encircling movement on the left flank of the enemy and a surprise attack against his right flank.⁸ Once again, Lee hopes to hit the Yankees while they are in full maneuver north of the Rappahannock.

As of October 7, rations are prepared for three days and 60 cartridges given to each man. The units must be prepared to move at any time on the next day.

⁷ The numbering of the Union Army Corps is in Roman numerals while for the South, it is in Arabic numerals.

⁸ Some sort of remake of the victorious battles of 2nd Manassas (August 1862) and Chancellorsville (May 1863).

THE OPPOSING FORCES

CONFEDERATES

Since June 1, 1862, the talented Robert Lee commands the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. Born in 1807, he is thus nearly 56 years old. After a year and a half of almost uninterrupted campaigns, he suffers from rheumatism, which seriously affects his legendary efficiency.

His army has changed over the past year. In July, 1863, it had suffered a serious trimming at Gettysburg⁹ and the departure of Longstreet's 1st Corps, on September 5, had certainly not improved the situation!

The muster rolls up to September 30, 1863, reveal the order of battle. The army consists solely of two infantry corps of three divisions¹⁰ and of a cavalry corps. The first is the 2nd Corps with the divisions of Rodes, Early and Johnson, commanded by Richard Dick Ewell. With a leg amputated in 1862, Ewell's place is probably better suited in a re-validation home rather than on a battlefield! The second is the 3rd Corps with the divisions of Heth, Anderson and Wilcox, led by Ambrose Powell Hill known as *A.P.* Hill, the warrior in the red shirt. Of a frail constitution, Hill suffers the recurring effects of a venereal disease contracted in 1844 while studying at West Point. He is known for his rashness, quality as much as weakness. As division commander, he is perfect but perhaps not really capable of leading an entire army corps. Ewell and *A.P.* Hill did not perform impressively during the disastrous battle of Gettysburg. So now, almost crippled generals command the army and especially its infantry!

The cavalry corps has two divisions of three brigades and is under the orders of James Ewell Brown Stuart, known as *Jeb* Stuart, in far better shape than in July! The small division of Wade Hampton consists of only 2,800 men. While Hampton is still recovering from a wound received at Gettysburg, Stuart commands the division and the corps, difficult to properly do both! Fitzhugh Lee, said *Fitz* Lee, the general in chief's nephew, leads the other division that is stronger with 5,200 men. The corps is supported by the 323 men of the six batteries of the legendary and still very effective Horse Artillery.

Finally, the foot artillery with 4,500 men, commanded since 1861 by Reverend William Pendleton, has been reorganized in May 1863. It is grouped into ten battalions with 40 batteries attached to the divisions and the corps. There is a small army artillery reserve of 2 battalions of 9 batteries. This serious deficit is mainly due to the shortage of guns in the South!

In total, Robert Lee can count on about 55,200 men backed by some 270 guns, a relatively modest force!

UNION

In the opposite camp, the ever-imposing Army of the Potomac is commanded by a virtually unknown general, George Gordon Meade. Born in 1815, he is 48 years old.¹¹

⁹ Practically the third of its force!

¹⁰ A division in 1863 has between 6,000 and 8,000 infantrymen. The regiment has only between 300 and 350 men, as compared to 1,100 in 1861.

¹¹ George Meade (1815-1872) was a professional soldier who graduated from the Military Academy at West Point in 1835, 19th in his class of 56. In addition, he was a civil engineer and participated in the Mexican War of 1846-1848.

However, he has never led troops in the field before the beginning of the Civil War. Since 1861, he was in charge of a brigade and a division, and in May 1863, of the Vth Corps. On June 28, 1863, three days before the clash at Gettysburg, he was given command of the entire Army of the Potomac.

The Federal army has already lost its XIth and XIIth Corps, which have been transferred to Chattanooga on Rosecrans' orders. According to the rolls of October 10, 1863, it consists of five infantry corps, the Ist, IInd, III^d, Vth and VIth Corps. Each is composed of two to three divisions of two to four brigades. On the 15th, a fourth division further strengthens the Vth Corps, which was already at full strength. The Union army has 16 divisions against 6 on the Confederate side or 71,000 men apposed to 42,500.

There is also a splendid cavalry corps with three divisions of two brigades and one in reserve. The 15,000 cavalrymen are well trained and armed with repeating rifles. Their mounts are of the highest quality. This cannot be said of the 8,400 riders in gray. There are three regiments of regular cavalry supported by eight batteries of artillery manned by regulars. Alfred Pleasonton¹² commands this huge force. He is also much more aggressive than his predecessor Stoneman.¹³

The artillery is organized quite differently and more efficiently than that of the Southerners, with excellent maneuverability and formidable firepower. The battalions are no longer attached to the divisions but only to the army corps. The eleven reserve battalions have 73 batteries against 49 on the Confederate side. The regular units fight alongside those of volunteers.

In total, the powerful Army of the Potomac totals approximately 92,000 men backed by some 440 guns.

FROM THE RAPIDAN TO CULPEPER – OCTOBER 8-11

From his base at Orange Court House, Robert Lee is going to renew the offensive in the northeast and against Washington. This will be the last time. He is not in top form, plagued by violent crises of rheumatism and for two days, has to be transported in an ambulance, which the troops do not see as a good omen! He accompanies Ewell's Corps.

On October 8, 1863, at 7 AM, the Confederate army starts marching westward, towards Liberty Mills. The next day at 5 AM, it crosses the Rapidan River in three places west of Orange. At the head of Hampton's Cavalry Division, *Jeb* Stuart precedes the infantry and covers its right flank along the Robertson River, masking the advance of the troops. Hill's Corps progresses on the left and Ewell's on the right. They advance through woods and gullies to avoid being spotted by Union observation towers. It is forbidden for the men to talk, let alone to sing!

As they go along, the departing units are replaced by outposts of Fitzhugh Lee's Cavalry Division and two Infantry Brigades. Quaker guns¹⁴ are placed along the Rapidan. At night, the army halts south of Madison.

¹² In October 1863, Alfred Pleasonton (1824-1897) is already an experienced cavalry officer. He came out of West Point in 1844, 7th out of 25.

¹³ George Stoneman was sent back to his studies after the fiasco of his raid in May 1863, during the Chancellorsville campaign.

¹⁴ Quaker guns were a Southern specialty. Fake guns had already been used in 1862 at Centreville and at Yorktown in Virginia.

On October 10, at 3 AM, a storming attempt is conducted on the observation tower located on Thoroughfare Mountain. The detachment of the 12th Virginia Cavalry is not really trained for this type of operation. It is quickly spotted and the attack is a failure. That same day, at 5 AM, the two Confederate corps are again on the go. The day is marked by the crossing of the Robertson River and a 20 mile march northeastward. At night, the infantry rests west of Griffinsburg. At noon, Stuart is in James City, west of Culpeper, facing Kilpatrick's Cavalry and a division of the IIIrd US Corps.

On the 11th, a similar scenario is repeated. Hill's Corps on the left starts at 6 AM and heads northeast. It crosses the Hazel River and upon reaching the Sperryville Pike, it veers southeast towards Culpeper. Since Ewell's Corps has less distance to travel, it only starts moving at 8 AM and follows the same route. By mid-afternoon, both corps halt at Stonehouse Mountain, 5 miles northwest of Culpeper. The troops occupy the enemy camps freshly evacuated at dawn.

Lee, now in far better shape, has remounted whereas Ewell's health is declining hourly. He moves his headquarters near Griffinsburg between his two army corps. In the morning, the Federals leave James City and Stuart penetrates Culpeper, pushing Kilpatrick out of town. Lee then enters the city under a warm welcome. While riding, he notes that the area has been completely devastated by the Union army and that most residents have been forced to flee the area.¹⁵

Officers order once more the men to prepare three days' rations, but there are no facilities to cook them since the convoys are still far behind. Moreover, the Federal camps are empty. There is nothing left to eat. Small consolation: soldiers recover a pair of boots here, a knapsack or a blanket there and discover a batch of brand new rifles. The men are literally dying of hunger!

Lee must face the facts: his maneuver has failed. Meade's troops are marching faster than his own. They are heading north towards the Rappahannock River.

That same October 10 at noon, Buford's Cavalry crosses the Rapidan at Germanna Ford. The two rebel infantry brigades left behind are under pressure and retreat to Morton's Ford that they try to hold. This is when *Fitz Lee's* cavalymen fall on those of Buford. Both cross the Rapidan River back and forth while the infantry in gray tries to follow as best as possible. *Fitz Lee* pursues Buford until Stevensburg. The fighting resumes there, forcing the Federals to withdraw towards the Rappahannock.

OCTOBER 11 – SECOND BATTLE OF BRANDY STATION

On the next day, October 11, both cavalries are once again active. From Culpeper, Stuart pursues Kilpatrick in a parallel direction to the Orange & Alexandria railroad. Continuing his previous effort from Stevensburg, *Fitz Lee* is on Buford's heels, but the latter arrives first at Fleetwood Hill, near Brandy Station.

As of June 10, 1863, more than 12,000 horsemen operate in the area. The disjointed Confederate charges are followed by efficient Northern counter attacks. Unexpectedly, *Fitz Lee's* artillery opens fire on Stuart's men, confusing them with those of Kilpatrick. Finally, the Federal cavalry, well led by its commander Alfred Pleasonton, manages to escape. At 8 PM, under the protection of the Vth Corps, it crosses the Rappahannock River not far from the rail station of the same name. Stuart is deeply frustrated.

¹⁵ According to the 1860 census, the prosperous city of Culpeper had 12,000 inhabitants.

OCTOBER 12

On October 12, the same exercise starts all over again and the hunting resumes. Lee again splits his infantry. Ewell on the right takes a direct route. His corps starts moving between 2 and 4 AM. Stuart is at the forefront. He is supported by Rodes' Division leading the 2nd Corps. In the morning, at Jeffersonton, Colonel John Gregg's Brigade of General David Gregg's Division (his cousin) narrowly escapes encirclement.

In the afternoon, at Sulphur Springs, Stuart is still supported by Rodes' Division, and particularly by its artillery. The Confederate cavalry again seriously disrupts John Gregg's Brigade. The 12th Virginia charges on the Rappahannock bridge and crosses it in force.

By late afternoon, the 2nd Corps reaches the Jeffersonton-Sulphur Springs area. Left, Hill progresses outside the circle, thus increasing the distance between corps. He is very late. Indeed, his 3rd Corps only starts moving between 8 and 10 AM. In the evening, he has merely managed to reach Amisville.

The two Confederate Corps have once again crossed the Hazel River.

MEADE ADVANCES TOWARDS CULPEPER

Meanwhile, Meade still ignores where the Confederate army is concentrated. He assumes it is probably on his right. Although his cavalry has been active, it has discovered nothing relevant. Are the Southerners heading straight for Washington or for the Shenandoah Valley? Why not towards Tennessee?

On October 12 at noon, Buford's Cavalry Division and the IInd, Vth and VIth Corps cross the southern part of the Rappahannock. The Ist and IIIrd protect their flanks. Meade hopes to meet Lee's army and force on him a pitched battle where the numbers and firepower would make a difference. The clash is foreseen in the Culpeper area. However, Lee is already far away and resolutely advancing towards Warrenton.

Meade is by nature reluctant to advance into the unknown. He orders his infantry to halt at Brandy Station. Only Buford's horsemen continue to cautiously move towards Culpeper. In front of them, the 180 riders of Colonel Thomas Rosser's 5th Virginia¹⁶ resist on foot. Young's Cavalry Brigade of Hampton's Division deploys in a second line. His mobility and the judicious use of his artillery seem to mystify Buford who stops for a break on the outskirts of Culpeper.

In the evening, Young orders to light far more campfires than necessary. However, Buford is not fooled: he has quickly realized that the Confederate cavalry in front of him is not significant and that Lee's army is not in Culpeper. In the evening, mission accomplished, he falls back on his infantry camped at Brandy Station where he plants his tent for the night.

At 9 PM, Meade is notified of Colonel Gregg's misfortunes at Jeffersonton and Sulphur Springs. He now knows the location of Lee's forces: on his right and almost on his rear. An immediate withdrawal is required.

Headquarters issue orders without delay. The three infantry corps start moving between 11 PM and midnight, followed by Buford's Cavalry at 1.30 AM. Their advance is parallel to the tracks of the Orange & Alexandria railway. The protection of endless

¹⁶ Thomas Lafayette Rosser was promoted general on October 15, 1863. In his Civil War Dictionary, Boatner mentions September 28.

supply convoys renders the Union staff hysterical: will *Jeb* Stuart try to seize them at any time? This will not be the case. Finally, without much trouble, the Army of the Potomac reaches Bull Run and Centreville.

On October 13, at 7 AM, the Federal engineers blow up the railway bridge on the Rappahannock River. They dismantle the pontoon bridges at 7.30 AM and in the process, reduce Bealeton station to ashes.

OCTOBER 13 – WARRENTON

On that same day, Hill leaves Amisville between 5 and 7 AM and heads north. When he reaches the Warrenton Turnpike, he veers eastward and crosses the Rappahannock River at Miller's Ford near Waterloo. Between noon and the end of the afternoon, the troops settle around Warrenton. Ewell's men are already there since they had less distance to travel. Having started at dawn, they got there at noon. Lee and Stuart have also arrived. Once again, rations must be cooked for two or three days.

Lee lingers for half a day in Warrenton. Was this half day too much? Should he perhaps have pushed Ewell's Corps further north? A few precious hours might have been eventually gained on the next day. However, his men need rest and food.

OCTOBER 13-14 – AUBURN

OCTOBER 13

On October 13 at noon, *Jeb* Stuart leaves Warrenton with two brigades of cavalry and seven guns to scout the surrounding area and Catlett Station, along the Orange & Alexandria railroad. *Fitz* Lee's Division follows him and stops at Auburn. His mission is to block anything that may come from Three Miles Station. However, one should remain cautious.

Concealed on a hill overlooking the railway line, *Jeb* Stuart cannot believe his eyes: 2,500 supply wagons are parked like sitting ducks along the tracks as far as the eye can see, between Warrenton and Catlett Station. A cavalryman's dream!

But Sykes Vth Corps and Sedgwick's VIth Corps are also there. This is probably too big a chunk to swallow for only two cavalry brigades. Nevertheless, it is perhaps the last opportunity to strike hard at the Army of the Potomac in motion. Stuart informs Lee that he must act quickly. Indeed, Newton's Ist Corps is already ahead and approaching fast Manassas Junction.

Meanwhile, arriving from Three Mile Station, French's IIIrd Corps attacks *Fitz* Lee's Cavalry at Auburn, which is outnumbered and has to retreat to Warrenton.

Stuart's situation quickly becomes untenable and he resolves to order his flamboyant but starving cavalry to turn back. Unknowingly, the Confederates pass near Meade's headquarters but the road is cut at Auburn. The IIIrd Corps quietly continues its march to Greenwich and Manassas. No one notices the presence of the enemy's cavalry.

With the Vth and VIth Corps at Catlett Station, Stuart is almost surrounded. He quickly hides his men in a wooded depression. It is 6 PM. The night promises to be long and cold, and there are no possibilities to light fires! Men whisper and fortunately, the horses and mules keep quiet. Stillness prevails through the hours of darkness.

OCTOBER 14

On the morning of October 14, Stuart is not yet out of trouble for Warren's IInd Corps has followed French's IIIrd. At 6 AM, Caldwell's Division crosses Cedar Run east of Auburn and settles on a hill overlooking Stuart's exact position that is still undetected.

The Federals are facing Warrenton, their back to the rebel cavalry. They are quietly preparing coffee. The hill will be renamed Coffee Hill, the name it still bears today.

At 6.30 AM, Stuart's seven guns open fire with diabolical precision. The Federals are bemused. They are attacked from the rear and panic but quickly awaken to the situation. They efficiently retaliate with their eighteen guns. Hays' Division crosses the Cedar Run.

Stuart now has to face two infantry divisions. A dismounted Confederate brigade opens a hot musket fire while the 1st North Carolina charges into the mass. Surprised, the enemy hesitates. At 7 AM, Stuart decides to withdraw. Operating a wide circle to the south around the IInd Corps, his division returns to Warrenton via Three Miles Station.

Stuart has barely pulled away that Ewell's 2nd Corps arrives from Warrenton and pushes aside Gregg's Cavalry Division guarding Warren's left flank. Caldwell's Division is for the second time under Confederate artillery fire. Early's and Rodes' Divisions are only weakly committed and do not pursue further. They are already redirected to Greenwich. Under cover of the cavalry, Warren's IInd Corps disengages effortlessly and progresses to Catlett Station where it arrives at around 10 AM.

OCTOBER 14 – MARCHING TOWARDS BRISTOE STATION

The rest of the day will be decisive and determine the success or the failure of the entire campaign.

At 5 AM, in Warrenton, AP Hill's 3rd Corps breaks camp. The inconsistencies will now unfold.

At New Baltimore, Hill is informed of the presence of enemy troops. Without any reconnaissance, he detaches Anderson's Division to Buckland Mills. He thinks he is facing the rear of the Union's IIIrd Corps but in fact, it is Kilpatrick's Cavalry Division. Anderson crosses the Broad Run. Failing to catch up with the enemy's cavalry, his men finally rejoin the bulk of the corps at Greenwich. *Fitz Lee's* Cavalry arrives timely and continues the pursuit of the enemy riders who have already taken a big lead.

At 10 AM, Hill reaches Greenwich. An hour later, Ewell's 2nd Corps also arrives. French's IIIrd Corps had left at 7 AM, the campfires still burning. By 9 AM, it is already on the other side of the Broad Run.

Hill's Corps is once again on the move. At 1 PM, it is the turn of General Harry Heth's Division to cross the Broad Run at Milford's Ford. On the opposite bank, behind the IIIrd Corps, Sykes' Vth Corps has just finished crossing the watercourse and his exhausted men are throwing their knapsack on the ground. Hill then arrives. Excited, he becomes as scarlet as his shirt! He orders a quick and immediate deployment of Heth's Division. His artillery starts firing on both the Vth Corps and Baxter's brigade. The latter is the vanguard of the IInd Corps that had arrived at Bristoe Station at noon, hoping to rest there. As quickly as possible, Baxter moves his brigade to Manassas. Sykes' men are surprised and the enemy shells pour on their heads for an hour. The Vth Corps retreats on the double until reaching Manassas. The deployment of Heth's Division is

anything but swift and it is already 2 PM when the general starts his attack on a Vth Corps that has since long evaporated!

BATTLE OF BRISTOE STATION

Meanwhile, Confederate scouts locate a strong enemy force advancing along the Orange & Alexandria railroad, on the rear of Hill's Corps. Indeed, despite a thirty-five hour march in the last forty-eight hours, Warren's IInd Corps¹⁷ has arrived at Catlett Station. No longer question for Hill to pursue the Vth Corps.

Not knowing what to do, Harry Heth stops his attack. After ten fatal minutes, Hill redirects Heth's Division to the railway line and Bristoe Station, making him execute a quarter turn to the right, which completely disorganizes his force.

Only Cooke's North Carolina Brigades on the right and Kirkland's Brigades¹⁸ on the left are able to attack immediately. After crossing wooded land, the nine Confederate assault regiments are now only 600 yards away from the railway embankment, clearly visible on the open ground and maneuvering beautifully as if on parade.

Meanwhile, Warren's IInd Corps has finally won the race. Behind the embankment are now lined up eleven regiments from three different brigades. They are well protected from artillery and musket fire. Only the men's heads are visible, providing difficult targets. Behind the infantry, the artillery is in position, concealed on the wooded hills with a magnificent view and range of fire. One could not dream of a better defensive position.

Despite such an unfavorable situation and without having reconnoitered the opposing position, Hill orders the attack. The rebel infantrymen progress under a murderous hail of lead. At 100 yards from the embankment, they fire their muskets without much efficiency. The artillery is also useless since the elevation of the railway track constitutes a very effective shield.

The suicidal charge¹⁹ continues and a handful of Confederates manage to make it to the embankment. Not for long since Colonel Mallon's New Yorkers slaughter them one after the other. The brave Mallon is mortally wounded in the action.

Within minutes, the two assaulting brigades have lost 40 percent of their men. It is enormous. They are no longer able to cross the fateful railway track. A retreat is ordered under a withering fire. Five hundred rebels trapped between the embankment and the hills prefer raising their arms to being shot in the back.

Meanwhile, the three divisions of Warren's IInd Corps have united. The Yankees are now in a position to counter attack. They proceed successfully and in the process, seize five guns of McIntosh's Battalion, which are too far up front and without infantry protection.

Heth's remaining two brigades finally arrive. They can only cover the retreat of their unfortunate comrades of the first wave, or at least, what little is left of them.

At 3 PM, Anderson's Division deploys on the right of Heth's survivors. At the same time, Wilcox's Division does the same on the left. Futile skirmishes persist until 4 PM. The Federal artillery is now in action and Confederate General Carnot Posey is mortally wounded by shrapnel. He will pass away on November 13. Hill's 3rd Corps that has arrived piecemeal is finally complete on the firing line, but this is by far too late and no

¹⁷ Warren's nickname was *Governor Kembl*.

¹⁸ The second first name of William Kirkland is *Woobdee*.

¹⁹ The lessons of the charges at Malvern Hill (1862) and Gettysburg (1863) had clearly not been learnt.

longer useful.

Also arriving from Greenwich, Ewell 2nd Corps has followed on a parallel road. At 4 PM, Early's Division deploys on the right of Anderson. Only Gordon's Brigade crosses the railway line in pursuit of an enemy convoy that finally escapes. This pushes the brigade eastward and renders it unusable. Early does not insist. At 5 PM, Johnson's Division approaches the battlefield. At 6 PM, it is the turn of Rodes to arrive. Lee's six infantry divisions are finally assembled to confront Warren's three small divisions. But there remains less than an hour of light at this time of year. It is too late to even hope achieving something.

Lee has accompanied Ewell's 2nd Corps. Will he re-inject some vigor in his army that badly needs it? Unfortunately no, since he clearly lacks energy himself. However, he is on site as of 4 PM. Everything is still possible. But he is strangely amorphous, probably physically weakened. Perhaps he has not mentally recovered from the Gettysburg campaign or is shocked by Heth's huge losses. Unless he is impressed by the strong enemy position? In any case, he orders no further action.

Between 8.30 and 11 PM, in complete silence, Warren's IInd Corps quietly withdraws from the Confederate right flank under Lee's nose. His soldiers hold tight their mess tin and cup to avoid making noise. At about 4 AM, exhausted, they finally reach the main army at Manassas. In their wake follow Buford's and Gregg's Cavalry Divisions with their precious convoys.

Although Warren has evacuated the battlefield, his victory is unquestionable. He has lost about 540 men of which only 50 killed. He has managed to block Lee and the Army of the Potomac is now safely encroached behind the Bull Run, beyond Manassas.

On the opposite side, the Confederates have lost nearly 2,000 men, of which only 137 killed despite the deluge of enemy fire, and above all 500 prisoners. Lee cut short Hill's tearful apology for the defeat by saying: *Well, General, bury these poor souls and stop talking about it!* From this moment on, Hill's reputation, already tarnished at Gettysburg, took a serious blow. Lee's as well as the army's confidence in him would never be quite the same again!

OCTOBER 4-20 – RETREAT

Lee goes no further than Bristoe Station. His force has been weakened and there is no question of further offensive. Division after division, the rebel army marches southward. Its task is now to take apart and sabotage the Orange & Alexandria railroad. The men destroy the wooden sleepers on site whereas they recover the iron rails and spikes. These will be melted to produce guns or armor plates at the Tredegar Iron Works²⁰. The men are perpetually hungry and the work is exhausting. They growl: *This is work for niggers, not for us!*²¹

On October 20, the Confederate army is once again south of the Rappahannock. Meanwhile, Lee had sent Stuart to reconnoiter the area leading to Manassas up to Bull Run. His report is anything but encouraging: the five corps of the Army of the Potomac are at full strength and firmly entrenched around Centreville. One cannot seriously consider dislodging them from such a strong position. Their supply convoys and

²⁰ Famous metallurgical complex in Richmond, Virginia, located along the James River, the largest cannon foundry in the Confederacy.

²¹ They were not entirely wrong. Indeed, blacks of the Union military railways suffered martyrdom during a month to rebuild the stretch of the Orange & Alexandria railway, which was destroyed in six days by Lee's men.

pontoon bridges, well covered by the cavalry, have again managed to slip through the rebel lines, another failure of the Confederate cavalry. After some useless and inconclusive skirmishes near Manassas Junction and Centreville, the horsemen hesitate to persevere and wisely decide to retire.

OCTOBER 19 – THE BUCKLAND RACES

From his impregnable headquarters at Centreville, the unfortunate George Meade, still harassed by his superiors and Washington's politicians, decides on a new, methodical but timid counter offensive.

Early in the morning of October 19, Judson Kilpatrick's Cavalry Division advances on the Warrenton Turnpike, remotely supported by the 1st Corps. At 8 AM, in Gainesville and Hay Market, Kilpatrick comes across Hampton's Division commanded by Stuart. Under heavy pressure, the Southerners have no choice but to fall back behind the Broad Run at Buckland Mills. Custer's²² brigade pushes through and allows his men to rest and eat. Is this the right time? Davies and his brigade then take the lead to pursue Stuart. Kilpatrick wisely dispatches scouts. Their report is somewhat disturbing: not a rebel rider on the horizon! Yet Fitzhugh Lee²³ and his division are at Auburn and have not been spotted. Stuart and Lee are in contact. A trap is being set up.

However, everything seems to go well for the Union cavalry. Davies is now beyond New Baltimore and has reached Chestnut Hill. Only three miles separate him from Custer. Meanwhile, Kilpatrick is notified of the presence of a cavalry column coming from the south. This must be Merritt with his reserve brigade on his way to Catlett Station. He is sadly mistaken, because it is in reality *Fitz Lee's* Division.

From that moment on, the events accelerate. *Fitz Lee* attacks Custer's Brigade at Buckland Mills. At Chestnut Hill, Stuart makes a u-turn and Hampton's Division clashes with Davies' Brigade. This is too much for Kilpatrick's men. Their retreat quickly turns into a rout. Stuart chases them for five miles up to Haymarket and Gainesville. Derisively, the Confederates called this affair *The Buckland Races*. Some of their officers indeed compared the end of this action to a fox hunt.

Fortunately, the 1st Corps has deployed between Gainesville and Haymarket, which deters Stuart's cavalry to push further and thus saves Kilpatrick's Division from annihilation. The next day, the exhausted but victorious Confederate cavalry crosses the Rappahannock at Beverly Ford and joins the main army south of the river.

THE LAST DAYS OF OCTOBER

On October 20, as soon as permitted by the repairs to the Orange & Alexandria railroad, the five infantry corps of the Army of the Potomac leave Centreville and resume their march towards the Rappahannock River. As always, huge convoys of supplies accompany them, including pontoon bridges and railroad repair equipment.

On the 21st, the Union cavalry crosses the Rapidan, Buford's Division in the lead. Until October 26, skirmishes increase with Ewell's 2nd Corps, whose task was to protect

²² George Armstrong Custer (1839-1876), left West Point in June 1861, last of his class of 34 students. He was appointed brigadier general in the cavalry on June 29, 1863, at the age of 23!

²³ Fitzhugh Lee (1835-1905) was a nephew of General Robert Lee. After leaving West Point in 1856, 45th out of 49, he was appointed brigadier general in the cavalry on July 24, 1862. He was then 27 years old! On August 3, 1863, he was promoted major general and commanded a division.

the convoys of recovered iron rails.

Also on that day, Colonel John Singleton Mosby's Rangers capture a convoy of 100 supply wagons between New Baltimore and Warrenton. This was more than what had been achieved so far by the entire Confederate cavalry corps!

On October 30, the railroad is back in service up to Warrenton Junction. The next day, Meade moves his pontoon bridges to Catlett Station. In the meantime, Lee sends two infantry regiments to hunt deserters in the Madison area.

IN THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY

Throughout the month of October in the Shenandoah Valley, Virginia, the 3,000 men of Imboden, Warton and Jenkins conduct a laborious harassment campaign against 24,600 Northerners. On October 18, Imboden successfully attacks Charlestown near Harper's Ferry. Unfortunately, this laudable action has no impact on the campaign.

NOVEMBER 7 – RAPPAHANNOCK STATION AND KELLY'S FORD

The first week of November 1863 is pretty quiet. The Rappahannock River once more separates the two opposing armies.

Lee cautiously orders to install a fortified bridgehead on the north bank of the river, near the ruins of Rappahannock Station. He takes advantage of the existing Federal redoubts that his army engineers quickly refurbish or rebuild. Only one pontoon bridge now connects the two banks of the river since the retreating Yankees have destroyed the railway bridge on October 13. Artillery batteries cover the site from the south shore. Lee estimates that his fortifications are sturdy. Of the same opinion, Ewell echoes that good work has been done. Early is more critical about the effectiveness of the defensive arrangements. We shall soon see that he was right.

Further east is Kelly's Ford. The northern shore held by the Federals overlooks the southern bank. The position is poor and difficult to hold. On November 7 at noon, French's IIIrd Corps crosses the ford in strength without much difficulty. Commanding the 2nd Confederate Corps, Ewell sets off to the scene. He arrives too late. Rodes has been surprised and two of his regiments have been captured.

At 3 PM, the artillery of Sedgwick VIth Corps starts shelling the bridgehead at Rappahannock Station, defended by two brigades of Jubal Early, allegedly composed of seasoned veterans. The firing ceases at 5 PM. It is almost dark. Lee and Early confer. The Yankees have never attacked during the night. The assault would thus take place on the next day. So one had time to see it coming.

Then the unthinkable happens. The northern infantry appears from nowhere and instantly overwhelms the stunned defenders. The surprise is total. Hundreds of Confederates lay down their arms. Only 600 men manage to escape by way of the river pontoon. The others are captured. Early cannot believe his eyes. Supreme frustration, he cannot even bring into action the gun batteries positioned south: it is too dark. Nothing can be seen except the flashes of musket fire.

With the loss of the bridgehead and the presence of the IIIrd Corps south of the river, the situation becomes untenable. Lee never understood what went wrong. Ewell's 2nd Corps bears a heavy responsibility. Moreover, he had lost 2,023 valuable men in this unbelievable affair, while the enemy recorded only 419 casualties. During the night, without wasting time, Lee abandons the Rappahannock line. On November 10, he

retreats via Culpeper and Brandy Station to nearby Orange, south of the Rapidan River, his departing base. George Meade and the Army of the Potomac once more occupy the area around Culpeper and Brandy Station.

THE LOSSES

By its constant mobility, this campaign is probably the less bloody of Virginia's entire theater of operations. The Union lost about 5,200 men, of which less than 200 killed. The Southerners lost over 2,000 men, of which less than 300 killed. The fighting at Bristoe Station and at Rappahannock Station had also cost the Confederates 2,500 prisoners. Around 1,500 northerners were captured, mostly by Stuart's Cavalry.

CONCLUSION

As always, Lee's plan had been masterful. The unfavorable ratio of forces - two to one - was not a real problem for him. It was not the first time that the southern general faced such a situation. He had once again staked everything on a rapid maneuver.

However, his plan had been executed less magnificently than in previous battles. Although he finally had no choice, Lee lost time in Culpeper and Warrenton. On October 14, A.P. Hill had proved mediocre at Bristoe Station, and he was obviously largely responsible for the campaign's failure. His superior, momentarily paralyzed, had done nothing to remedy the situation. On November 7, Lee, Ewell, Early and Rodes had equally been overwhelmed along the Rappahannock.

The opposing armies had marched more than 125 miles each in 30 autumn days, while fighting incessant skirmishes. Temperatures had dropped and it was cold at night. It rained heavily every other day. Lacking shoes and blankets as always, the Confederates suffered more than their foe.

The roads had turned into quagmires, which did not help. Finally, both armies had returned exactly to their starting point. It should also be pointed out that this time, the Yankees had marched faster than their Confederate counterparts and their infantry had proved more effective. The cavalry of both sides perfectly fulfilled their role. As to the southern infantry, it was more debatable. The quality of the troops had declined and the yield was felt. The 2,500 captured soldiers are an irrefutable proof of this.

Finally, the result of the campaign was inconclusive. Lee and his officers were demoralized. They had not been able to cut Meade from Washington and force him to fight a decisive battle. This lost opportunity would not present itself anymore. Lee would never again have the means to regain the initiative of operations. Until the end of the war, he would have to submit to the law of a more powerful opponent, with no doubt less means, but still much talent.

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