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A Whole Lot of Blame to Go Around: The Confederate Collapse at Five Forks

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Abstract

While Confederate major general George E. Pickett was finishing his plate of fried fish at a shad bake, Union major general Philip H. Sheridan was devouring Pickett's command at Five Forks. The sounds of the Federal assault were supposedly silenced by abnormal atmospheric conditions called an acoustic shadow. Pickett and his luncheon companions -- Maj. Gen. Thomas Rosser and Maj. Gen. Fitzhugh Lee -- heard nothing over the sounds of conviviality, but the sudden appearance of the courier alerted the dining party to an alarming reality. This soldier claimed that he was nearly shot out of his saddle by Federal soldiers who were sweeping the Confederate infantry. Plates and cups must have dropped to the ground when he pointed to the enemy skirmishers advancing just a few hundred yards away. It was abundantly clear to every person at the shad bake, whether the man had imbibed or not, that the enemy was on the verge of enveloping Pickett's entire command. [*excerpt*]

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Comments

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Petersburg
♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ **to** ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦
Appomattox



THE END OF THE WAR IN VIRGINIA

Edited by Caroline E. Janney

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A Whole Lot of Blame to Go Around

The Confederate Collapse at Five Forks

Peter S. Carmichael



While Confederate major general George E. Pickett was finishing his plate of fried fish at a shad bake, Union major general Philip H. Sheridan was devouring Pickett's command at Five Forks. The sounds of the Federal assault were supposedly silenced by abnormal atmospheric conditions called an acoustic shadow. Pickett and his luncheon companions — Maj. Gen. Thomas Rosser and Maj. Gen. Fitzhugh Lee — heard nothing over the sounds of conviviality, but the sudden appearance of a courier alerted the dining party to an alarming reality. This soldier claimed that he was nearly shot out of his saddle by Federal soldiers who were sweeping behind the Confederate infantry. Plates and cups must have dropped to the ground when he pointed to enemy skirmishers advancing just a few hundred yards away. It was abundantly clear to every person at the shad bake, whether the man had imbibed or not, that the enemy was on the verge of enveloping Pickett's entire command.

Such sobering news spurred into action the man who had earned immortality for his failed charge at Gettysburg. Pickett rushed to the front, riding on the right side of his horse as a shield from enemy fire. Everything was in disarray by the time he reached Five Forks. Thousands of men streamed past him, fleeing the field with the single-mindedness of veterans driven by the desire to survive. They showed no regard for their reputations and cared even less for the authority of rank. Their flight cleared the way for the Federals to seize the South Side Railroad, a communication and supply line of immense importance. Union control of these tracks forced Gen. Robert E. Lee to evacuate Petersburg, which in turn meant that Richmond's days as the Confederate capital were numbered. Pickett's debacle at Five Forks, unlike his bloody

failure at Gettysburg, could not be redeemed as a grand gesture of romantic heroism. The humiliation of this disaster, however, could be swept under the rug of the Lost Cause, which hid all imperfections by attributing any Confederate setback to Union armies having more troops and resources.

The storyline above encapsulates the standard explanation of Confederate defeat at Five Forks, a crossroads where the White Oak Road, Scott's Road, Ford's Road, and Dinwiddie Court House Road intersected. Without exception, historians have criticized Pickett and Fitz Lee for a dereliction of duty that is virtually unparalleled in the Civil War. Some historians maintain that both officers, even if they had abandoned their men for a fish fry, could have done nothing to check such a powerful Union attack led by Generals Sheridan and Gouverneur K. Warren. Others see Pickett and Fitz Lee as the hapless victims of an acoustic shadow that distorted the soundscape of the battle. How could anyone have expected the Confederate officers to defeat the Yankees when nature itself had turned against them?¹

The interpretive consensus on Five Forks advances a number of shared conclusions, though not all historians embrace these points with equal conviction. In one explanation Sheridan and Warren remain a virtual sideshow to Pickett and Fitz Lee, whose defeat was of their own making. Union victory, in other words, fell into Sheridan and Warren's lap; the quirky aspects of the battle—the shad bake and acoustic shadow—isolated Pickett and Fitz Lee from their commands and doomed Confederate chances. These arguments, though useful, are almost entirely disconnected from the operational and strategic context of the battle. The result is a lack of historical altitude on Five Forks that keeps Robert E. Lee at a safe distance from one of the greatest calamities that befell his army.

Few generals in military history who were at the helm when their armies collapsed and their cities fell have received less critical scrutiny than Lee. As soon as the war ended, ex-Confederates rallied to their former commander's defense, arguing that he was never outgeneraled or defeated but succumbed to superior numbers and resources in a ruthless war waged by a godless enemy. This idea formed the cornerstone of a Lost Cause explanation of Confederate defeat that continues to raise its ugly head today.² The almost militant defense of Lee, however, did not bring unanimity among white Southerners. In 1866, for instance, James D. McCabe Jr. argued in *Life and Campaigns of Robert E. Lee* that the collapse of Confederate forces at Petersburg could have been avoided if Jefferson Davis had relinquished more authority to Lee. The calamity at Five Forks was particularly disturbing to McCabe. He pinned the defeat on Pickett's infantry, whose behavior on April 1, 1865, he

condemned as cowardice. McCabe argued that the once proud soldiers of Gettysburg were so weak-minded and demoralized at this late stage of the war that when pressed by the Yankees they “made little to no effort to hold their position.” McCabe buttressed his account with some apocryphal stories that were intended to elicit sympathy for the commanding general. According to McCabe, an indignant Lee “had witnessed this disgraceful conduct of his troops, promising those around him that when Pickett’s veterans were taken into action again, he would place himself at the head of their charging column. Then turning to a general officer present, Lee ordered ‘him sternly and with marked emphasis, to collect and put under guard *‘all the stragglers on the field.’*”³ McCabe’s Five Forks account was pure fiction. Lee was nowhere close to the Five Forks battlefield, but the reading public would be unaware of such a crucial detail.

The survivors of Five Forks had been shamed, and honor demanded a public response. Walter Harrison, formerly of Pickett’s staff, would not allow McCabe’s accusations to stand without a challenge. In his 1870 publication, *Pickett’s Men: A Fragment of War History*, Harrison tried to restore the tarnished image of the Confederates at Five Forks by discrediting McCabe. He denounced McCabe for his falsification of the past, reminding his readers that “it might not be worth while to notice this foolish and slanderous attack against the ‘men of Gettysburg’; upon these veteran soldiers of many battlefields whom Gen. Lee himself ‘delighted to honor.’”⁴ Yet the dispute between Harrison and McCabe did not erupt into contentious public debate over Five Forks. In fact, the words of Harrison and McCabe were largely forgotten, their writings inconsequential to subsequent debates. The shad bake and the acoustic shadow, which eventually became permanent fixtures in modern studies, were not even mentioned by either author.

The Five Forks debate found new life in 1884 when Confederate cavalryman Tom Rosser revealed the story of the shad bake in the *Philadelphia Weekly Times*. He exposed the embarrassing fact that Pickett and Fitzhugh Lee had absented themselves from their commands for a fish fry. Rosser admitted that he had organized the affair, but he was quick to note that neither Fitz Lee nor Pickett seemed especially concerned about the welfare of the troops or interested in the intentions of the enemy. During the feast, Rosser noted that “couriers came in from” the picket line reporting Federal activity, but their messages failed to convince Pickett and Fitz Lee that the enemy was on the move. They trusted their ears over the eyes of their subordinates. As long as the popping sounds of picket fire did not escalate into sustained cannonades and musketry, they saw no reason to stop eating. Not until a



Maj. Gen. George E. Pickett, renowned for his failed charge at Gettysburg, blamed subordinates and superiors alike for his debacle at Five Forks.
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courier reported that he had been fired upon did the party break up. After so many years, Rosser still could not understand Pickett's behavior. "It seems to have been a surprise to General Pickett, yet one would have supposed that he would have been on the alert in the presence of an enemy he had so recently been fighting, but from all I could see on the occasion I am satisfied that all the generalship and management was on the Federal side."⁵ For the

man who was behind the fish fry and apparently enjoyed the food and drink as much as any other officer there, it took some nerve for Rosser to single out Pickett for negligence.

Although Rosser had an unquenchable passion for disparaging his fellow officers, there are no outlandish claims in the *Philadelphia Weekly Times*—as one would have expected from the Virginia cavalryman. Historians have largely accepted Rosser's conclusion that Five Forks was lost at the shad bake, where Pickett and Fitz Lee unknowingly sat in a soundproof vault of nature's own creation. The echoes of battle that reverberated across the gloomy pine flats surrounding Five Forks never reached the two most important Confederate officers on the field. No historian has done more to popularize this interpretation than Douglas Southall Freeman, whose four-volume Pulitzer Prize biography of Lee, *R. E. Lee: A Biography*, and three-volume history of the Army of Northern Virginia, *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command*, established him as one of the most influential of all Civil War historians of his generation. In both works, Freeman, who was never shy about his Confederate sympathies, does not go easy on Pickett and Fitz Lee. He blames both men for attending a shad bake rather than tending to their troops. This lapse of judgment, he insists, turned an inevitable defeat into a rout. In the end, Freeman articulated the interpretation that has become the widely accepted historical interpretation: the position at the Forks was indefensible, Sheridan's force was too strong, and in the face of such extreme odds no act of generalship could have rescued Pickett's small command. Freeman offers a well-reasoned and researched explanation for the Confederate collapse at Five Forks, but when the author turns to Lee, he loses his critical perspective. As was typical of Freeman, he always went out of his way to dust off Lee's fingerprints from any reverse. The calamity at Five Forks was no exception.

Lee stands behind a Lost Cause barricade, shielded from criticism about April 1, 1865, at the expense of his subordinates, who are left without cover and easily targeted for the operational and tactical mistakes made by the Army of Northern Virginia on that day. In *R. E. Lee*, Freeman removes the general from the Five Forks debacle without exploring all that Lee could have done to protect the South Side Railroad. To identify such possibilities would have challenged the inevitability of Confederate defeat, a point that Freeman treasured. Instead, he checked the standard interpretive boxes: too many enemy soldiers, too few resources, and a lack of subordinates who could carry out Lee's brilliant designs. With his typical seductive eloquence, Freeman wrote of Five Forks, "Thus in two calamitous hours, the mobile force that Lee had established to protect his right flank was swept away and virtually ceased to

be." Although the general was physically present on the extreme western edge of the Petersburg lines, Freeman insisted that "his [Lee's] most strategic position had been lost. Fought in accordance with the plans made by two subordinates, and without Lee's participation or knowledge of what was happening, Five Forks was only one scene removed from the dread denouement."⁶

If one accepts Freeman's assessment of Five Forks, then one must also excuse Lee for not participating in or knowing anything about a situation that the general himself deemed a threat to the very existence of his army and nation. It is unfortunate that Freeman distanced Lee from the battlefield at Five Forks, but this was in keeping with his belief that Lee's generalship was beyond reproach. Freeman needed to strike a better balance between criticism and empathy. If he had done so, his analysis would have been more incisive and his interpretation more enduring. A more critical approach, however, does not mean entertaining the what-ifs that plague much of the anti-Lee scholarship.⁷ Any suggestion that the general could have saved his army with an offensive maneuver reminiscent of Second Manassas or Chancellorsville is pure fantasy. The Army of Northern Virginia had long passed its zenith of power, and the grind of siege warfare had reduced the fighting spirit and strength of the rank and file. In the spring of 1865, Lee only had 31,400 men to cover twenty-seven-and-a-half miles of trench line that stretched from the Richmond defenses just north of the James River to the western outskirts of Petersburg. On the ground it came to 1,140 men per mile, or one man every yard and a half.⁸

Lee's veteran soldiers were hanging on by a gossamer thread. Quite simply, Petersburg was a fiendish place. Clean water was difficult to find, and rations were inadequate and insufficient in nutrients. Weakened bodies living in filth and mud were vulnerable to diarrhea and dysentery. The physical decline of the troops decimated morale. It was no surprise that desertion surged among Confederates who had neither the will nor the physical energy to continue the fight. Confederate lieutenant general Richard Anderson admitted as much in his official report of the Petersburg campaign to Lee: "Our army (from what causes it is useless to inquire) had received no accession of strength and was in all points weaker than when it had marched the year before to the battle of the Wilderness." "That of the enemy," he added, "was much more powerful than it had been and his number, his equipage, his transportation and his ammunition were ostensibly exhibited to our half starved, poorly equipped and depleted ranks, and disheartened and discouraged they entered upon the campaign of 1865 with but little of the spirit of former days."⁹

The Army of Northern Virginia was falling apart because of Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's calculated strategy to deprive Lee of the means to wage war in the early spring of 1865. The Army of the Potomac extended its tentacles westward beyond Petersburg, choking off all but two of the Confederates' important links to the outside world—the South Side and Richmond & Danville Railroads. In so doing, Grant locked Lee's army in place while damaging valuable railroads leading to Petersburg from the south and west. Lee attempted to break the Army of the Potomac's chokehold by attacking Fort Stedman on March 25. Lee had committed to evacuating Richmond and Petersburg prior to his attack against Fort Stedman, which was designed as a means to that end, not as the catalyst for it. Initially the Confederates punched a hole in the enemy lines, but the Federals regrouped and restored their broken lines. The defeat helped convince Lee that the fall of Richmond was unavoidable. He started to outline contingency plans to evacuate both cities, assuring civil authorities that abandoning the nation's capital would not be akin to throwing away the cause. He wrote to the secretary of war that "if the army can be maintained in an efficient condition, I do not regard the abandonment of our present position as necessarily fatal to our success."¹⁰ But a controlled and methodical evacuation could occur only if Lee withdrew on his timetable—not the enemy's.

There was no reprieve for the Army of Northern Virginia after Fort Stedman. Within days of the failed assault, Grant sent some 13,000 of Philip Sheridan's troopers on an expedition to end the siege. They were to head west and sweep around the Confederate flank by moving toward Dinwiddie Court House. From there, Sheridan could head north, using his mobility and firepower to get astride the South Side Railroad. Communications would be severed and supplies would be shut off, leaving Petersburg and Richmond untenable.

To protect the Confederate right flank from Sheridan's slashing offensive, Lee organized a task force of 5,500 horsemen under Fitzhugh Lee and 6,000 infantry under George Pickett. The shifting of troops to Petersburg was no easy matter. The situation on the Confederate left flank above the James River was also vulnerable. Stripping troops from that area worried Lt. Gen. James Longstreet, who was uncertain of the enemy's intentions on his own front. Lee warned Longstreet that he might need to lead a division in person. In the meantime, he called on three brigades of Pickett's division, the closest thing that Lee had to a reserve force.¹¹ These troops were north of the James River and close to Richmond in order to await a possible raid by Sheridan. When the attack never materialized and Sheridan's movements

toward Petersburg were detected, Pickett's men boarded trains for Petersburg on March 29. During the movement they tried to conceal themselves from the enemy until they reached Sutherland Station, some ten miles beyond the western edge of the Petersburg trenches.

Once they disembarked, Pickett received orders to move to Hatcher's Run and report to Fourth Corps commander Richard Anderson near Burgess Mill. It was a wicked march in a fierce night rain. Swollen streams and mud nearly derailed the operation. The misery did not end until the troops reached their destination early on the morning of March 30. Escaping the shackles of trench warfare was supposed to rejuvenate weary veterans, but Pickett's men were reminded that campaigning in the field had its own way of oppressing body and mind.¹²

Shortly after the troops arrived, Pickett headed to an important meeting with Robert E. Lee and Maj. Gen. Henry Heth. Both officers had just finished a morning reconnaissance. A Virginia artilleryman watched the pair ride by, recording the moment in his diary. He noted that Lee did not appear to be in "a good humour."¹³ It is easy to imagine why; nothing in his reconnaissance with Heth offered much cause for hope. Wherever he looked, Lee saw trenches sparsely held. What could be done to meet a situation that was turning into a full-blown crisis when there were so few soldiers? The previous day the Confederates had been unable to hold the Boydton Plank Road for a lack of manpower in a sharp little fight known as Lewis Farm House or Quaker Road. The loss of this important roadway, coupled with the news that Sheridan's troops were massing around Dinwiddie Court House, demonstrated Grant's intentions. The entire Confederate right flank—and not just the South Side Railroad—was imperiled. To meet this Federal offensive, the Confederate commander had no choice but to lengthen his lines to the west along the White Oak Road. This would extend his position past the Claiborne Road and toward Five Forks.¹⁴

It was midmorning when Lee and Heth met Pickett and Anderson at the Turnbull House. A staff officer described this gathering as "a considerable *pow-wow* . . . among the chiefs."¹⁵ It appears that everyone agreed that a purely defensive posture would play into the hands of Grant and Sheridan. Heth opened the conversation with the suggestion that his division, supported by Pickett, would strike the Federals near Burgess Mill. If successful, Grant would have to contract his lines and regroup, thus buying Lee more time to shift forces to his distressed flank. The proposed movement, however, would have done nothing to blunt Sheridan's inevitable advance from Dinwiddie Court House. Lee's reservations about Heth's proposal were not

recorded, but his alternative plan of sending Pickett and Fitz Lee as a strike force outside the main Confederate line was consistent with his belief in a defensive-offensive philosophy. This had guided his operations from the beginning of the siege.

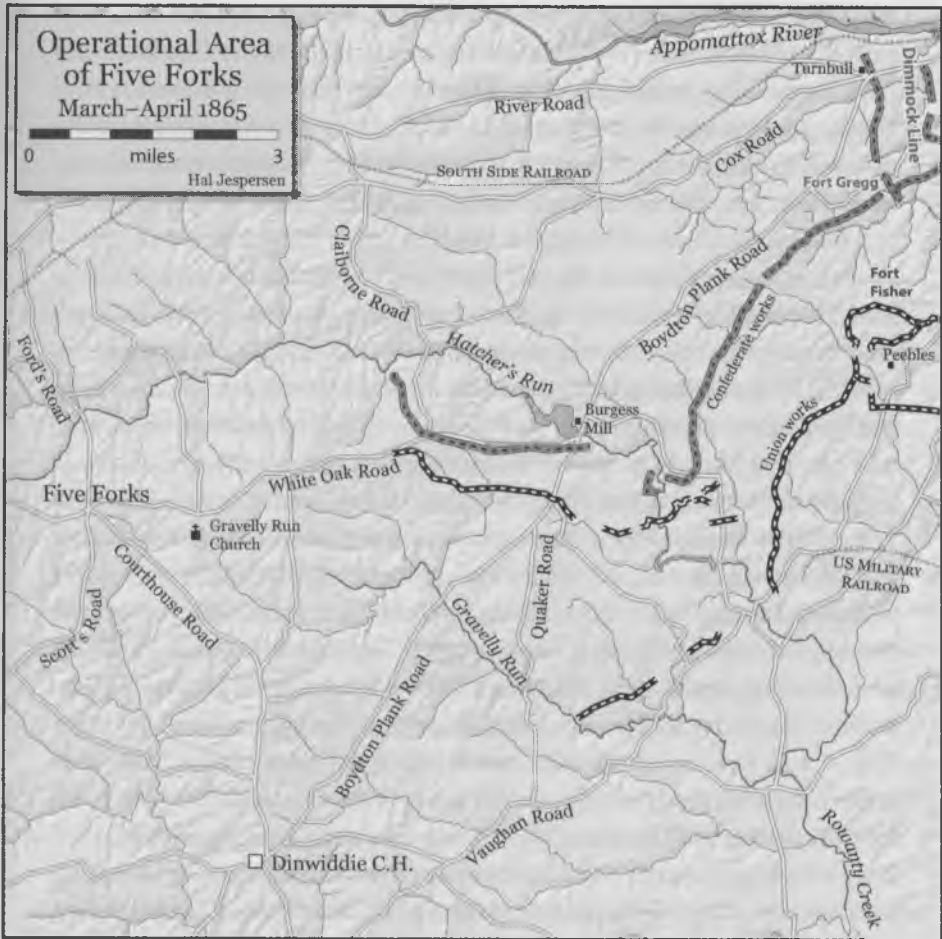
To suggest that the general should have stayed in his formidable trenches to simply preserve his manpower overlooks the inescapable political imperatives that forced Lee's hand. Unless he took offensive action, he would be relinquishing Petersburg without any resistance. The Confederacy could not handle another Joseph E. Johnston. From the start of the siege in June 1864, Lee had wanted his counterstrokes to drive the Army of the Potomac from the besieged city, but it quickly became apparent that Grant, no matter how serious the battlefield setback, was not going to budge. All Lee could do was frustrate his adversary's operations. He did so in a series of offensive forays throughout the summer and fall of 1864. The Army of the Potomac staggered back from the Confederates' well-directed counterpunches, but without sufficient reserves, Lee lacked the offensive muscle to deliver a knockout blow. And yet the Confederates had still managed to achieve tactical success at Jerusalem Plank Road (June 22–24), Weldon Railroad (August 18–21), Ream's Station (August 25), Peebles Farm (September 30–October 2), Boydton Plank Road (October 27), and Hatcher Run (February 5–7, 1865).¹⁶

With the opening of the spring campaign in early 1865, Grant was eager to resume the familiar dance of trying to sidestep the enemy. Union forces would push to the west, extending their reach around Petersburg, and the Confederates would respond by coming out of their trenches to resist the advance. As this pattern of operations had already revealed, Federal troops were often dispersed, isolated, and vulnerable to attack. At the same time, Grant had induced Lee to move his troops outside of his powerful fortifications. This must have pleased the Union commander, but Lee had history on his side. Since the beginning of the siege, his troops had been outmanned, but they had never been outfought. Lee had good reason to believe that a mobile Confederate force would disrupt and embarrass the Federal advance, especially in the open field. Lee had said as much to his cavalry subordinate and nephew Fitz Lee—and most likely to Heth, Pickett, and Anderson as well. According to Fitz Lee, the general had stated, "We could attack that force (Sheridan), and had better attack it as the best way to break it up and prevent any movement upon their part."¹⁷

As grim as things were in late March 1865 for the Army of Northern Virginia, Lee knew that Federals operating south of Petersburg were vulnerable to a Confederate counterstroke. A static defense of Five Forks and

the Burgess Mill area would have rendered Pickett's situation hopeless. Lee clearly expected Pickett and Fitz Lee to keep the enemy off-balance through creative maneuvering and aggressive fighting. Pickett and Fitz Lee proved that they were not up to the task at hand, but reading backward from their breathtaking failure on April 1 obscures how Lee thought at the time. He constantly looked to create possibilities for his army, particularly at those times when others had turned to despair and fatalism. Recent history at Petersburg had taught him that his troops were always ready to exploit any misstep by the enemy. In the end, Pickett's expedition to Five Forks and Dinwiddie Court House was not a desperate gamble on Lee's part but a sound decision rendered during desperate times. In fact, it was entirely consistent with his operational strategy throughout the campaign against Grant's flanks. The only departure from Lee's pattern on March 31 was his decision to attack Sheridan's exposed flank rather than to slice between Sheridan and the permanent Union works. The presence of the Union Fifth Corps in that "gap" dictated the course of Lee's counterpunch.

When the meeting closed at the Turnbull House between Lee and his chief subordinates, Pickett received his marching orders. He would have five brigades of infantry under his command; three came from his own division and two drew from the ranks of Maj. Gen. Bushrod Johnson. The gap that the brigades left in place along Burgess Mill was filled by Maj. Gen. Cadmus M. Wilcox's soldiers. Pickett's amalgamated force amounted to some 6,000 foot soldiers. He also carried six pieces of artillery under the direct supervision of the renowned cannoneer William R. J. Pegram. His task force marched to join Fitz Lee's three cavalry divisions at Five Forks. From there, Pickett would assume command of all the forces in a coordinated movement against Sheridan to drive him away from Dinwiddie Court House. Tactical arrangements were clearly left to the discretion of Pickett and Fitz Lee, but what operational issues extended beyond their immediate authority? To what degree did Lee expect Pickett to cooperate with Richard Anderson's forces at the intersection of the White Oak and Claiborne Roads? What about the reserve troops at Burgess Mill? Had anyone outlined contingency plans if Pickett met with a reverse? Could he count on any reserves? It is impossible to reach any firm answers to these crucial questions. In fact, it is quite likely that Lee's officers would have struggled to offer consistent answers to these questions. The army's meltdown at Five Forks was not entirely the fault of Pickett and Fitz Lee, though they certainly bear much of the blame. Some of the communication difficulties originated at headquarters, where Robert E. Lee lost



operational control of the all-important right flank of his army before the battle even started.

Evidence of Lee's deep concern for the safety of his right flank was on display on March 31 when he rode to the White Oak and Claiborne Roads. This intersection marked the western outpost of the Confederate line. From there, Lee spotted the flank of the Union Fifth Corps hanging in the air. To keep the Federals from breaking through Anderson's position along the White Oak Road or turning on Pickett at Dinwiddie Court House, Lee personally directed an attack against Gouverneur Warren's unprepared men, who were sent reeling backward. A few undersized Confederate brigades almost wrecked Warren's Fifth Corps, whose retreat nearly turned into a rout

until one division rallied and counterattacked. With great reluctance, Lee pulled his forces back to the original trenches along the White Oak Road. But the commanding general found no solace in nearly wrecking the entire Fifth Corps, since Warren's infantry stopped the Southern advance within a stone's throw of the Confederate line. What a reversal of fortune it was for Warren, whose men were poised to take the vital White Oak Road on April 1.¹⁸

Lee received more bad news during the early morning hours of April 1, when a messenger relayed Pickett's decision to withdraw from Dinwiddie Court House. This must have caught Lee off guard, since the reports throughout March 31 had been so encouraging. Sheridan's troopers were unable to hold their own against the combined strength of Pickett and Fitz Lee. They had been driven eight miles south of the Forks, spared humiliation only by the darkness that brought a close to the fighting.¹⁹ March 31 had started out just as Lee had envisioned, but unfortunately it had not ended as he had hoped. Pickett and Fitz Lee, operating outside of the main fortifications, looked like the second coming of William Mahone and Wade Hampton. They had whipped Sheridan, who had cried out to Grant for reinforcements. Success, though, was a mirage. Pickett saw through it, but Robert E. Lee did not. The commanding general expected Pickett to hold his advanced position at Dinwiddie Court House, but the whereabouts and the intentions of Warren's Fifth Corps were relatively unknown. Pickett had good reason to be concerned, particularly when captured Union prisoners revealed that Union infantry lurked behind his lines. The Confederate position was untenable, and Pickett had no choice but to retire. At two o'clock in the morning of April 1, word quietly passed along the line to retreat. The men extricated themselves with little difficulty and without alerting Sheridan to their movements. They crossed over the ground gained the previous day, stumbling through the blackness of night, to arrive at the Forks just as dawn was breaking. Pickett's men were wet, exhausted, and famished. For three days they had had little rest, little food, and too much rain.

There was still no time for weary men to rest. Out of habit the troops immediately started throwing up earthworks that stretched along the northern side of the White Oak Road. Brig. Gen. Matt W. Ransom's North Carolina infantry and Virginian Col. Thomas T. Munford's dismounted cavalry anchored the far left flank of Pickett's position, which rested 0.7 miles to the east of the Forks and roughly 3.6 miles to the west of the main Confederate fortifications at the intersection of the White Oak and Claiborne Roads. (This was the area where Robert E. Lee had clashed with Warren on March 31.) This 3.6 miles amounted to a dangerous gap between the Confederate position at the

White Oak and Claiborne Roads and the Confederate left, which was held by Ransom and Munford. Only a thin picket line of a few hundred North Carolina troopers had the task of covering this vital line of communication along the White Oak Road between Pickett and Anderson's forces at Burgess Mill.

The Confederate right flank was one mile to the west of the Forks. Maj. Gen. William "Rooney" Lee's cavalry had the assignment to defend this area with infantry support and three of William Pegram's guns, which unlimbered across from the Gilliam field. Pickett had instructed Pegram to place his three other pieces at the Forks, a dismal place for artillery. They were in the midst of a thick woods, the ground was low, and the position commanded nothing, except the intersecting roads at the junction. Pegram's adjutant, Lt. William Gordon McCabe, protested the order, pleading with Pegram to make a direct appeal to Pickett. Pegram flatly refused, rebuking his good friend for suggesting that he violate orders. Later that day Pegram would fall with a mortal wound to his left side. The loss of his dear comrade embittered McCabe, who never forgave Pickett for his placement of the guns. Writing after the war, McCabe charged that Pickett "knew far more about brands of whisky than he did about the uses of artillery."²⁰ There were also four guns of William Morrell McGregor's horse artillery positioned on the far left flank and under the authority of General Ransom, but the boggy landscape curtailed mobility, keeping McGregor from using his guns as "flying artillery."²¹

Pickett felt as if he had little choice but to align his forces along the White Oak Road, even though there were large swaths around the Forks that proved impassable for artillery, cavalry, and even infantry. One Confederate officer observed that "It is generally a boggy country, and the most indifferent land for cavalry to move in, and in those low points you could not move many infantry. Our horse artillery, which generally went everywhere with us, we did not dare carry in there, simply because they would have been stuck there."²² It is important to note that this was not the ground of Pickett's choosing but of his commander's. Lee, upon learning of his subordinate's forced withdrawal from Dinwiddie Court House, had issued a directive to Pickett that left no room for interpretation: "*Hold Five Forks at all hazards. Protect road to Ford's Depot and prevent Union forces from striking the South-Side Railroad. Regret exceedingly your forced withdrawal, and your inability to hold the advantage you had gained.*"²³

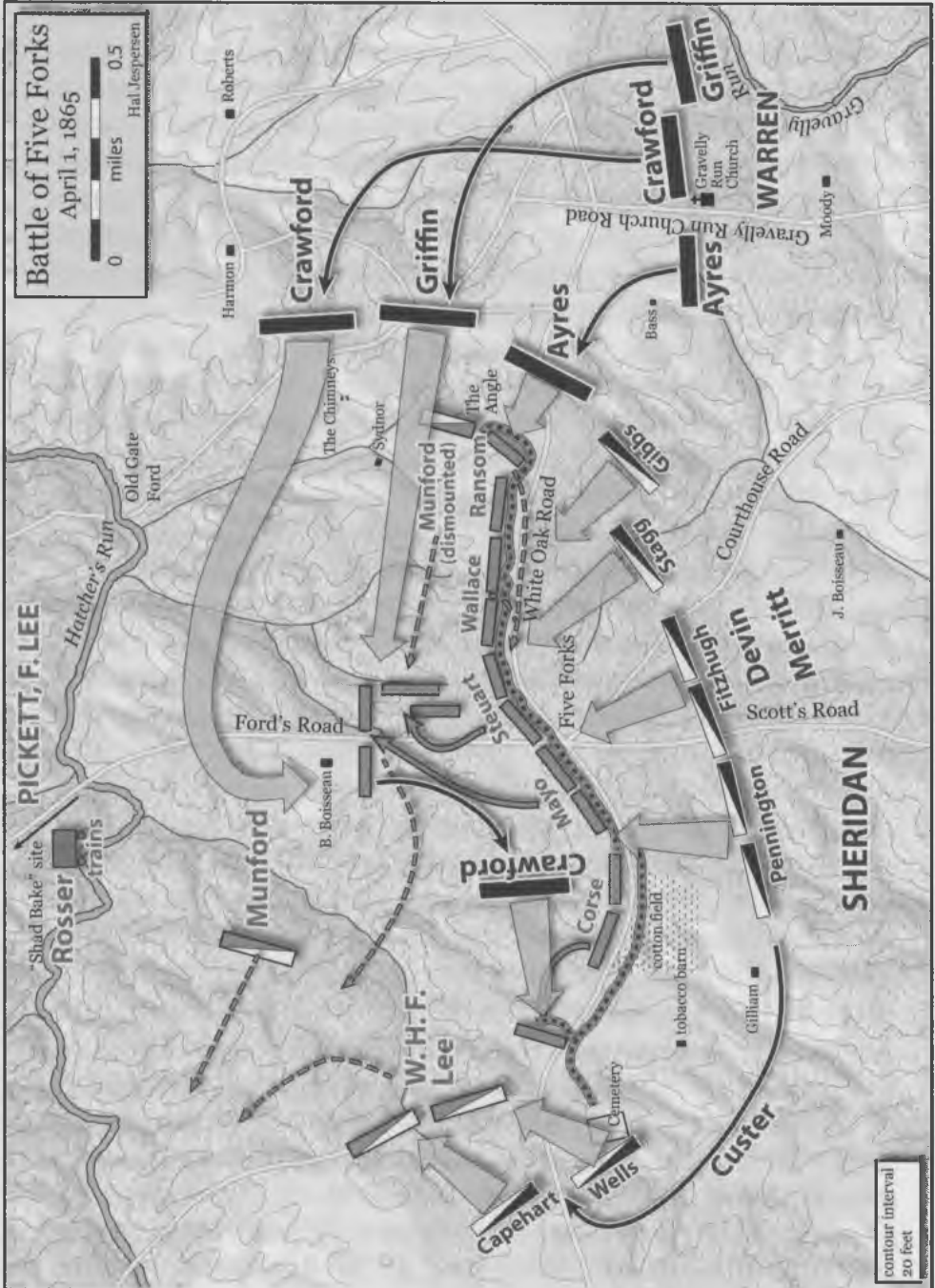
In all of Lee's written orders to his subordinates, his dispatch to Pickett stands out as truly exceptional. It was customary for Lee to give his officers wide latitude to make decisions in the field as they saw fit. This generally worked to Lee's advantage, but a Second Corps staff officer complained after

the war about the vagueness of Lee's orders. "I have frequently noticed before & have also since this occasion [referring to the Wilderness] that Gen. Lee's instructions to his Corps Comrs are of a very comprehensive & general description & frequently admit of several interpretations — in fact will allow them to do almost anything, provided only it be a *success*. They caution them particularly against failure & very frequently wind up with the injunction to 'attack whenever or wherever it can be done to advantage.'"²⁴ Whether this officer was correct in his assessment or not is not at issue. His words are more valuable in understanding how Lee typically communicated his expectations to his subordinates. In Pickett's case, he certainly broke from customary practice. There was no room for interpretation, no allowances made for changing circumstances, and no discretion to move away from Five Forks — a place that Lee had never seen with his own eyes.

The directness of Lee's order does not necessarily suggest a lack of faith in Pickett; rather, it speaks to how desperate the situation had become in Lee's mind. It is understandable why he demanded that Pickett hold his ground at all costs because of the South Side Railroad, but the commanding general had essentially fixed his subordinate to a static defense of an indefensible position along the White Oak Road. Pickett made this very complaint in his May 1865 report. The modest bluffs of Hatcher's Run, located just 1.5 miles north of Five Forks, would have been more suitable for a Confederate last stand. Lee's order, above all else, reveals an imperfect understanding of the operational situation on April 1. To criticize Pickett for his forced withdrawal is incomprehensible; Lee knew that Pickett had no choice but to retreat. It is possible that Lee thought the Fifth Corps was still lodged at the White Oak Road, but Pickett's dispatches alerted Lee to the movements of the Federal infantry. There could very well have been other dispatches, messages, or oral communications in which Lee accounted for Warren's troops, but they do not survive. Nonetheless, Lee should have spelled out contingency plans for his subordinate, especially since the odds were so steep — as Lee himself had discovered the previous day at the White Oak Road. The most astonishing oversight of the "Hold Five Forks at all hazards" order is the lack of guidance in coordinating Pickett with Anderson's troops at the White Oak and Claiborne Roads. Only by uniting Anderson and Pickett could Lee have forestalled a disaster at the Forks. Lee's flawed order is not responsible for the debacle at Five Forks, but its inflexibility conveyed language that can only be read as a reprimand that did not allow for the creativity that Lee so prized in his subordinates.

Battle of Five Forks
 April 1, 1865

0 0.5 miles
 Hal. Jespersen



contour interval
 20 feet

Pickett and Fitz Lee should have overcome Lee's poorly worded orders, but a combination of factors clouded their judgment and kept them from acting with the vigilance expected of senior officers. The popular perception of Pickett and Fitz Lee sacrificing their army so that they might enjoy some shad and whiskey is an oversimplification. A more nuanced and complicated picture emerges when one consults the underutilized *Proceedings, Findings, and Opinions of the Court of Inquiry in the Case of Gouverneur K. Warren*. A number of ex-Confederates, including Fitz Lee and Thomas Munford, were subpoenaed to the 1879 court of inquiry into Sheridan's unjust dismissal of Warren at the close of the fighting on April 1. Unfortunately, Robert E. Lee and Pickett had passed away by the time the court convened, but there were a number of front-line Confederate officers who offered important insight into the many facets behind the Confederate collapse at Five Forks.

On the whole, the testimony counters the simplistic idea that Pickett and Fitz Lee were more interested in eating fish and drinking whiskey than looking after their troops. Witnesses attest to the fact that both officers personally placed their soldiers along the White Oak Road throughout the morning of April 1. They remained at the front until going to Hatcher's Run (which they probably did around 2:00 P.M.) A little after noon, Col. Joseph Mayo Jr. of the 3rd Virginia Infantry remembered that "General Pickett called us together at Five Forks in the rear of those guns, pulled out a map showed us where we were, then gave directions to strengthen our position as well as we could; and he rode of [f] with General Fitz Lee down this Ford road to the north. We went immediately to execute that order."²⁵ From Mayo's testimony and that of others, it is clear that Confederate officers knew the location of Pickett and Fitz Lee's headquarters north of Hatcher's Run, where Rosser was guarding the army's wagons. The idea that Fitz Lee and Pickett simply disappeared without telling anyone is misleading. Couriers had no problem in finding both men throughout the day. The challenge for the couriers was getting Pickett and Fitz Lee to believe there was a crisis brewing in front of the Confederate left flank. It also appears that Pickett had not left explicit instructions with the ranking officer on the line, Maj. Gen. Rooney Lee, who himself was not in position to react to an emergency. Rooney was on the far right of the line when the Union attack commenced and was completely unaware that he was the ranking officer responsible for giving commands until Pickett or Fitz returned. Such negligence on Pickett's part was absolutely indefensible.

Why did Pickett and Fitz Lee dismiss even the mere suggestion of an enemy attack? Victory at Dinwiddie Court House had deceived them into believing that Sheridan needed time to regroup. They must have also assumed

that Warren's Fifth Corps could not pressure them without support from Sheridan's troopers. But the outcome at Dinwiddie Court House should not have kept Pickett and Fitz Lee from scouting the enemy's movements. Both officers neglected the spadework of army command, which was elemental to success and something that their commanding general valued above all else.²⁶ One would have thought that curiosity alone should have prompted both men to locate the Fifth Corps, but Pickett and Fitz Lee acted as if Warren's men had vanished into thin air. Sheridan could appear out of nowhere, but Pickett and Lee, having never encountered the fiery Union cavalryman on the battlefield, grossly underestimated the tenacity of their adversary. "I considered that the movement [Sheridan's] had been broken up," Fitz Lee admitted at the Warren trial, and "hearing nothing more of the infantry's move which we had heard of the night before, I thought that the movements just there, for the time being, were suspended, and we were not expecting any attack that afternoon, so far as I know."²⁷ To trust their ears rather than seeking hard intelligence through the eyes of their cavalry was an egregious and indefensible mistake that left Pickett's men isolated from the rest of the Army of Northern Virginia.

If Fitz Lee and Pickett had monitored Sheridan and Warren's movements with a modicum of attentiveness, they would have kept a closer eye on their exposed left flank. This point, called the "return line" because the trench line extended to the north, or perpendicular to the White Oak Road, was almost entirely exposed to an enemy attack. Only a few hundred North Carolina troopers extended beyond the return line and covered the 3.6 miles to Anderson's troops at the White Oak and Claiborne Road intersection. This was not an adequate force to maintain a secure line of communication. Throughout the afternoon the North Carolinians sparred with Sheridan's troopers, and control of the White Oak Road, as a result, was in flux. It is a mystery why Anderson and Pickett did not cooperate on April 1. They might as well have been in two distant theaters of war. The best chance of seizing the initiative and catching Sheridan and Warren off guard depended upon Pickett and Anderson coordinating their movements. It appears that they failed to communicate or to discuss any contingency plans if the Confederate defense unraveled. Even if Pickett and Anderson had been in communication, it is hard to imagine what could have been accomplished in closing the gap between them. The moment of truth had arrived for Lee, whose troops were finally stretched to the breaking point. Weakening his lines to the east even more (considering that Scales's and McGowan's brigades had been withdrawn) would have been an act of desperation that could have had ruin-

ous results, given that the Union Second Corps troops could have attacked. It is easy to understand why Lee could not live up to his reputation as audacity personified.

Shortly after 3:00 P.M., Munford's cavalry along the White Oak Road detected the Fifth Corps massing for an attack near the Confederate left flank. Munford went in person to Fitz Lee, who was incredulous about the report. He instructed Munford to return to the front and make a personal reconnaissance. Munford hurried back to his picket line along the White Oak Road, dismounted, and took cover in the woods. He caught a glimpse of Warren's 12,000 men taking position in a deep and expansive swale surrounding the Gravelly Run Church. The enemy was a little more than a quarter of a mile from Ransom's left flank. "As soon as I got there," Munford recalled, "I found that the Fifth Corps were out there."²⁸

Again and again Munford sent couriers to Pickett and Fitz Lee to warn them of the impending attack. He waited for a response, but none came. "I was very anxious to see General Pickett," Munford later told the Warren court. "I had sent three or four staff officers to him, advising him of the condition of things, but had no reply." Munford did not panic. He quickly extended the Confederate left flank to the east, ordering his dismounted troopers to throw up some rails directly north of the Fifth Corps staging area. But this obstruction, Munford realized, would do little to impede Warren's formations once they got moving.²⁹

The failure of Fitz Lee and Pickett to respond to Munford's pleas for help caused an irretrievable breakdown in command and control that eventually trickled down the Confederate line from Ransom's position to the far right flank. To the Warren court, Munford captured the feeling of doom that was settling over his isolated command. "I felt alarmed about the condition of things because there did not seem to be any general officer there who was controlling the infantry movements. . . . The Fifth Corps was on our flank, moving, and there was no support for Fitz Lee's division of cavalry."³⁰ Not hearing from Fitz Lee or Pickett, Munford turned to General Ransom for help, but the infantry officer refused any request without Pickett's approval. "I had asked General Ransom for his artillery and he would not let me have it. . . . I urged him to open on the Fifth Corps. He said that Pickett was in command. *Pickett was not in command, in person.* Ransom told me that himself, that Pickett was in command, and that he [Ransom] would not come out, nor would he let me have the artillery."³¹

Without the assistance of Ransom, Munford was essentially reduced to being a spectator to the advance of the Fifth Corps. Thanks to a faulty map

sketched by Sheridan's troopers, one division of Warren's corps overshot its target—Ransom's return line—and headed due north, nearly marching off the battlefield. Fortuitously, this brought much of Warren's infantry behind Pickett's White Oak Road line. It was not so easy for Warren to capitalize upon this brilliant but accidental flanking maneuver. The ground was marshy, small tributaries had turned into nasty creeks, and much of the area was covered with dense vegetation. No body of troops could possibly move quickly across such a hostile landscape. Munford's dismounted Confederate troops, some 1,000 men in total, were able to slow down the Federal advance. They used the cover of the ground to get off a few shots before retiring to another favorable position, but they could not stop the Federals from getting squarely behind the Confederate infantry on the White Oak Road. The loose skirmish formations diluted Confederate fire, and the Federals apparently did not respond for twenty minutes as they wheeled into position. Once the maneuver was complete, they began their westward advance toward the Ford's Road. Munford's men retreated in a methodical fashion, firing randomly. They did not unleash massed volleys as a collective unit.

About the time that elements of Warren's command neared the Ford's Road, other portions of his corps had located the return line. Ransom's men did not offer much resistance; the vast majority abandoned their position without firing a shot. "Our infantry were not doing much," recalled Munford, who never forgave Ransom for his passivity. "There was no artillery fire of any consequence, and there was a good deal of cheering. It looked very singular to me, without knowing what was the cause. There was some sharpshooting but there was not a heavy engagement going on anywhere."³² Other witnesses backed Munford's significant observation: there was no massive eruption of musketry or artillery that announced the Fifth Corps attack. All afternoon the fire along Pickett's front was described as desultory, erratic, or light. An occasional cannon shot could be heard from Pegram's guns on the Confederate right flank. It appears that when Warren launched his attack, the clash with Pickett's left flank did not result in a substantial increase in the volume of the battle. There was no great escalation in noise that one would have associated with a general engagement. It is no wonder that Pickett, Fitzhugh Lee, and Rosser were stunned to hear of the battle from the lips of a courier who had just dodged enemy bullets at Hatcher's Run.

The men of Brig. Gen. George H. Stuart's Virginia brigade, positioned just to the right or west of Ransom and Wallace's brigades, were as unaware of the attack as Pickett and Fitz Lee. The heavy woods not only restricted lines of sight but also muffled gunfire. Lt. Col. William Walter White of the

14th Virginia Infantry saw an old friend in Munford's cavalry who alerted him to the shocking fact that Federal infantry was in their rear. At that same moment, White looked down the White Oak Road and saw Ransom and Wallace's brigade coming toward him. To his surprise, they "were in order," White told the Warren court, "and in such good order that I thought they were marching under command." He realized that something was amiss when he saw General Ransom riding on horseback, clearly agitated and yelling at White that "his men were retreating against orders." White called on his soldiers to stop the fugitives and to bring them into line.³³ Roughly a third of Ransom and Wallace's brigades escaped, but White's regiment and the rest of Steuart's Virginians managed to form a new line perpendicular to the White Oak Road and facing to the east. They could handle any Union attack that came directly from the direction of the return line, but their left flank was exposed to Warren's men to the north and Sheridan's troopers to the south. They could not hold out for long.

In spite of Pickett and Fitz Lee's negligence, their subordinates managed to patch together a temporary line of defense that staved off an immediate rout. The assault had been underway for at least forty-five minutes, but it appears that only the desultory sounds of picket fire wafted across Hatcher's Run. The lack of auditory intelligence was the cornerstone of Fitz Lee's defense at the Warren court, but neither he nor Pickett had said anything about the deceptive soundscape of Five Forks or the shad bake in their official reports or in their personal correspondence spanning the five years following Appomattox.³⁴ A sheepish Fitzhugh Lee did not mention the shad bake to the Warren court. He looked to the environment for exoneration. An acoustic shadow, he maintained, had muted the sounds of battle along Hatcher's Run. "My experience is that in certain conditions of the atmosphere," he explained to the court, "it is very difficult to hear the firing of infantry. You can only hear the firing of infantry at a short distance where the undergrowth is thick." The court pressed Lee on this matter, and he insisted that "I did not hear any." In fact, he added that "General Pickett, who was closer than I, for he was just along the run, evidently did not hear it either, for he only got across this ford just about the time the Federal infantry got possession of the road."³⁵ He told the court that he had been at the front until noon and then had retired to Hatcher's Run. He did admit to hearing a little skirmishing before going among the wagons to see Rosser for "ammunition and rations." There was no mention if there was a special ration on the menu for pescatarians. Claiming that he had heard nothing from Munford, which certainly was not true, Fitz Lee told the court that he was surprised when a courier reported the Union

attack. "As soon as I got information of the attack on the left," he stated, "I immediately mounted my horse, and before I could get to where the road crosses Hatcher's Run, . . . I found that road in possession of the enemy."³⁶

From the banks of Hatcher's Run, Fitz Lee pulled back on the reins of his horse, deciding that he would not risk a Yankee bullet to rejoin Munford's cavalry. Instead, he watched Pickett gallop down the Ford's Road with his body angling off his saddle, his horse shielding him from enemy fire. He managed to ride the mile and a half to the woods just north of the Forks. There Pickett met a furious Munford, who apparently dressed down his superior. The Warren court asked Munford, "If you had any conversation with General Pickett, when you met him at the Ford road, you may repeat it, unless you prefer not." Munford replied, "If you don't want me to say it, I prefer not." The court did not press the issue, telling Munford, "Well, we do not ask for it then."³⁷

Unlike Munford, who was somewhat guarded before the court, former colonel Joseph Mayo Jr. of the 3rd Virginia Infantry showed no restraint. He condemned Pickett for vanishing from the field and leaving his subordinates to find their own way out of chaos. At a time when decisiveness was needed, Pickett's subordinates became unusually tentative, hesitant to take any action that might violate a chain of command that was essentially headless. Mayo recalled a revealing conversation that he had with General Steuart. "Colonel [Mayo]," began Steuart, "I have just received an important message from Ransom to bring my brigade to his support." "Of course I cannot do that," Steuart continued, "I do not like that firing there. We cannot leave here. I will send him two regiments if you will send him one." Mayo explained to the court that "I told him I did not like to take that responsibility, and asked him where General Pickett was. He said he did not know; he had not seen him. I saw something had to be done. Affairs were growing worse and worse. Then, at that interval of time, the enemy had got so far to our rear that the balls came continually across over our heads, and then in front, too."³⁸

By the time Pickett finally reached Munford on the Ford's Road, a hot converging fire on the Forks came from three directions. Even a man who had as sluggish a military mind as Pickett knew that the situation was on the precipice of a catastrophe, that something dramatic had to be done, or the Confederate infantry on the White Oak Road risked capture. Pickett had one of Mayo's regiments about-face and move just 200 yards north of the Forks to strike the Union infantry commanding the Ford's Road. From the edge of the woods, Colonel Mayo encountered Pickett, who pointed to the Union forces and said, "Colonel, the enemy are in our rear, and if we do not drive them out

we are gone." Testifying before the court, Mayo recalled that "I said that was perfectly apparent to everybody." It also became apparent that a token Confederate advance could not withstand the overwhelming pressure from the front and flank. Pickett quickly rescinded his order without knowing what to do next. He bluntly told Mayo that "we cannot stay here: get out the best way you can."³⁹

When Mayo reached the Forks he found panicked men in broken formations, and he knew that he had to get them out of this predicament. Mayo headed west, trying to keep his men in order, but Union volleys into the rear and flank of the fleeing Confederates turned the retreat into a rout. At the far right flank, far removed from the Union assault, Brig. Gen. Montgomery D. Corse had refused his left flank with his intact Virginia brigade so that his men were perpendicular to the White Oak Road. Pickett instructed them to cover the retreat. Any soldier who was not part of Corse's brigade and who had managed to escape should "get back to the railroad."⁴⁰ Pickett's instruction made no attempt to bring order out of his scattered and demoralized mass of troops who were rolling down the White Oak Road toward a setting sun. There was no chance they would rally around Pickett, who was hardly a paragon of inspiring leadership. As men were streaming by him, Pickett ordered his cavalry officer Rooney Lee "to throw a mounted regiment" to "stop the flight of the infantry."⁴¹ Pickett then vanished from the field, ending the battle just as he had started it.

From his headquarters in Petersburg, Robert E. Lee was also wondering about Pickett's whereabouts. He had received a detailed dispatch, likely a telegram from Fitzhugh Lee that outlined with remarkable specificity the disposition of Confederate troops and their collapse at Five Forks. He forwarded this information to Secretary of War John C. Breckinridge in Richmond, but he acknowledged that General Pickett's "present position" was unknown.⁴² He also informed Breckinridge that "a large force of infantry, believed to be the 5th Corps with other troops, turned Genl Picket's left" and that it "is supposed" that the same body of infantry that had engaged Anderson on March 31 was also part of the operations on April 1. The lack of certainty in Lee's message is telling, and it points to an intelligence and communication breakdown between Anderson and Pickett that the commanding general could have prevented.

Only the commanding general could have ensured that Pickett and Anderson worked in harmony. What exactly Lee had asked of his two subordinates is impossible to determine. There are no surviving written orders or verbal instructions recorded. Yet, both Pickett and Fitzhugh Lee, in sepa-

rate statements, criticized Anderson for failing to provide direct support to the Confederates at the Forks (Anderson, in fact, had a long history of failing to cooperate with his other officers). Fitz Lee, in a report to Robert E. Lee dated April 22, 1865, does not name names but makes it clear that he and Pickett were dangling from a hook. "Should their Infantry [Fifth Corps] be withdrawn from the position of their lines contiguous to our operations, a corresponding force of our own would have been thus made available, and would be used to restore the status or numerical balance between the two sides."⁴³ Even if the expectation of supporting Pickett had not been clearly articulated to Anderson, he and his subordinate Bushrod Johnson showed a breathtaking lack of initiative on April 1. By 11:00 A.M., the Confederates at the White Oak and Claiborne Roads reported the retreat of the Fifth Corps. For the rest of the day, Anderson's men, who were under the direct command of Johnson, did nothing — no reconnaissance of note and no attempt to communicate developments on their front to Pickett. Both Anderson's and Johnson's official reports are somewhat incriminating.⁴⁴ They reveal an almost disinterest in the enemy's whereabouts, particularly Maj. Gen. Andrew Humphrey's Second Corps.

To be sure, Pickett and Fitz Lee were just as culpable as Anderson and Johnson. The former never monitored the thin line of communication held by Brig. Gen. William P. Roberts's brigade of North Carolina cavalry. Not a single piece of information was transmitted between the two commands until the very end of the day, when all was lost. It was true that Roberts's troopers were under duress from Sheridan's slashing attacks, but this, if anything, should have spurred a closer investigation of this vulnerable portion of the line, ensuring communication between Pickett and Anderson. A coordinated attack against Warren at the staging area around the Gravelly Run Church was not beyond the realm of possibility, and it would have been disastrous for the Federals.

Operational oversight from Lee's headquarters could have brought attention to this issue and likely averted disaster, though not defeat. If the commanding general had a chief of army operations who had been at Pickett's or Anderson's side, a more harmonious and effective partnership could have been forged between his subordinates. Grant had such a position in the Army of the Potomac, and Andrew Humphreys was incredibly effective at the post. In no way should Lee shoulder all the blame for the disaster at Five Forks. Sheridan's aggressiveness and the Federal firepower were insurmountable. In fact, Lee had resigned himself to the inevitable loss of the South Side and Richmond & Danville Railroads. On April 1 he bluntly informed President

Davis of “the necessity of evacuating our position on James River at once.”⁴⁵ It is important to note that Lee wired this telegram on April 1, before he even knew of Pickett’s defeat at Five Forks.

It is tempting to see Lee’s expedition against Sheridan as a fool’s errand, but it was not, as Pickett and Fitz Lee had demonstrated by driving Sheridan back on March 31 at Dinwiddie Court House. Possibilities still existed after their impressive victory to slow down the Federals, but Pickett and Fitz Lee squandered them by underestimating Sheridan’s resolve and losing track of Warren’s troops. There was no recovering from these monumental mistakes, especially on ground that was so poor for a defensive stand. Fitz Lee and Pickett compounded their errors by dismissing intelligence reports received from the front. Their isolation from their troops — due to both the shad bake and the atmospheric conditions — was a misunderstanding on the part of officers who thought they knew better than their subordinates. They were, at the most fundamental level, ridiculously careless, something for which Pickett was notorious. When the Union attack came, Confederate infantry and cavalry officers could not adjust without violating military protocol. Under the circumstances, Pickett’s command fought as well as men could fight when enemy bullets were crisscrossing over their heads. The sudden collapse of Ransom’s and Wallace’s brigades did not occur with the other Confederate brigades, but it underscores the fragility of Pickett’s entire force at this late stage of the war.

The suggestion that Lee could have rescued Pickett at Five Forks if he had exerted stronger operational control over his subordinates is highly debatable. The discussion is necessary only for the simple fact that commanding generals are responsible for positioning their subordinates for tactical success. Lee’s role in the battle, however, did not enter the private and public conversations among Pickett, Fitz Lee, Harrison, and Rosser. Their analysis of the battle, as a result, was too narrow and lacked a broad perspective. They focused on isolated incidents and personality issues in their writings, and this partially explains why they had such a difficult time reaching a consensus about the battle. The controversies that emerged about Five Forks have inspired “what-if” questions that remain popular among students of the war today. Counterfactual scenarios are often viewed as harmless, if not pointless, inquiries into the past. Robert E. Lee knew better. He understood that what-if questions kept the political questions about the war alive and that the battlefield was not just a chessboard of tactics. On August 1, 1865, Lee wrote to the celebrated cavalry officer Wade Hampton, expressing his regret that the South Carolinian had been absent at Five Forks. “If you had been there

with all of your cavalry, the result at Five Forks would have been different, but how long the contest would have been prolonged it is difficult to say." But, he concluded about the war: "It is over."⁴⁶

The war kept living for Lee's subordinates, who fought among themselves for decades after 1865 over who was to blame for the fiasco at Five Forks. Ironically, the general's subordinates had little choice but to turn on each other, since criticizing Lee was unthinkable. Even in a world ruled by Lost Cause doctrine, where Lee was deified and every Confederate veteran enshrined, it was impossible to forge perfect solidarity among former soldiers who defended their public reputations at all hazards.

NOTES

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1. The modern historiography on Five Forks begins with Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee's Lieutenants: A Study in Command* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1944), 3:662-74. Scholars have largely adopted Freeman's description and analysis of the Confederate side of the battle; see for example Ed Bearss and Chris Calkins, *The Battle of Five Forks* (Lynchburg, Va.: H. E. Howard, 1985), esp. chap. 5; J. Tracy Power, *Lee's Miserables: Life in the Army of Northern Virginia from the Wilderness to Appomattox* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 272; Lesley J. Gordon, *General George E. Pickett in Life and Legend* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 146-53; A. Wilson Greene: *The Final Battles of the Petersburg Campaign*, 2nd ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2008), 186; and Joseph T. Glatthaar, *General Lee's Army: From Victory to Collapse* (New York: Free Press, 2008), 458-59.

2. On Robert E. Lee's place in the Lost Cause, see Alan T. Nolan, *Lee Considered: General Robert E. Lee and Civil War History* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991).

3. James D. McCabe Jr., *Life and Campaigns of Robert E. Lee* (Atlanta: National Publishing Company, 1866), 603.

4. Walter Harrison, *Pickett's Men: A Fragment of War History* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1870), 133-34.

5. Thomas Rosser, "Annals of the War: Chapters of Unwritten History, Rosser and His Men," *Philadelphia Weekly Times*, April 5, 1884.

6. Douglas Southall Freeman, *R. E. Lee: A Biography*, 4 vols. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1934-35), 4:40, see especially n. 79.

7. For a response to the revisionist critics of Lee, see Gary W. Gallagher, "The Idol of His Soldiers and the Hope of His Country: Lee and the Confederate People," in *Lee and His Generals in War and Memory*, ed. Gary W. Gallagher (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1998), 3-20.

8. Earl J. Hess, *In the Trenches at Petersburg: Field Fortifications and Confederate Defeat* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 354.
9. "Richard Anderson's Report," June 15, 1866, in *Supplement to the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, ed. Janet B. Hewett and others, 95 vols. and 5-vol. index (Wilmington, N.C.: Broadfoot, 1994–2001), pt. 1, 7: 819–20 (hereafter cited as ORS; all references are to pt. 1).
10. Robert E. Lee to John C. Breckinridge, March 9, 1865, in *The Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, ed. Clifford Dowdey and Louis H. Manarin (Boston: Little, Brown, 1961), 913.
11. Bearss and Calkins, *Battle of Five Forks*, 8–13.
12. Harrison, *Pickett's Men*, 135–36.
13. Armistead C. Gordon, ed., *Memories and Memorials of William Gordon McCabe* (Richmond, Va.: Old Dominion Press, 1925), 1:163.
14. Bearss and Calkins, *Battle of Five Forks*, 21, 30.
15. Harrison, *Pickett's Men*, 135.
16. We still lack a comprehensive treatment of the Petersburg campaign. A Wilson Greene's forthcoming trilogy on the siege will fill this void. In the meantime, readers should begin with a fine overview of the campaign by Noah Andre Trudeau titled *The Siege of Petersburg*, part of the National Parks Civil War Series published by Eastern National in 1995. Those who seek more details should consult Richard J. Sommers, *Richmond Redeemed: The Siege at Petersburg* (New York: Doubleday, 1981); John Horn, *The Destruction of the Weldon Railroad: Deep Bottom, Globe Tavern, and Ream's Station, August 14–25, 1864* (Lynchburg, Va.: H. E. Howard, 1991); and Greene, *Final Battles of the Petersburg Campaign*.
17. Fitzhugh Lee testimony in U.S. Army Adjutant General's Office, *Proceedings, Findings, and Opinions of the Court of Inquiry in the Case of Gouverneur K. Warren* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1883), 2: 481 (hereafter cited as WCI; all references are to vol. 2).
18. Freeman, *R. E. Lee*, 4: 33–35.
19. For the best treatment of Five Forks, see Bearss and Calkins, *Battle of Five Forks*.
20. Thomas T. Munford's Narrative on Five Forks with Marginalia: Notes by W. Gordon McCabe, miscellany, box 2, Munford-Ellis Family Papers, William R. Perkins Library, Duke University.
21. Thomas T. Munford testimony, *WCI*, 447.
22. *Ibid.*
23. Lee's original order to Pickett has never surfaced in an archive or private papers. The first version appears in Walter Harrison's 1870 publication, *Pickett's Men*. This was followed by the release of a similar dispatch by the general's widow, LaSalle Corbell Pickett, in her *Pickett and His Men* (1899). She unquestionably altered or fabricated some of her husband's correspondence, but in this instance her reprinted dispatch appears to be authentic. It contains some of the wording from the Harrison version, and the military language departs from LaSalle's excessively romantic prose. On LaSalle as the gatekeeper of her husband's legacy, see Gordon, *General George E. Pickett in Life and Legend*, and Gary W. Gallagher, "A Widow and Her Soldier: LaSalle Corbell Pickett as the Author of George E. Pickett's Civil War Letters," in *Lee and His Generals*, 227–42.

24. Campbell Brown, *Campbell Brown's Civil War: With Ewell and the Army of Northern Virginia*, ed. Terry L. Jones (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001), 248.
25. Joseph Mayo testimony, *WCI*, 498.
26. On Lee's belief in "spade work," see Elizabeth Brown Pryor, *Reading the Man: Portrait of Robert E. Lee through His Private Letters* (New York: Viking, 2007), esp. chap. 10.
27. Fitzhugh Lee testimony, *WCI*, 481.
28. Thomas T. Munford testimony, *ibid.*, 442.
29. *Ibid.*, 447.
30. *Ibid.*
31. *Ibid.*, 442.
32. *Ibid.*, 454.
33. William Walter White testimony, *ibid.*, 486-87.
34. George Pickett to Fitzhugh Lee, May 24, 1870, and Thomas T. Munford to H. C. Lee, August 2, 1870, in Fitzhugh Lee Papers, box 2, Albert and Shirley Small Special Collections Library, University of Virginia, Charlottesville; "George Pickett official report," May 1, 1865, in *ORS*, 7:778-85; "Report of Richard Anderson," June 15, 1866, in *ORS*, 7:817-22.
35. Fitzhugh Lee testimony, *WCI*, 471-72.
36. *Ibid.*, 471.
37. Thomas T. Munford testimony, *ibid.*, 448.
38. Joseph Mayo testimony, *ibid.*, 499.
39. *Ibid.*, 499, 500.
40. *Ibid.*, 501.
41. R. M. T. Beale testimony, *ibid.*, 617.
42. R. E. Lee to Breckinridge, April 1, 1865, in *Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, 923.
43. Fitzhugh Lee to R. E. Lee April 22, 1865, box 2, Fitzhugh Lee Papers.
44. "Journal of Bushrod Rust Johnson, March 15-April 16, 1865," in *ORS*, 7:746; report of Richard Anderson, June 15, 1866, in *ibid.*, 7:817-22.
45. Robert E. Lee to Jefferson Davis, April 1, 1865, in *Wartime Papers of R. E. Lee*, 922.
46. Robert E. Lee to Wade Hampton, August 1, 1865, reprinted in Thomas T. Munford, "Narrative of the Battle of Five Forks, April 1, 1865," Munford-Ellis Papers.