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# Ambrose Burnside, the Ninth Army Corps, and the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House

## **Abstract**

The fighting on May 12, 1864 at Spotsylvania Court House evokes thoughts of the furious combat at the Bloody Angle. However, there is another aspect of the fighting on May 12, that is, incidentally, at another salient. The then-independent command of Ambrose Burnside's Ninth Corps spent the day fighting on the east flank of the Mule Shoe, and charging against the Confederate right flank at Heth's Salient.

This paper has two parts: the first half analyzes the complexities and problems of Burnside's return to the Eastern Theater since his disastrous defeat at Fredericksburg in 1862, starting in April 1864 and culminating with the opening moves of the Overland Campaign. In the second half the paper examines the fighting on May 12—tactically how and why Burnside was repulsed, while strategically it examines the larger repercussions of the fighting on May 12, including the pivotal position of Heth's Salient in defending Lee's flank and reserve line.

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## **Keywords**

Ambrose Burnside, Battle of Spotsylvania Court House, Army of the Potomac, Ninth Corps, Heth's Salient

## Ambrose Burnside, the Ninth Army Corps, and the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House

Ryan T. Quint

Spring had come and that meant that the bloodletting could begin anew. For Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside that campaign commenced on April 13, 1864 when he arrived in Annapolis, Maryland to rendezvous with his Ninth Army Corps.<sup>1</sup> Around the city that was home to the U.S. Naval Academy the soldiers in the corps' three divisions milled about, drilling and organizing. Most of the men in the divisions were brand new recruits, learning the school of the soldier for the first time. These recruits were shuffled into regiments shrunken by years of arduous fighting for the Union all the way from the North Carolina Coast in the spring of 1862 to, most recently, the Siege of Knoxville.<sup>2</sup>

The same day that Burnside arrived in Annapolis he paraded the Ninth Corps in review for recently-promoted Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant.<sup>3</sup> As general-in-chief

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<sup>1</sup> William Marvel, *Burnside* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1991), 345.

<sup>2</sup> Augustus Woodbury, *Major General Ambrose E. Burnside and the Ninth Army Corps: A Narrative of Campaigns* (Providence: Sidney S. Rider & Brother, 1867), 365, 367; William F. Fox, *Regimental Losses in the American Civil War* (Albany: Albany Publishing Company, 1889), 81-83.

<sup>3</sup> A word on the convention of writing out Federal corps is useful here. Though the practice of identifying Federal corps with Roman numerals is the accepted practice today, during the war the corps were identified with either regular numbers or were spelled out. I also agree with the late Harry Pfanz, who wrote that “[F]or me...Roman numerals always

of the United States Army, it was expected that he would have set up his headquarters in the nation's capital, but Grant decided to take the field. Grant found the Ninth Corps in "an admirable position for such a reinforcement." From its location Burnside's men "could be brought at the last moment as a reinforcement to the Army of the Potomac, or it could be thrown on the sea-coast, south of Norfolk, in Virginia, or North Carolina, to operate against Richmond from that direction." Though Grant had witnessed these soldiers pass in review this was hardly the reason he had come all the way to Annapolis from his field headquarters near Culpeper; rather it was to "confer with Burnside about the role the Ninth Corps would play in the spring campaign...."<sup>4</sup>

That role, Burnside soon found out, was to support the Army of the Potomac with an overland march. On April 23 the Ninth Corps packed up its tents and formed into marching columns. To the surprise of many of the soldiers, the corps began to march towards Washington, D.C., not down to the Annapolis docks. It had made its fame on a naval expedition against North Carolina's Outer Banks in 1862 and still had the legacy to prove it: its insignia was an anchor and cannon, crossed over a shield. Many expected to repeat their success at sea with another strike at a rebel

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require a pause for translation that snags my train of thought." Harry W. Pfanz, *Gettysburg: The Second Day* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), xvii.

<sup>4</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Memoirs and Selected Letters* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1990 reprint), 477; Brooks D. Simpson, *Ulysses S. Grant: Triumph Over Adversity, 1822-1865* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 271.

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target.<sup>5</sup> But this coming campaign would involve no ships for the Ninth Corps, only grueling marches and hard fighting.

As the corps neared Washington City a fourth division, consisting entirely of United States Colored Troops, was added to the corps. Burnside's command was now composed of close to 21,000 men and 72 cannons ready for action.<sup>6</sup> Entering the capital, the corps marched past throngs of cheering crowds while the divisions' "soiled and tattered flags, bearing inscriptions of battles in six states, east and west, were silent and affecting witnesses of their valor and their sacrifices."<sup>7</sup> Crossing Long Bridge into Virginia, the corps continued its march until, by May 5, they were closing in on the Army of the Potomac. As the regiments neared the battlefield, one man later wrote, "Every soldier knew that we were about to participate in a battle, as the booming of cannon and the rattle of musketry were heard long before... The trail of the regiments preceding us was made plain by the thousands of playing cards strewn along the wayside, which they had discarded from their blouse pockets to make room for their

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<sup>5</sup> For the naval expedition, see Marvel, 41-97; for the corps insignia see C. McKeever, *Civil War Battle flags of the Union Army and Order of Battle* (New York: Knickerbocker Press, 1997 reprint), 81-82.

<sup>6</sup> Darrell L. Collins, *Army of the Potomac: Order of Battle, 1861-1865, with Commanders, Strengths Losses, and More* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2013), 168.

<sup>7</sup> Woodbury, 368.

testaments, which had reposed unopened, in many cases, for weeks, in their knapsacks.”<sup>8</sup>

For Ambrose Burnside, the march to join the Army of the Potomac would not have marshaled good memories. He had last seen the army after resigning its command following the horrific defeat at Fredericksburg in December, 1862, followed immediately by the embarrassing “Mud March.” As Burnside prepared to leave the army in early 1863, he remarked, “Farewell Gentlemen, there are no pleasant reminiscences for me connected with the Army of the Potomac.”<sup>9</sup> For its part, the Army of the Potomac was not sorry to see Burnside to go, and blamed the side-whiskered general wholeheartedly for its bloody defeat.

Now, in the spring of 1864, Burnside was returning to the Army of the Potomac, and it was already creating problems. The most serious matter was that of seniority— with Burnside’s return he should, by his commission’s date, assume command of the Army of the Potomac, taking it away from George Meade. Burnside had been commissioned a major general of volunteers to date from March 18, 1862, while Meade did not attain the same rank

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<sup>8</sup> Allen D. Albert, editor, *History of the Forty-Fifth Regiment Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteer Infantry 1861-1865* (Williamsport, PA: Grit Publishing Company, 1912), 114.

<sup>9</sup> A. Wilson Greene, “Morale, Maneuver, and Mud” in Gary W. Gallagher, *The Fredericksburg Campaign: Decision on the Rappahannock* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 215; Francis A. O’Reilly, *The Fredericksburg Campaign: Winter War on the Rappahannock* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003), 495-496.

until November 29 of the same year.<sup>10</sup> No one expected or would have allowed for Burnside to take command of the army, and Grant settled on an independent structure for the Ninth Corps— Burnside would report directly to Grant and get orders from him while the other three infantry corps would answer to Meade. It was a clunky system that would prove largely ineffective—especially at Spotsylvania, whose bloodiest fighting lay just under a week away.<sup>11</sup>

The second problem facing Burnside's return to the Army of the Potomac, even with his independent command, was the fact that no one within the army had any confidence in him. Though beyond the scope of this narrative the second day of the Battle of the Wilderness on May 6, 1864 is worth mentioning in passing only because it shows the lack of confidence and low expectations that army officers had for Burnside. On the Federal left Winfield Scott Hancock's Second Corps crashed through the woods and hit elements of A.P. Hill's Confederates— some of the same rebels that Burnside would fight at Spotsylvania in six days' time. As Burnside's corps was coming up, his three divisions, led by Thomas Stevenson, Robert Potter, and Orlando Willcox, were all ordered

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<sup>10</sup> George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of Officers and Graduates of the U.S. Military Academy, at West Point, N.Y.: Volume II* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1868), 191; George W. Cullum, *Biographical Register of the Officers and Graduates of the Military Academy at West Point, N.Y., Volume I* (New York: D. Van Nostrand, 1868),

<sup>11</sup> Gordon C. Rhea, *The Battle of the Wilderness May 5-6, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), 48.

forward.<sup>12</sup> But in the thick confines of the Wilderness the troops were given unclear directions and “bushwhacked toward their indistinct goal,” as one historian writes.<sup>13</sup> Another historian, Gordon C. Rhea, wrote that “For the rest of the morning, the [Ninth] Corps remained lost to the Federal war effort. Occasionally messages emerged from the undergrowth, but the troops themselves seemed to have been swallowed up by the Wilderness.”<sup>14</sup>

To the men and officers of the Army of the Potomac though, it mattered little that the three divisions got lost. What they remembered was the fact that when they needed support, Burnside came up short. As Theodore Lyman, aide to George Meade, met with Hancock, he reported that Burnside was slowly making progress, to which the Second Corps commander bellowed, “I knew it.... Just what I expected.”<sup>15</sup> One of Hancock’s staff officers wrote years later that when Burnside did finally get into action, “assistance it could hardly be called, for, when Burnside at last made his attack, Hancock had already been driven back....”<sup>16</sup> Charles Wainwright, an artillery officer in the Fifth Corps, wrote in his diary, “Burnside somehow is

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<sup>12</sup> The Fourth Division, commanded by Edward Ferrero, was detached and did not take part in the Battle of the Wilderness. See Burnside’s report, *Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies in the War of the Rebellion*, Series 1, Vol. 36, pt. 1, 906 (hereafter cited as OR, followed by part, volume, and page number—all series are 1).

<sup>13</sup> Marvel, *Burnside*, 355.

<sup>14</sup> Rhea, *Wilderness*, 331.

<sup>15</sup> Theodore Lyman, *Meade’s Headquarters 1863-1865* (Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press, 1922), 94.

<sup>16</sup> Francis A. Walker, *History of the Second Army Corps in the Army of the Potomac* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1886), 427.



never up to the mark when the tug comes.” Wainwright also commented on Burnside’s subordinate officers, saying, “I got a very poor impression of the corps.”<sup>17</sup>

Following the tactical stalemate at the Wilderness, which resulted in little other than close to 30,000 casualties, Grant decided to shift his forces south, towards Spotsylvania Court House. Burnside’s men moved back towards Chancellorsville and then began sliding further south, reaching the Fredericksburg Road on May 9. This road ran straight from Fredericksburg to Grant’s objective of Spotsylvania Court House. When Burnside’s men reached the road, they now served as the Federals’ left flank.<sup>18</sup>

With Orlando Willcox’s division leading the way down the Fredericksburg Road, Burnside soon a problem that would plague the entire Federal command. Bad maps had been distributed before the campaign began and now, with Grant trying to issue orders to both Burnside and Meade’s Army of the Potomac, the problems associated with those maps bubbled to the surface. First was the maps’ quality—Theodore Lyman wrote that the maps were

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<sup>17</sup> Charles W. Wainwright, *A Diary of Battle*, edited by Allan Nevins (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 1998), 352.

<sup>18</sup> On the Wilderness’ casualties, see Noah Andre Trudeau, *Bloody Roads South: The Wilderness to Cold Harbor, May-June 1864* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1989), 341; on the movement of the Ninth Corps see Burnside’s OR, Vol. 36, pt. 1, 907-908; Spotsylvania Court House serving as Grant’s objective can be found in Gordon C. Rhea, *The Battles for Spotsylvania Court House and the Road to Yellow Tavern: May 7-12, 1864* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 13.

printed “on wretched spongy paper, which wore out after being carried a few days in the pocket....” Furthermore, Lyman pointed out that many of the maps had key points on them entirely out of position—pertinent to the Battle of the Spotsylvania Court House was the fact that the courthouse itself was portrayed “two and one half miles to the west [from where it is actually located].”<sup>19</sup>

Most problematic to Burnside on May 9 was the issue of the location of a “Gate”, as well as the Gayle house. This problem would resonate through the next couple of days of the battle, culminating with the fighting on May 12. Grant issued orders to Burnside, ordering him to send “a small force from Gate toward Spotsylvania to reconnoiter the roads and enemy’s position in that direction, and especially have all roads leading to your right... examined... and whether they lead to the positions occupied by General Meade’s forces.....”<sup>20</sup> In other words, Willcox, whose division was leading the corps, was to skirmish ahead and see which roads, if any, could link up with the Army of the Potomac so that the Federal line could be one solid front.

There are numerable problems with this order, but the main concern is the usage of “Gate.” Going back to the horrendous maps, it appears that “Gate” was mentioned on both Grant’s and Meade’s maps, but not Burnside’s. The choice to write Gate as a proper noun also implies that

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<sup>19</sup> Theodore Lyman, “Uselessness of Maps,” in *The Wilderness Campaign May-June 1864, Volume IV* (Boston: The Military Historical Society of Massachusetts), 79-80.

<sup>20</sup> OR, Vol. 36, pt. 2, 580.

Grant and Meade both believed that the Gate was the property of a local. There was indeed a gate along the Ninth Corps' advance, but it was just that—a toll gate, not a large house, and furthermore, it was far to the rear of Willcox's advance. Nonetheless, Willcox pushed on ahead, towards the Gayle house, a structure on the north-eastern side of the river. There his skirmishers ran into Confederate pickets of infantry and dismounted cavalry and the two sides began to open a lively fire. Willcox reported back to Burnside that he had "Found the enemy's vedettes one-half mile before reaching Gayle's house."<sup>21</sup> Reporting back to Grant, Burnside reiterated the "Gayle" house. And then, in a snafu classic for military history, both Grant and Burnside assumed the other was misspelling the g-word—whether it was "Gate" or "Gayle" and neither asked for clarification. It didn't help that on the map that Grant possessed, the gate was marked where the Gayle house actually stood.<sup>22</sup>

At the end of the day on May 9, Willcox had nonetheless pushed across the Ni River and drove away the Confederate pickets. From his current position Willcox was only about 1.5 miles away from Spotsylvania Court House, and ahead of him lay just more Confederate pickets—had the Third Division pressed down the road, the likelihood of capturing the courthouse and its vital crossroads was very

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<sup>21</sup> OR, Vol. 36, pt. 2, 581; for detailed topographic maps of the Spotsylvania area, see map series "Battle of Spotsylvania Court House", produced by Steven Stanley, 2000.

<sup>22</sup> William D. Matter, *If It Takes All Summer: The Battle of Spotsylvania* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 110.

high. The Federal high command's faulty cartography depicted the distance between the Ni River crossing and Spotsylvania as 3.5 miles, however. Gordon C. Rhea summarizes this whole episode as "Burnside missed a superb opportunity."<sup>23</sup> Later that night Burnside finally tried to clear up the confusion, writing, "The position occupied by General Willcox is at Mr. Gayle's house, there being no such place as Gate in this section...."<sup>24</sup> The note apparently did not stick; in his postwar history of the campaign, Meade's chief of staff Andrew Humphreys wrote that "General Burnside moved with the Ninth Corps... to Gate's house, on the road from [Spotsylvania] Court House to Fredericksburg, and then toward the Court House, crossing the [Ni] at Gate's house (a mile and a half from the Court House)...."<sup>25</sup> At least by the 1880s Humphreys had learned the true distance from the river to Spotsylvania.

If May 9 had been difficult for Burnside in trying to get through the ambiguous orders, May 10 was difficult because Burnside lost his "ablest division commander."<sup>26</sup> Brigadier General Thomas Stevenson brought his First Division forward to support Willcox's command in solidifying their front on the southern side of the Ni River. Seeking some shade (the mercury recorded 89 degrees at 2

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<sup>23</sup> Matter, 110; Rhea, *Spotsylvania*, 103.

<sup>24</sup> Burnside to Grant, OR, Vol. 36, pt. 2, 583.

<sup>25</sup> Humphreys, *The Virginia Campaign of 1864-1865* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1883), 72.

<sup>26</sup> Rhea, *Spotsylvania*, 182.

PM in Washington City—65 miles north),<sup>27</sup> Stevenson lounged about and smoked cigars with his staff. Then, breaking the brief reprieve in an extremely bloody fashion, a bullet cracked through the back of Stevenson's head, toppling him over. The twenty-eight year old Brigadier General was dead almost instantly. Burnside wrote that Stevenson's death was a "severe misfortune" and that the general had "on all occasions proved himself an efficient soldier."<sup>28</sup> As Stevenson's body was sent back to Boston, Colonel Daniel Leasure took over command of the First Division. One of his new staff officers wrote, "I had a favorable opinion of him, but I can't say I retain it."<sup>29</sup> Over the course of the next day Burnside was hesitant to further use the division under Leasure.

By May 10, the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House was into its third day. By this point of the battle Confederate engineers had laid out their defensive works—the most famous being the Mule Shoe Salient. Measuring "1,800 yards wide at the base and 1,320 yards deep from the base to the tip",<sup>30</sup> the Mule Shoe was truly massive and also proved to be a liability for its Confederate defenders; a salient can be attacked from three sides at once, making it

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<sup>27</sup> Robert K. Krick, *Civil War Weather in Virginia* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 129.

<sup>28</sup> Derek Smith, *The Gallant Dead: Union and Confederate Generals Killed in the Civil War* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2005), 230; Burnside's OR, Vol. 36, pt. 1, 908-909.

<sup>29</sup> Marvel, *Burnside*, 360.

<sup>30</sup> Earl J. Hess, *Trench Warfare under Grant and Lee: Field Fortifications in the Overland Campaign* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 47.

difficult to defend. As Lee's line continued, the Confederate engineers followed the natural contour lines of the ridge they were on and dug a second salient, this one "a minor protrusion in comparison [to the Mule Shoe]... The trench was over five feet deep, and pine logs topped the parapet."<sup>31</sup> This second salient would be guarded mostly by men of Henry Heth's division, thus the position got its name—Heth's Salient. These works would soon become the focus of major Federal attacks.

There was little fighting on Burnside's front on May 11, but plenty of maneuvering. As Grant planned his big offensive against Lee's line for the next day, the Ninth Corps spent the majority of the day re-crossing the Ni River back to the north side. In the midst of driving rain storms, this proved difficult to do. Once the high command realized what was going on, the corps was ordered to re-cross the river again and regain their works on the south side of the river. The end result was that the Ninth Corps spent the majority of May 11 in the rain marching back and forth only to end up in the exact same place as they had started, only now exhausted and soaked to the bone. Burnside denied ordering the move, as did Grant—historian William Matter writes that "Until more evidence is uncovered, this episode will remain a mystery."<sup>32</sup>

In the meantime, the soldiers of the Ninth Corps suffered for the lack of shelter. One soldier in the 57<sup>th</sup> Massachusetts wrote, "The afternoon of the 11<sup>th</sup> [of May]

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<sup>31</sup> Hess, *Trench Warfare under Grant and Lee*, 58-59.

<sup>32</sup> Matter, *If it Takes All Summer*, 174.

was rainy, which continued through the night. The Fifty-Seventh rested upon their arms without shelter of any kind, the ground was wet and the men's clothing also, with no opportunity of getting dry; sleep was impossible...."<sup>33</sup> Another soldier in the 7<sup>th</sup> Rhode Island added, "The rain poured in torrents over the hundreds lying around. Few had blankets."<sup>34</sup> For all of their marches, the soldiers did not reach their trenches until about 10:00 PM, which meant they had about six hours to lie around in the mud until going forward.<sup>35</sup>

While the Ninth Corps moved about and struggled with the elements, Burnside got his orders for the next day's attack. Grant's message to Burnside was time-stamped at 4:00 PM, but the latter probably did not get the order "until near dark"—sunset on May 11 was three minutes shy of 7:00 PM.<sup>36</sup> In his orders, Grant wrote that "You will move against the enemy with your entire force promptly and with all possible vigor at precisely 4 o'clock to-morrow morning. Let your preparations for this attack be conducted with the utmost secrecy, and veiled entirely from the enemy."<sup>37</sup> To assist Burnside, Grant ordered two of his

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<sup>33</sup> John Anderson, *The Fifty-Seventh Regiment of Massachusetts Volunteers in the War of the Rebellion* (Boston: E.B. Stillings & Co., 1896), 80.

<sup>34</sup> William Palmer Hopkins, *The Seventh Regiment Rhode Island Volunteers in the Civil War, 1862-1865* (Boston: Hub Engraving Co., 1903), 169.

<sup>35</sup> Rhea, *Spotsylvania*, 218.

<sup>36</sup> Marvel, *Burnside*, 362, Krick, *Civil War in Virginia*, 129.

<sup>37</sup> OR, Vol. 36, pt. 2, 643.

aides, Cyrus Comstock and Orville Babcock, to attach themselves to the Ninth Corps staff and direct the attacks.

After getting his orders Burnside began to plan his corps' attacks. Some have criticized Burnside for his lack of overall preparations in these stages of the battle—one historian writes that he was “befuddled” and “dithered” in front of the enemy on May 10, and he characterized Burnside’s fighting on May 12 as “a spectacle of embarrassing confusion.”<sup>38</sup> Ambrose Burnside serves as an easy target for these historians as the debacle at Fredericksburg will always stain his name, but it is unfair to claim that Burnside did nothing but spew incompetence; in the midst of the Ninth Corps’ preparations on the night of May 11 it is important to remember Grant’s warning to keep the movements an “utmost secrecy, and veiled entirely from the enemy,” a line that his two aides also reiterated.<sup>39</sup> In this setting, it is easy to understand why Burnside was hesitant to send scouts forward to reconnoiter the ground, especially when Comstock, one of the aides from Grant, had already done so earlier in the day, could provide Burnside with whatever directions he needed. Furthermore, after arriving at Burnside’s headquarters in the dark, “Comstock suggested no reconnaissance.”<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> John Cannan, *Spotsylvania Campaign: May 7-21* (Conshohocken: Combined Books, 1997), 98; John Cannan, *Bloody Angle: Hancock’s Assault on the Mule Shoe Salient May 12, 1864* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2002), 135.

<sup>39</sup> See Note 37.

<sup>40</sup> Comstock’s reconnaissance is found in Rhea, *Spotsylvania*, 215; Marvel, *Burnside*, 362.



In the midst of all this, another curveball was thrown at Burnside when Major General Thomas L. Crittenden arrived and took over command of the corps' First Division.<sup>41</sup> Crittenden was another general whose presence threatened to upend the army's hierarchy; his major general's commission dated from July 17, 1862, four months before George Meade.<sup>42</sup> By assigning Crittenden to the independent Ninth Corps, the matter of commissions were avoided, but Crittenden had other baggage he brought along. In the Chickamauga Campaign in the early fall of 1863 Crittenden had commanded the Army of the Cumberland's Twenty-First Corps, totaling almost 11,000 infantrymen.<sup>43</sup> With his defeat at Chickamauga, William S. Rosecrans looked for scapegoats, and one of those men was Crittenden. In late January of 1864, a court of inquiry was established to "investigate the conduct of" three generals, including Crittenden.<sup>44</sup> Over the next twenty-one days the court heard testimony and examined the Battle of Chickamauga in detail before it absolved Crittenden and wrote, "The evidence... respecting General Crittenden's operations... not only shows no cause for censure, but, on the contrary, that his whole conduct was most creditable...."<sup>45</sup> Though absolved, the court was still a stain

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<sup>41</sup> OR, Vol. 36, pt. 1, 909.

<sup>42</sup> Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Blue: Lives of the Union Commanders* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 100.

<sup>43</sup> Crittenden's force is tallied up from figures compiled in David A. Powell, *The Chickamauga Campaign: August 22-September 19, 1863* (El Dorao Hills: Savas Beatie, 2014), 639-641.

<sup>44</sup> OR, Vol. 30, pt. 1, 930.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 996.

on Crittenden, and whereas he had commanded close to 11,000 troops at Chickamauga, his First Division command in the Ninth Corps now only tallied about 2,100.<sup>46</sup>

With poor maps, a tired and soaked corps, and a new division commander with only a couple of hours' experience in command, Ambrose Burnside prepared his attack in the early morning hours of Thursday, May 12, 1864. According to orders, Robert Potter's Second Division left their works around four in the morning and began to slide north, looking to link up with Hancock's Second Corps. By punctually ordering Potter's division up, Gordon C. Rhea says Burnside was "displaying unaccustomed vigor", but Burnside biographer William Marvel would disagree with this assessment, writing "Burnside had never had much trouble holding up his end of a schedule before[.]"<sup>47</sup> Either way, Potter's force of about 5,700 men crashed through the woods and struck the eastern salient of the Mule Shoe just minutes after Hancock's men had completely shattered the top of it.<sup>48</sup> The Confederate defenders of the tip of the salient were almost all captured en masse, leaving Hancock's men with some 2,700 prisoners to take care of.<sup>49</sup> However, the success also came

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<sup>46</sup> Troop strength comes from Collins' strength of First Division before the Wilderness, 168, and subtracting 535 casualties, as evidenced in OR, Vol. 36, pt. 1, 131. This figure does not account for any casualties the First Division would have suffered on May 10 or 11 due to skirmishing.

<sup>47</sup> Rhea, *Spotsylvania*, 244; Marvel, *Burnside*, 473 (n. 25).

<sup>48</sup> Potter's strength, Collins, 168.

<sup>49</sup> Alfred C. Young III, *Lee's Army during the Overland Campaign: A Numerical Study* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University, 2013), 236

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with problems. An officer in Hancock's corps wrote that, "All line and formation was now lost...Amid the wild confusion of the glorious success, it was difficult to preserve order."<sup>50</sup> In this confused melee, Potter's three brigades hit below Hancock and got some of their own spoils, including two captured cannon.<sup>51</sup>

The confusion of the Federal breakthrough assisted the Confederate response immensely. Gathering his brigade of almost 2,000 North Carolinians, James Lane pushed up to the edge of the salient. As other Confederate brigades, mostly from Ewell's Second Corps, were hitting Hancock, Lane focused his attention on Potter's men. His five regiments in tow, Lane moved forward and later wrote, "In the best of spirits the brigade welcomed the furious assault, which soon followed, with prolonged cheers and death dealing volleys[.]"<sup>52</sup>

Lane's men were soon joined by the combined weight of the 2,500 men present in Alfred Scales' and Edward Thomas' brigades. The three Confederate brigades soon proved too much for Potter's men and the Federals gave ground, even giving up the two cannon they had captured earlier. Potter wrote in his report, "The connection on our right with the Second Corps being broken... we were forced out of the enemy's work with a few prisoners."

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<sup>50</sup> St. Clair A. Mulholland, *The Story Of The 116th Regiment Pennsylvania Volunteers In the War of the Rebellion* (Philadelphia: F. McManus, Jr & Co., 1903), 209.

<sup>51</sup> OR, Vol. 36, pt. 1, 928.

<sup>52</sup> Young, 246; Lane's Report in *Southern Historical Society Papers: Volume 9*, 146.

By 8:00 AM Potter's men were out of their breach and spent the rest of the day trading shots with the rebels to their immediate front as well as small sorties against the rebel works which accomplished little.<sup>53</sup>

As Burnside tried to get a handle on the fighting to his front, Grant pushed him to send more troops in. Increasingly frustrated at his commander's impatience, Burnside crumpled up and threw on the ground one dispatch and, at another demand, verbally snapped at Comstock. The firing continued at its heaviest near the western salient of the Mule Shoe, which would soon get its infamous name of the Bloody Angle. Hoping to help, Burnside ordered more attacks, this time not at the eastern salient, but at the rebel positions further south—at Heth's Salient.<sup>54</sup>

Thomas Crittenden's First Division was picked for this task, and its two brigades began to advance through the swampy ravines and bottomlands, crashing through the woods closer and closer to Heth's line. But with Crittenden's newness to the division, combined with the two brigades' near-total exhaustion, the fighting formation did not make it far. As the Federals stumbled towards Heth's Salient, the Confederates behind their works readied their rifles. The rebels in these works belonged to the two brigades of Joseph Davis and Robert Mayo, who together had about 2,300 men. As soon as Crittenden's men came

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<sup>53</sup> Combined strength of Scales and Thomas, Young, 246; Potter's report, Vol. 36, pt. 1, 928; Steven Stanley Map Series, "Battle of Spotsylvania Court House", Map 12 of 24.

<sup>54</sup> Marvel, *Burnside*, 364.

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into view, the two brigades opened fire. Heth, who ironically had been roommates with Burnside at West Point, wrote, “[Crittenden’s] attack was met with firmness and repelled with gallantry. The enemy left many dead and wounded in our front. A stand of colors was captured during this affair...”<sup>55</sup> Adding to his rather stoic report, Heth allowed himself some more prose in his memoirs, where he added, “On the [12<sup>th</sup>] of May my breastworks [were] vigorously assailed by General Burnside... the attacking force, or some of them, came within thirty paces of my breastworks; at the same time my infantry poured a shower of lead into Burnside’s troops. They were exposed to a raking fire of my artillery on my right, where I had some twenty pieces in position.”<sup>56</sup>

Crittenden’s repulse left Burnside with only Orlando Willcox’s division. The corps’ Third Division moved off towards the salient, hoping to break through in one-last attempt. With the fighting at the Bloody Angle having descended into a maddened killing spree of little overall importance, Burnside’s ultimate objective was to break through Heth’s Salient, forcing Lee to move men away from the Mule Shoe, potentially opening the door to a final Federal success. Willcox’s two brigades moved off in the same fashion as Crittenden, whose disjointed fragments also tried to join the attack. Joining the infantry were four

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<sup>55</sup> Henry Heth, *Heth’s Report of Spring 1864 to October 1864*, unpublished, Fredericksburg & Spotsylvania National Military Park archives; Henry Heth *Memoirs Henry Heth*, edited by James L. Morrison (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1974), 185-186.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

batteries of guns under the Ninth Corps Chief of Artillery, Lieutenant Samuel Benjamin.<sup>57</sup> As Willcox's two brigades, under John Hartranft and Benjamin Christ, advanced they soon came under the same fire that had met Crittenden's division, together with an added thrust—a Confederate counter-attack of two brigades, centered against Willcox's left and aimed straight at the four batteries of artillery.

Looking to do the exact same thing as Grant, but in reverse, Robert E. Lee looked to take pressure off the Mule Shoe, and saw the easiest way to do so would be to hit the Federal left—Burnside's corps. Willcox's attack was timed almost perfectly to the same moment that the Confederate attack struck out from the right flank of Heth's Salient. The two brigades belonged to David Weisiger and James Lane, the latter having already repulsed Robert Potter earlier in the morning. As Lane's men led the attack, though, they "commenced yelling too soon and drew upon themselves a terrible fire of canister from four of the guns..."<sup>58</sup>

The fighting around Benjamin's batteries descended into chaos. Willcox wrote in his diary, "At one time the enemy was within ten paces, but the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan, supporting this battery, re-manned the guns and with the aid of canister of the other batteries, repulsed the charge splendidly."<sup>59</sup> While the fighting swirled about the batteries, the musketry from within Heth's Salient

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<sup>57</sup> OR, Vol. 36, pt. 1, 941.

<sup>58</sup> *Southern Historical Society Papers: Volume 9*, 148.

<sup>59</sup> Orlando B. Willcox, *Forgotten Valor: The Memoirs, Journals, & Civil War Letters of Orlando B. Willcox*, edited by Robert Garth Scott (Kent State University of Press, 1999), 521.

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continued to hit Willcox's brigades from the front, and Willcox noted that "my front line suffered severely in killed, wounded, and prisoners...."<sup>60</sup> Especially caught in the middle, not only by the fire to their front, but also by Weisiger's and Lane's counter-attack, the 17<sup>th</sup> Michigan nearly ceased to exist—"only four dozen men escaped."<sup>61</sup> Though it was able to repulse Weisiger and Lane, Willcox's division's attack was spent before it really got a chance to get underway. The attack slunk back to its defensive works, ending, for all practical purposes, the fighting around Heth's Salient on May 12.

So ended Ambrose Burnside's attacks on May 12 at Spotsylvania. Strategically, why were they important? In his memoirs, Grant perhaps expressed it best when he wrote, "Burnside accomplished but little of a positive nature, but negatively a great deal. He kept Lee from reinforcing his [center] from that quarter."<sup>62</sup> In other words, Burnside's attacks kept portions of three Confederate divisions (Heth, Cadmus Wilcox, and William Mahone) away from the Mule Shoe—troops that could have been used to tip the balance and completely evict the Federal breakthrough. Others, however, were not so willing to see what Burnside had accomplished. Only knowing that Burnside failed to break Heth's line, a staff officer in the

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<sup>60</sup> Willcox, *Forgotten Valor*, 521.

<sup>61</sup> Marvel, *Burnside*, 365.

<sup>62</sup> Grant, *Memoirs*, 554.

Sixth Corps wrote that Burnside was a “[damned] humbug.”<sup>63</sup>

It is difficult to get an understanding of the casualty counts for the Ninth Corps as well as the Confederates from the fighting near Heth’s Salient. In his report, Burnside claimed that the corps had lost 1,500 killed, wounded, and captured, but that figure also included losses in the days following May 12. Confederate counts encompass the entirety of the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House, which for Henry Heth, meant stand-up fights against the Second Corps in the days before fighting against Burnside. For the entire battle, Heth’s division suffered 350 casualties, while Lane’s brigade, which seemed to be everywhere on May 12, claimed 470 casualties for the day.<sup>64</sup>

Had Burnside broken through at Heth’s Salient, it would have broken open Lee’s line. After the collapse of the Mule Shoe, Lee had his engineers, joined by soldiers who were routed from the initial clash there work feverishly on a fallback line, digging into the wet earth with “pick and shovel.”<sup>65</sup> However, that fallback line ran along with, and incorporated Heth’s Salient. Had any of Burnside’s attacks broken through, the entirety of the new line would be useless as the Ninth Corps came crashing down onto the unfinished trench system. From there, Lee’s

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<sup>63</sup> Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr, *Touched with Fire: Civil War Letters and Diary of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. 1861-1864*, edited by Mark De Wolfe Howe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1946), 116.

<sup>64</sup> OR, Vol. 36, pt. 1, 911; Young, *Lee’s Army*, 246; *Southern Historical Society Papers: Volume 9*, 152.

<sup>65</sup> Douglas Southall Freeman, *Lee’s Lieutenants: Volume III*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1944), 408-409.



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options and his defensive nature against Grant would have been severely limited.

But Burnside did not break through. He did not break through because of the actions of the Confederates at Heth's Salient, who held steady in the face of three separate attacks, and even managed their own attack that sent Willcox's division sprawling back in confusion. Any discussion of what might have been beyond this is mere conjecture and opinion. For all the damage done, the bloodletting was not over. The armies would move steadily south, all the way to Petersburg, where a mine, an explosion, and a bloody crater waited for Major General Ambrose Burnside.

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