



The charge of Emory Upton

By Curtis D. Crockett

One of the chief fascinations of the American Civil War is the coexistence and interfusion of the modern and the archaic which characterized the tactical environment of the war. Both sides utilized newly available military technology including ironclad warships, telegraphic communications, and a modern, extensive railway system affording previously unthinkable troop mobility and modern weaponry such as the rifle musket and rifled artillery. Yet land battles continued to be fought with Napoleonic tactics adapted to smoothbore musketry engagements, totally unsuited to modern weaponry.

No longer did the armies face each other with smoothbore muskets accurate at only fifty to seventy-five yards. The standard issue of the United States Army at the outbreak of the Civil War was the model 1855 rifle musket. However, the standing army in the United States in 1861 of about 16,000 men possessed a mere 36,000 of them at the beginning of the war. The model 1861 Springfield rifle musket became the standard issue of the Union infantry after the war began. During the course of the war nearly 1.5 million model 1861 rifle muskets were produced by the Union and some 900,000 British pattern 1853 Enfield rifle muskets were imported, many by the South.¹ The multiple innovations in warfare introduced since the Napoleonic wars and the Mexican War of the 1840s not only assured that war would be more terrible, but made the American civil War a veritable testing ground for modern weaponry.

The United States military was not ignorant of the new technological developments

¹ Earl J. Coates and Dean S. Thomas, *An Introduction to Civil War Small Arms*. PP. 14-19.

in warfare. Dismissal of long held military tactical theory, however, was not universally embraced by the high level command in either army as evidenced by failed mass frontal, linear-type attacks at Malvern Hill, Fredericksburg and Gettysburg. By May, 1864, the rifle musket was prevalent on both sides. Troops attacking fortified works in linear formation at the Battle of the Wilderness on May 7, 1864, faced deadly accurate rifle musket fire at 500 yards. In addition they faced the devastating effects of rifled artillery, accurate from a distance of one to two miles as well as short-range canister. Attacking across an open field of fire, with continuous reloading, exposed troops experienced murderous fire and untold slaughter.

Colonel Emory Upton understood the changing face of the war as well as any officer in the Army of the Potomac. In May, 1864, twenty-four year old Emory Upton was commander of the second Brigade of the VI Corps' 1st Division. He graduated 8th in his class from West Point in the spring of 1861. He recognized and appreciated the recent developments in weaponry including the accurate firepower of the fast-loading rifle musket, rifled artillery and newly improved artillery projectiles. Upton realized the need for a change in tactics to accommodate the technological developments in warfare. Colonel Clinton Beckwith, of the 121st New York developed a deep and abiding respect for Upton, "*He was in my judgment, as able a soldier as ever commanded a body of troops, and I never saw an officer under fire who preserved the calmness of demeanor, the utter indifference to danger, the thorough knowledge of the situation, and what was best to do, as did Colonel Upton.*"² Upton also possessed intellectual vision and penetrating insight; his placement in history was perfectly prescribed. The progression and positioning of the armies, and an ideal set of circumstances provided the perfect stage for one of the classic infantry assaults of military history.

The 1864 campaign commenced like most others in the eastern theater of the Civil War, but it had all of the potential for bringing about the Confederacy's summer of discontent. General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia experienced decisive defeat for the first time at Gettysburg the previous July. Some of the South's most promising generals had been killed on the battlefield, including Stonewall Jackson, Albert Sydney Johnston, Dorsey Pender, William Barksdale, Richard Pettigrew and Lewis Armistead. James Longstreet was seriously wounded at the Wilderness. The South's continuing ability to field its armies and, indeed, feed its populace were in doubt. One Confederate soldier wrote, "*the conviction that the struggle ahead of us was of a different character from any we had experienced in the past - a sort of premonition of the definite mathematical calculation, in whose hard, unyielding grip it was intended our future should be held and crushed.*"³

Despite optimistic sentiment in the north, Major General George Meade's Army of the Potomac had unsuccessfully and clumsily sought to draw General Lee's army into open battle. Meade's army had cowered under the Confederate breastworks at Mine Run, the previous November. The embarrassing skirmish at Morton's Ford in February, 1864, the brainstorm of the dubious military strategist, Major General Benjamin F. Butler, was an ill omen that Meade's Gettysburg victory was a fluke. One thing was clear, the overwhelming numerical superiority of the northern army relegated General Lee's army to the defensive both strategically and tactically. Seizing the initiative and strategic maneuver would no longer be the inevitable prescription for southern victory.

By March, 1864, in the midst of crisis and stalemate, Lieutenant General Ulysses S.

² Isaac O. Best, *History of the 121st New York Infantry*, P. 134, William L. Clements Library, University of Michigan.

³ Robert Stiles, *Four Years Under Marse Robert*, P. 241.

Grant was appointed to chief command of the armies of the United States. He decided to take up residence in the east with the Army of the Potomac and experience first hand this enigmatic contradiction of an army. It did not take long for Grant to assume de facto command of the Army of the Potomac.

Lee immediately earned Grant's respect. The Battle of the Wilderness on May 6-7 provided a rude awakening for "unconditional surrender" Grant, who was not used to stalemate on the battlefield. The battle's indecisive result and substantial casualties looked and smelled enough like defeat for Grant to follow the model of his predecessors and retire behind the Rapidan River. But Grant did not acquiesce to the limitations and insufficiencies of the enigma which he inherited. He brought a new kind of warfare to the table consisting of unrelenting, unyielding dogging of the enemy in the belief the best way to end the war was to destroy the Army of Northern Virginia. Grant perceived the Wilderness as merely a temporary tactical setback; a strategic impasse. It was clear by now that the destruction of Lee's army could not be accomplished in a single knock-out punch.

The Wilderness campaign occurred at the crossroads of two significant strategic catalysts which shaped the duration of the war: the predominance of the rifle musket and the introduction of trench warfare. The battle and its aftermath became a laboratory for the southern soldier to devise ever more ingenious measures to protect himself. Imaginative earthworks became the order of the day. Protected rifle pits, parapets, and abatis (wood barricades with sharpened tips), appeared everywhere on the battlefield, in stark contrast to previous battles fought substantially in the open. General Meade's aide, Lieutenant Colonel Theodore Lyman noted, "*It is a rule that, when Rebels halt, the first day gives them a good rifle pit; the second, a regular infantry parapet with artillery in position; and the third a parapet with abatis in front and entrenched batteries behind.*"⁴

After the Wilderness, Lee characteristically anticipated Grant's next move to the small crossroads town of Spotsylvania Court House in his attempt to get around Lee and make a move toward Richmond. When the Union V Corps reached the vicinity of Spotsylvania Court House on May 8 after a "secret" march, it found the Confederate I Corps, under South Carolinian Major General Richard Anderson a mile north of the town behind hastily constructed defensive works. Anderson had replaced the wounded Lieutenant General James Longstreet. With the help of Confederate cavalry, he had beaten the Union army to the location and secured the advantageous position. These momentous decisions and movements resulted in the Battle of Spotsylvania Court House, a bloody continuation of the fighting at the Wilderness.

To be continued ...

⁴ Letters of Theodore Lyman to family, May 18, 1864, in Meade's Headquarters, 1863-1865; *Letters of Colonel Theodore Lyman from the Wilderness to Appomattox*, P. 100 as quoted in Gordon C. Rhea, *The Battles for Spotsylvania Court and the Road to Yellow Tavern*, P. 6.