



The Greatest Civil War Battles: The Battle of the Wilderness

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures of the battle's important generals.

*Includes several maps of the battle.

*Includes accounts of the fighting written by important generals like Grant, Longstreet, John Gordon, Theodore Lyman, and more.

*Includes a Bibliography for further reading.

“Numbers meant little—in fact, they were frequently an encumbrance on the narrow trails. Visibility was limited, making it extremely difficult for officers to exercise effective control. Attackers could only thrash noisily and blindly forward through the underbrush, perfect targets for the concealed defenders.” – Col. Vincent J. Esposito

With Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia continuing to frustrate the Union Army of the Potomac's attempts to take Richmond in 1862 and 1863, President Lincoln shook things up by turning command of all the armies of the United States to Ulysses S. Grant in March 1864. Lee had won stunning victories at battles like Chancellorsville and Second Bull Run by going on the offensive and taking the strategic initiative, but Grant and Lincoln had no intention of letting him do so anymore. Attaching himself to the Army of the Potomac, Grant ordered Army of the Potomac commander George Meade, "Lee's army is your objective point. Wherever Lee goes, there you will go also."

From May 5-7, the two most famous generals of the Civil War squared off for the first time. The 100,000 strong Army of the Potomac was double the size of Lee's hardened but battered Army of Northern Virginia. It was a similar position to the one George McClellan had in 1862 and Joe Hooker had in 1863, and Grant's first attack, at the Battle of the Wilderness, followed a similar pattern. Nevertheless, Lee proved more than capable on the defensive.

The Battle of the Wilderness was fought so close to where the Battle of Chancellorsville took place a year earlier that soldiers encountered skeletons that had been buried in shallow graves in 1863. Moreover, the woods were so thick that neither side could actually see who they were shooting at, and whole brigades at times got lost in the forest. Both armies sustained heavy casualties while Grant kept attempting to move the fighting to a setting more to his advantage, but the heavy forest made coordinated movements almost impossible.

On May 5 and May 6, both armies attempted desperate attacks and counterattacks to strike a knockout blow, but they were ultimately unable to dislodge each other. Given the terrain and the nature of the fighting, it was one of the most horrendous battles of the war, with some wounded men literally burning to death in fires ignited by the battle that sparked the nearby underbrush and spread rapidly. The defending Confederates technically won a tactical victory by holding their ground, but they did so at a staggering cost, inflicting 17,000 casualties on the Army of the Potomac and suffering 11,000 of their own.

On May 7, Grant disengaged his army from the battle. His objective had been frustrated by Lee's skillful defense, and his men got the familiar dreadful feeling that they would retreat back toward Washington, as they had too many times before. This time, however, Grant made the fateful decision to keep moving south, inspiring his men by telling them that he was prepared to “fight it out on this line if it takes all Summer.” The Battle of the Wilderness would only be the beginning of the Overland Campaign, not the end of it.

The Greatest Civil War Battles: The Battle of the Wilderness comprehensively covers the campaign and the events that led up to the battle, the fighting itself, and the aftermath of the battle. Accounts of the battle by important participants are also included, along with maps of the battle and pictures of important people, places, and events. You will learn about the Wilderness like like you never have before, in no time at all.

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