

Grant's Overland Campaign Timeline

Background

After three years of fighting, Lincoln appoints Ulysses S. "Sam" Grant as commander of all Union forces thus relegating Henry Halleck to chief of staff in Washington, DC. Grant decides to establish his headquarters in the field alongside the Army of the Potomac, commanded by George Meade. Grant directs that four separate Union armies begin offenses at the same time, hoping to prevent the Confederates from transferring units from one sector to another. Grant determines that the Army of the Potomac shall proceed south toward Richmond, Virginia, the Confederate's capital, while Sherman shall lead his Grand Army southeastward from the Chattanooga area toward Atlanta in order to destroy J. E. Johnston's Army of Tennessee. Franz Sigel will operate in the Shenandoah Valley while Butler's Army of the James will move from Fort Monroe up the James River.

The Wilderness

May 4, 1864 – Union Army crosses Rapidan River, with Gouverneur Warren's 5th Corps leading across Germanna Ford with John Sedgwick's 6th Corps following, and Winfield Scott Hancock's 2nd Corps crossing a half dozen miles east, or downstream, at Ely's Ford. Meade, without objection from Grant, is forced to wait for his supply train, which is 50-60 miles long, to catch up.

May 4 - (*Assigned two corps, Butler leaves Fort Monroe via ship for transport up the James River headed toward the Bermuda Hundred.*)

May 5 – Harry Wilson, who was supposed to cover on Turnpike Road, takes his cavalry division completely out of the picture, and fails to discover Rebel forces approaching from the west.

May 5 – Warren 5th Corps makes first contact with Rebels at Saunders Field along the Orange Turnpike. Wright fails to bring his division up to attack along Charles Griffin’s right. Hancock, who by now is at Todd’s Tavern, south of The Wilderness, is ordered back to block A. P. Hill’s attack at the intersection of Orange Plank Rd & Brock Rd. The day ends in a bloody standoff.

Night of May 5-6 – After a hard day of fighting, and expecting James "Pete" Longstreet to relieve him, Hill does not fortify his position astride Orange Plank Road.

May 6 – Grant orders a general attack to commence at 0500 but before attack can be launched, Rebels attack Sedgwick on Union right, and firing gradually spreads along the line.

May 6 – Hancock’s 2nd Corps, reinforced by Ambrose Burnside's 9th Corps for a total of 30,000 men, attacks at Tapps Clearing. Longstreet, with a Texas Brigade in the vanguard, arrives to launch a fierce counterattack that drives Hancock back thus saving the day for Lee's army. 1st "Lee to the rear!" Grant is unhappy with Burnside for failing to assist Hancock.

May 6 – Later that morning, as Longstreet is rolling up Union’s left flank like a "wet blanket" he is hit and severely wounded by friendly fire.

May 6 – Late in the evening John Gordon tries a futile attack against Sedgwick’s right flank.

May 6 – USA casualties for two days – 17,500
CSA " " " " -- 10,500

Spotsylvania

May 7 – Grant moves southward along Brock Road toward Spotsylvania C.H..

May 7 – Richard H. Anderson, appointed as Longstreet's stand in, wins the race to Spotsylvania after making a decision to leave four hours early.

May 8 – Phil Sheridan's idle cavalry blocks Meade's infantry at Todd's Tavern. Meade and Sheridan have an open argument at Meade's Command Post. Grant fails to back Meade, and almost immediately Sheridan is released to pursue Stuart.

May 9 – *(Sheridan, with 12,000 troopers and 6 batteries of horse artillery, departs for Richland. Without cavalry to know what is going on, and in order to cut off rest of Lee's army, Hancock's 2nd Corps is sent to turn CSA left in vicinity of Block House Bridge; this maneuver requires two crossings of meandering Po River.)*

May 9 – Sedgwick is killed by a sharpshooter at Laurel Hill; he is replaced by Horatio G. Wright as commander of 6th Corps. For a couple of days, Wright has to fortify himself and calm his nerves with whiskey but eventually becomes an effective corps commander.

May 10 – "A sad, disappointing day for the Union." Grant orders five divisions under Wright to attack enemy's supposedly weakened left center. This attack fails but Emory Upton leads 12 massed regiments to breach CSA line on left face of Mule Shoe. Successful at first but support is bungled forcing Upton to withdraw.

May 10 – Grant orders Hancock to join Warren in front of Laurel Hill, which requires re-crossing to north of Po River. Barlow's division, bringing up the rear, is almost trapped by Jubal Early who has crossed the Po downstream from Brock House Bridge. Warren has initiated his attack before Hancock is in place.

May 10 – Grant sends his "... if it takes all summer" dispatch to Washington DC

May 11 - *(Jeb Stuart, 31, is mortally wounded at Yellow Tavern, six miles north of Richmond, by Sheridan's cavalry.)*

May 12 – One of the bloodiest days of the war. Grant tries Upton's massing tactic with Hancock's entire 2nd Corps, Francis Barlow in the lead; a crest to the west of point of attack becomes known as Bloody Angle as battle, much of which is hand-to-hand, lasts for 23 hours. 3,000 prisoners are taken and 20 guns captured, and a 22" tree falls from being hit by so many bullets. After this battle, Stonewall Jackson's old division has to be degraded to a brigade because of its heavy losses. One soldier says that he "... doesn't expect to go to hell, but if I do it can't be any worse than Bloody Angle."

May 12 -- Lee chastises Dick Ewell to "calm himself" as Ewell's troops flee from the front.

May 14-15 – Grant shifts 2nd, 5th, and 6th Corps to the left of Burnside's 9th Corps along Fredericksburg Road.

May 15 - *(At New Market a combined Union force under Sigel collapses and quickly retreats, thus forfeiting the Shenandoah Valley to Rebel control.)*

May 16 - *(Beauregard block's Butler's advance at Drewry's Bluff.)*

May 18 – Union makes a brief attack against Rebel strengthened breastworks located at former neck of Bloody Angle.

May 19 – Ewell, supposedly on a reconnaissance with his entire corps, strikes Union right flank at Harris Farm thus ending battle of Spotsylvania. Much of the Union fighting was done by recently redeployed "Heavies."

May 19 – USA casualties beginning May 5 – 32,000
CSA “ “ “ “ – 18,000 plus 57
commanders of corps, divisions, and brigades.

North Anna

May 20 – By now Grant has taken more control of the Army of the Potomac, delegating Meade to serve as Grant's executive officer. Armies race to Hanover Junction, another race won by CSA. Pickett's division, which had been in NC, rejoins Lee.

May 21 – Hancock's 2nd Corps, in an effort to draw out Lee, reaches Milford Station, but is effectively out of contact with Grant and Meade.

May 21 – On Telegraph Road in vicinity of Madison Ordinary while en route to North Anna, Lee's 1st & 2nd Corps move across Union's 5th Corps giving Warren, who could hear the movement four miles to his west, a golden opportunity to strike. Warren, out of touch with Grant or Meade, is in no mood to strike.

May 21 – Photo of famous scene of Grant leaning over Meade's shoulder. Taken at Grant's Hqs at Massaponax Church, about six miles east of Spotsylvania C.H.

May 23 – Lee allows his army to rest without entrenching south of North Anna River. Lee was so tired and sick himself that he inspected his positions while riding in a borrowed civilian carriage.

May 23 – Grant has his army on move in three columns toward North Anna, hoping to catch Lee before he has time to prepare a strong defensive line. Hancock captures a redoubt guarding Chesterfield Bridge on Telegraph Road.

May 23 – Sheridan's continued absence leaves Meade without effective eyes and ears. Lee devises an inverted "V" with vertex

at Ox Ford to try to trap Grant. Ox Ford is perhaps the finest natural defensive position in Virginia.

May 24 – With Hancock on the right of CSA wedge, and Burnside against the vertex, Grant obliges Lee by moving straight into Lee's trap but Lee is confined to his tent with diarrhea while Ewell is also ill with dysentery, and trap cannot be sprung. In an attempt to capture Ox Ford, James Ledlie, of Burnside's 9th Corps, and while drunk, sends a futile charge against CSA works.

May 24 - Sheridan's cavalry rejoins the rest of the army, having contributed little to the campaign other than the killing of Stuart. Warren's Corps crosses North Anna at Jericho Mill and falls upon Hill's 3rd Corps. Eventually Warren is astride Virginia Central RR, but also recognizes the trap.

May 25 -- Lee expresses his anger at Hill for allowing Warren to escape the trap.

May 25 - Union forces begin to re-cross the North Anna in preparation of continuing to sidle around Lee's left.

May 26 – Grant assures Halleck that "Lee's Army is really whipped." Nevertheless Grant begins another sidling move to his left.

May 27 – Ewell, too sick to command any longer, relinquishes command to Early.

May 27 – Custer's cavalry pushes away a small group of Rebel horsemen guarding the Pamunkey River crossing near Hanover town. Almost immediately, Union engineers begin construction of pontoon bridge.

May 28 – Union Army crosses Pamunkey River near Hanover town. As lead elements are digging in south of Pamunkey, David Gregg's cavalry division encounters strong

Rebel force of cavalry, leading to a seven hour head-on struggle, the single most brutal cavalry fight of the Civil War, near Enon Church and six-road junction at Haw's Shop. Both Cavalry sides are looking for the other side's infantry; Rebel cavalry locates Federal forces but Sheridan still cannot locate. Nevertheless, pushing the Rebels from this junction allows Federal forces several options.

May 29 - The last of the Union army has crossed the Pamunkey River.

May 30 – Hancock pushes CSA away from Totopotomoy Creek.

Cold Harbor

May 30 - After Warren's 5th Corps has crossed the Totopotomoy Creek, Lee's strikes at Bethesda Church. Warren complains that he failed to get any support from Sheridan.

May 31 – Sheridan's cavalry seizes five road junction at Old Cold Harbor near Gaines Mill battlefield of 1862. One road leads to Union supply base at White House on Pamunkey River. Capture of junction allows Grant to establish a north-south alignment.

June 1 –Sheridan – using newly arrived Spencer repeating rifles – helps repulse two badly managed Southern attacks at Old Cold Harbor. Wright, after a tortured night march from the right of Union lines, arrives at Old Cold harbor junction. William F. ("Baldy") Smith's 18th Corps, after having been mistakenly being ordered to New Castle Ferry to the east, arrives to further reinforce Union forces.

Night of June 1-2 – Remainder of both armies arrive and entrench for 7 miles from Totopotomy to Chickahominy. Battlefield coincides with Gaines Mills battlefield whose battle lines run east and west.

June 2 – Early's Corps attacks Union right, or northern, flank without significant gain.

June 3 – Grant assigns Meade to order a general frontal assault that is poorly planned or coordinated resulting in bloody disaster; early during the attack even the normally aggressive Hancock recommends a halt. That evening Grant says he regrets that attack more than any one he had ever ordered. A "heavy" regiment assigned to Barlow manages to breach Confederate entrenchments but this gain is not exploited because veteran reserve regiments simply "hit the ground" rather than advance. While it is the most lopsided victory for CSA in the campaign, it is also Lee's last significant victory of the war. Meade tells his wife that Grant "is willing to admit now Virginia & Lee's army is not Tennessee & Bragg's army."

June 7 – Truce finally called to retrieve the few wounded who survived three days in sun without water and to bury the dead. Vultures have been circling and feeding upon the aftermath.

Some quotes about Cold Harbor -- "... Perhaps the easiest ever granted to Confederate arms by the folly of Federal commanders."

Lincoln: "...it can almost be said that the 'heavens are hung in black' "

Bruce Catton: Cold Harbor is "one of the hard and terrible names of the Civil War, perhaps the most terrible one of all."

"... those days will appear to be the darkest of the many dark days through which passed the friends and lovers of the Federal Union."

Grant: "I have always regretted the assault at Cold Harbor was ever made."

The End of the Campaign

June 9 - Suddenly Grant switches to an entirely new strategy, changing his objective from Richmond to across the James River to Petersburg, the railroad hub 25 miles south of the capital.

June 11-12 - *(To distract CSA and if possible to destroy Virginia Central RR before joining Hunter in the Shenandoah Valley, Grant sends Sheridan west to Trevilian Station, west of Louisa. The ensuing cavalry fight over two days incurs a casualty rate of 20%, being the bloodiest cavalry action of the war. Sheridan had no clue that Wade Hampton is waiting at Trevilian and is driven off before he can complete the rest of his mission.)*

June 12 - Lee detaches Early's 2nd Corps for deployment toward the Shenandoah Valley. The same night Grant cleverly disguises his principle objective by sending Warren's corps, accompanied by Wilson's cavalry division, toward James River with the men cautioned to disengage as silently as possible.

June 13 - Lee incorrectly guesses that Richmond is Grant's objective and moves to protect the approaches to the capital city thus allowing Federals relatively free access to the James, which the Federals begin to approach late in the afternoon.

June 13 - USA casualties during campaign - 55,000
CSA " " " " 27,000

Each side loses approximately 45% of original strength.

June 14 - Baldy Smith's 18th Corps retraces its steps back to White House Landing to board riverboats before circling around the end of the Peninsula to start back up the James River to land at Bermuda Hundred. The rest of the Union army, including three infantry corps and the army's baggage trains, carefully withdraw from its Cold Harbor trenches to begin a 55 mile march to Charles City C.H. near the James.

During the night of June 14-15 they start traversing a 2,100 foot bridge laid across 110 pontoons.

June 15 - Baldy Smith, leading his 18th Corps, confronts Petersburg's undermanned fortifications but Smith flinches at the sound of locomotives that he assumes are bringing in more defenders and elects to wait for reinforcements before trying to assault the next morning.

June 16 - Reinforcements sent by Lee begin to arrive to help defend the Petersburg fortifications. Hancock's 2nd Corps assaults the newly reinforced Rebel lines but cannot advance.

June 17 - Burnside's 9th Corps failed to succeed after also taking heavy losses.

June 18 - After several attacks failed against freshly reinforced Confederate positions, Grant declares that there would be no more attacks against fortifications, thus concluding the Overland campaign while initiating the semi-siege against Petersburg whose siege lines would eventually extend to Richmond.

The Overland campaign from May 4 until June 18 fails in its primary objective to win a decisive victory over Lee's army. The six and half week campaign produces three of the bloodiest battles - The Wilderness, Spotsylvania, and Cold Harbor - that were indecisive. Nevertheless by maneuvering before initiating a siege around Petersburg, and threatening Richmond's lifeline of the railroad network in and out of Petersburg, Grant's ultimate victory now seems to be a mere matter of time.

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