

The University Of North Carolina At Asheville

Through the Rain:  
An Analysis of General Winfield Scott Hancock's Role in the Battle of Williamsburg

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By  
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In his Civil War memoirs, Louis Philippe Albert, Comte de Paris, wrote: “Finally Hancock halted his troops with the same precision as on a parade ground. He waited for the enemy to close the range, then killed a great number with one massive volley. Then he turned to his men and cried, ‘Now, Gentlemen, let us charge!’ The charge was sounded and the whole brigade attacked with the bayonet.”<sup>1</sup> This gripping account of Brigadier General Winfield Scott Hancock’s role in the Battle of Williamsburg is one of many that attempt to describe the events of May 5, 1862.

Following the battle, many men from both sides lay wounded in makeshift hospitals while others lay dying in the fields surrounding Williamsburg. Amid the carnage however, there were still other men who actually benefited from the battle. General Hancock went into Williamsburg a respected Union officer but emerged a venerable war hero. Thus, resulting from actions which General McClellan himself called “superb,” Hancock’s military career was off to a promising start due to the Battle of Williamsburg. McClellan’s praise also came at an opportune time when the Union was in desperate need of positive news from the battle front. However, behind the adjectives and the hype, Hancock owed this bright start to the mistakes of the officers and soldiers who fought against him.

Some historians refer to the Battle of Williamsburg as a mere skirmish, while others realize the impact that the battle had on the soldiers involved and the civilians in surrounding areas. Many historians are divided in terms of the likelihood that the two opposing armies would clash at the location that they did. In their book entitled *Pitiless Rain*, Earl and David Hastings express surprise that the Battle of Williamsburg evolved

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Philippe Albert, “We Prepare to Receive the Enemy Where we Stand,” *Civil War Times Illustrated* 24, no. 3 (1985), 23.

as it did. Terming the location “the Williamsburg Line,” they charge that Confederate General Joseph Johnston “had no interest in this line either before or after the battle, but had it not just happened to be at the specific place where he was forced to turn and fight, the history of the Peninsula Campaign might well be different.”<sup>2</sup> They continue to explain that the Williamsburg Line was intended to be secured by a large defending force and not the relatively small rearguard which dug their heels in to defend against the invaders.<sup>3</sup>

Considered in history circles to be the authority on Williamsburg during both the Civil War and Reconstruction, Carol Kettenberg Dubbs addresses this same idea in her essay “Fortress Williamsburg: Treasure Through Four Years of War.” Noting its role as a “staunchly Confederate community . . . midway between Federal-held Fort Monroe and the tip of the Peninsula and the Southern capital of Richmond,” Dubbs promotes the idea that Williamsburg was nearly guaranteed a specific role in Civil War history.<sup>4</sup>

Historian Mark Grimsley agrees with the statement that conflict at Williamsburg was imminent, however, he points to the delays caused by both Confederate General Joseph Johnston and Union General George McClellan. In particular, “the zeal of their subordinates, too long frustrated by the slowness of siege warfare, intervened to undermine the commanders’ control of events.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, in his article entitled “Rear Guard

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<sup>2</sup> Earl C. Hasting Jr. and David S. Hastings, *A Pitiless Rain* (Shippensburg: White Mane Publishing Company, 1997), 39.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Carol Kettenburg Dubbs, “Fortress Williamsburg: Treasure Through Four Years of War,” in *Williamsburg, Virginia: A City Before the State, 1699-1999*, ed. Robert P. Maccubbin (Richmond: Carter Printing Company, 2000), 95.

<sup>5</sup> Mark Grimsley, “Rear Guard at Williamsburg: Turning Back the Yankees,” *Civil War Times Illustrated* 24, no.3 (1985): 10.

at Williamsburg,” Grimsley believes that “misguided aggressiveness” was the catalyst that “both caused and shaped the Battle of Williamsburg.”<sup>6</sup>

With regards to the role that Hancock played in the battle’s outcome, most historians seemingly attribute the Union victory to Hancock himself. Historian David M. Jordan, in his book entitled *Winfield Scott Hancock*, remarks that Hancock’s part in the conflict was “a complete victory for Hancock, and it settled Williamsburg.”<sup>7</sup> In his article, Grimsley also includes the Union command’s reaction to the progress of Hancock’s men during battle, referring to it as “word of Hancock’s success.”<sup>8</sup> Another noted historian and Hancock biographer, Glenn Tucker makes similar generalizations in his book *Hancock the Superb*. Also covering the reaction of Hancock’s superior officers he makes references to “Hancock’s repulse of the Confederates and his brilliant counterattack.”<sup>9</sup>

However, Carol Kettenberg Dubbs, in her book entitled *Defend this Old Town*, does address the issue of Hancock’s post-battle glory. Noting that Hancock would have faced a court-martial had events not turned in his favor, she notes that “he was fortunate instead to end up the hero rather than the goat of the battle.”<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, she recognizes that Hancock received perhaps more than his fair share of credit in comparison to the other Union officers engaged in the battle. Dubbs concludes that “after a twenty-three minute fight and a relatively small loss, Hancock was all but given credit

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> David M. Jordan, *Winfield Scott Hancock* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988), 44.

<sup>8</sup> Grimsley, 30.

<sup>9</sup> Glenn Tucker, *Hancock the Superb* (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1960), 88.

<sup>10</sup> Carol Kettenberg Dubbs, *Defend this Old Town: Williamsburg During the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002), 194.

for the Federal ‘victory’” at Williamsburg.<sup>11</sup> However, Dubbs does not explore any further into the notion of Hancock “the superb.”

Therefore though the investigation of the battle has been largely accomplished, historians often brush over Hancock’s actual role in the battle, following the generalization of “Hancock the Superb.” None have taken the time to analyze the occurrences and to investigate the actions behind the nickname that stayed with General Hancock for the duration of his life. Thus this new approach to the Battle of Williamsburg differs from previous research in that it specifically scrutinizes not only Hancock’s action during the battle, but the actions of his opponents also.

With the well trained Army of the Potomac at his disposal, many in Washington felt that Major General George Brinton McClellan was dragging his feet while the Army of Northern Virginia was camped only twenty-five miles away.<sup>12</sup> Therefore, due in large part to pressure from President Abraham Lincoln and other political figures, plans were made to finally deal with the Confederate presence. McClellan and the Army of the Potomac soon went into action with the inception of the Peninsula Campaign.

Historian Emory Thomas explained that the objective of the campaign was simple: “The Federals planned to overrun the Confederates, press on to Richmond, and win the Civil War within a few weeks.”<sup>13</sup> McClellan had originally hoped to move his army using the Chesapeake Bay, reach Richmond before the enemy, and leave the Confederates in what he termed “a vice.”<sup>14</sup> Before McClellan could trap his foe, however, the Confederate Army began to pull back towards their capital at Richmond. However as

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Stephen W. Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond* (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1992), 4.

<sup>13</sup> Emory M. Thomas, “The Peninsula Campaign,” *Civil War Times Illustrated* 17, no. 10 (1979): 5.

<sup>14</sup> Sears, 10.

they had been positioned dangerously close to the Union capital, the Confederate Army had stretched its supply lines past its limits and was decidedly outnumbered. Therefore Confederate President Jefferson Davis and Confederate General Joseph Johnston made the decision to pull back. President Davis, historian Stephen Sears said, was “certain that with the coming of spring McClellan’s army would take the offensive.”<sup>15</sup> The Confederacy would have to react defensively.

The Peninsula Campaign quickly turned into a race to Richmond. The Confederate forces pulled back to Yorktown, causing McClellan to prepare to attack. He advanced on Yorktown, “dragging his siege guns through the mud, digging gigantic entrenchments for them, until he had 114 heavy guns and mortars in position ready to open fire on Yorktown.”<sup>16</sup> McClellan hesitated in his attack however, and the Confederates were able to leave Yorktown and continue their retreat to Richmond. Laden with heavy guns and supplies, the Army of the Potomac again gave chase, eventually meeting with the Confederate rearguard at Williamsburg, Virginia. As McClellan called the Battle at Williamsburg ““an accident brought about by the rapid pursuit of our troops,”” it was evident that neither general had planned this conflict.<sup>17</sup>

The poor road conditions on most roads leading to Richmond slowed Confederate progress. Even with the Confederate head start, Sears commented that it “would be a long time moving any distance on the single muddy road leading out of Williamsburg towards Richmond.”<sup>18</sup> General Johnston therefore decided to leave Major General James Longstreet in charge of impeding the Union pursuit. With these new orders, Longstreet

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 12.

<sup>16</sup> Joseph P. Cullen, *The Peninsula Campaign, 1862* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1973), 45.

<sup>17</sup> Grimsley, 10.

<sup>18</sup> Sears, 70.

and the near eleven thousand men now under his command began preparation for a Union attack.<sup>19</sup>

Luckily for Longstreet, Williamsburg was already equipped for a Confederate defensive battle. Historian Norman Dain even went as far as to claim the “town a natural point of Confederate defense.”<sup>20</sup> First, the peninsula was easy to defend due to its geography. Only seven miles wide elsewhere, this particular section spanned only three miles on account of Queen’s Creek and College Creek on either side.<sup>21</sup> Longstreet could therefore concentrate his forces on one relatively small area. He also did not need to worry about the construction of a fort.

Several months before, General John Bankhead Magruder had built a considerable fort to serve as the defending point for a Confederate fallback.<sup>22</sup> Described by Historian George Contant as “rough but substantial,” Fort Magruder was surrounded by thirteen additional small redoubts.<sup>23</sup> As Major Stiles explained, the immediate area was “admirably adapted to the purpose for which General Magruder designed and located them; namely to enable a small body of troops to hold the position.”<sup>24</sup> Positioned at the junction of Lee’s Mill Road and Yorktown Road, it was just eleven miles from Yorktown and two miles from Williamsburg.<sup>25</sup> Combining Fort Magruder with its geographic location, the fortification proved to be a formidable obstacle for Union forces.

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<sup>19</sup> Sears, 73.

<sup>20</sup> Norman Dain, *Disordered Minds* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1971), 166.

<sup>21</sup> Sears, 70.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> George W. Contant, “The Men Who Made Hancock Superb,” *Civil War Times Illustrated* 40, no.1 (2001): 38-44, 53-55. [www.ebsco.com/](http://www.ebsco.com/) (accessed March 29, 2004).

<sup>24</sup> Robert Stiles, *Four Years Under Marse Robert* (New York: The Neale Publishing Company, 1904), 75.

<sup>25</sup> Sears, 68.

Despite the road conditions, Union troops began to approach Williamsburg and Fort Magruder on the afternoon of May 4, 1862. The Federals had finally started to trickle in, beginning with Brigadier General George Stoneman and his cavalry. William F. Smith's division soon followed, as did the three corps commanders; Sumner, Heintzelman and Keyes.<sup>26</sup> Before daybreak on May 5<sup>th</sup>, the second division under Brigadier General Joseph Hooker also arrived. Therefore, though a total of five infantry divisions would take part in the fighting, the Army of the Potomac began the Battle of Williamsburg with only three corps commanders in command of two divisions consisting of no more than 18,500 men.<sup>27</sup>

The first division to reach the front was led by General Hooker who was decidedly tired of McClellan's slow progress. He thus began to plan his attack as soon as he and his division were able to see Fort Magruder. On the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup>, without orders or without even consulting a higher authority, Hooker led his troops towards Fort Magruder.<sup>28</sup>

Although historians have described Hooker as aggressive, his execution during the Battle of Williamsburg was not. First, Hooker had three brigades under his command but chose to begin the attack only using one of them. The second brigade was used to support his left flank, while the third served as a reserve. Second, Hooker deployed his reinforced skirmish line as planned, in order to investigate the Confederate position; however Grimsley argued that it "lacked the solid punching power of a battle line."<sup>29</sup> Lastly, Hooker's division maintained a productive speed at best, keeping pressure on the

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<sup>26</sup> Grimsley, 12.

<sup>27</sup> Sears, 71.

<sup>28</sup> Grimsley, 12.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

Confederates, but also allowing them time to regroup.<sup>30</sup> Hooker's quick attack had also left his men completely unprepared for actual battle. With no potential reinforcements for hours, it was up to his division to do most of the fighting in the early hours of combat.

Plagued by shortages of ammunition and exhaustion, Hooker's once ambitious plan was left in pieces. Confederate troops were growing more confident by the minute as they forced the Union forces back almost half a mile.<sup>31</sup> As Hooker's men retreated towards the woods, Confederates were able to capture four pieces of artillery and "a Union flag inscribed 'To Hell or Richmond.'"<sup>32</sup> Eventually, Captain James E. Smith and the 4<sup>th</sup> New York Battery arrived and helped counteract the damage done by Hooker.<sup>33</sup>

While Hooker was fighting the Confederates head on, the Union corps commanders had in fact learned of an abandoned Confederate redoubt to the left of the enemy line and gave Brigadier General Winfield Scott Hancock orders to investigate and "take possession, if possible, of the enemy's work on the opposite side of the creek."<sup>34</sup> Taking five regiments with him, Hancock obediently ventured into enemy territory and found the redoubt unoccupied.<sup>35</sup> With that, another course of action was opened up on the Confederate left. It was from the ensuing conflict that Hancock received the commendation of "superb."

There are several differing accounts as to what occurred between Hancock, his men and their Confederate adversaries. However, historian George W. Contant argues that irregardless, Hancock alone was not worthy of the praise that he received. In his

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Grimsley, 27.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Grimsley, 27.

<sup>34</sup> Jordan, 43.

<sup>35</sup> *Virginia*, vol. 3, *Confederate Military History*, (Richmond: The Blue and Grey Press) 272.

article entitled “The Men Who Made Hancock Superb,” Contant charges that those truly responsible for the victory at Williamsburg went relatively unnoticed. Having written home to his wife “declaring, ‘Hancock was superb today,’” McClellan later attended the dress parade of Smith’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Division at which he congratulated the men who fought under Hancock at Williamsburg. After such statements as “‘to you, and you only, belongs the victory and upon your banner shall be inscribed the name of ‘Williamsburg,’ as a memorial of what you have done, and what you always will do,’” Contant assumes that McClellan must have understood the impact that Hancock’s men had on the Battle of Williamsburg. However, when popular newspapers blew McClellan’s reference to Hancock out of proportion, Hancock’s men were left behind.<sup>36</sup>

After finding the first redoubt unoccupied, Hancock decided to continue on to a second redoubt which his skirmishers had found to be also abandoned. Hancock remarked that from this new position “‘Fort Magruder with all its surroundings could be distinctly seen and all portions of the enemy on the plain between us.’”<sup>37</sup> With this small victory, the Union position began to look promising. Brigadier General Smith promised to send four regiments and a battery as reinforcements. Hancock accordingly began to fire with his artillery on two Confederate held redoubts that were 300 to 400 yards away.<sup>38</sup>

Unsatisfied with a mere barrage of artillery, Hancock waited for his reinforcements. Historian Glenn Tucker explained that “‘if his flank and rear were adequately protected, he could oust the enemy troops from the trenches . . . demonstrate

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<sup>36</sup> Contant, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Jordan, 43.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

against the fort and greatly assist Hooker's division."<sup>39</sup> However, while preparing for an attack, Hancock received the alarming message that no reinforcements would be arriving. Furthermore, Brigadier General Sumner was ordering Hancock to fall back to the first redoubt. When Hancock asked one of his junior officers what he thought of the situation, Lieutenant George Armstrong Custer responded, "Well, sir, if ignoring some senseless order means deciding a victory and perhaps winning this war, then let's be insubordinate with flying colors!"<sup>40</sup> Hancock agreed and "well knowing the lucky prize he had found, determined to stay."<sup>41</sup>

Though daringly bold, this decision to remain on the Confederate left flank, against orders, put Hancock's entire force in danger. Early in this maneuver, he had already forfeited his element of surprise. Colonel Bratton of the Sixth South Carolina Regiment was unaware of Hancock's movement and had "reported the extreme left redoubt as unoccupied."<sup>42</sup> This advantage could have proved useful for Hancock. However, Bratton later continued that their "occupation was announced to me by a cannon ball from the enemy's gun."<sup>43</sup>

With the Confederates now aware of their position, Hancock's men faced further danger in the event of a Confederate offensive. At this point, the Confederates were concerned with Hancock's Union troops who were alone and "out of reach of support" on

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<sup>39</sup> Tucker, 82.

<sup>40</sup> D. A. Kinsley, *Favor the Bold* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1968), 61.

<sup>41</sup> Colonel R. L. Maury, "The Battle of Williamsburg and the Charge of the Twenty-fourth Virginia of Early's Brigade," in *Southern Historical Society Papers*, vol. 8, ed. Rev. J. William Jones (Richmond: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1990), 288.

<sup>42</sup> Colonel Bratton, "The Battle of Williamsburg," in *Southern Historical Papers*, vol. 7, ed. Rev. J. William Jones (Richmond: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1990), 299.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

the enemy flank.<sup>44</sup> As a soldier from the 24<sup>th</sup> Virginia noted, Hancock's troops "were far in advance of General Sumner."<sup>45</sup> Meanwhile, instead of pulling back as had been ordered, Hancock pressed his luck further. Though their advance into the redoubts went smoothly, in the case of necessitated retreat, Hancock had only one real option; to leave by the same way that they had come.<sup>46</sup> Custer found that entering the area had been difficult enough as "it was necessary to cross a narrow dam over which it was barely possible to march infantry in column of fours."<sup>47</sup> This would not have proved an easy task for panicked and retreating troops. With five full regiments and ten pieces of artillery, a retreat would have ended in certain disaster for his men.<sup>48</sup> Thus General Hancock's unwillingness to follow orders could have resulted in possible death for his men had it not been for the mistakes of his enemy.

Luckily for Hancock, mismanagement hampered Confederate success. The objective of the rearguard left at Williamsburg was to stall the enemy long enough to allow Confederate supply trains and troops to continue their retreat to Richmond. However, these unoccupied redoubts were "the key to the entire Confederate line and opened to the enemy a road to Williamsburg, as well as to Longstreet's rear."<sup>49</sup> Therefore, the question should be asked as to why these redoubts were left unoccupied and vulnerable to Union attack. Major Stiles explained simply that several Confederate officers stated that "they did not know and were not informed as to the location of these

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<sup>44</sup> Colonel D. K. McRae, "The Battle of Williamsburg-Reply to Colonel Bratton," in *Southern Historical Papers*, vol. 7, ed. Rev. J. William Jones (Richmond: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1990), 372.

<sup>45</sup> Maury, 291.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> G. A. Custer, "War Memoirs," *The Galaxy* 22, no. 5 (1876): 690.

<sup>48</sup> Maury, Colonel R. L., 290-291.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 289.

works.”<sup>50</sup> However, Colonel Maury countered that it was their “obvious duty to cover all the lines on which the enemy could advance.”<sup>51</sup> Furthermore, as the Confederates prepared to defend Fort Magruder, “surely common prudence, not to say ordinary generalship, should have suggested the importance of ascertaining the position of its flanks.”<sup>52</sup> But still Longstreet, Hill, Anderson and even General Joseph Johnston denied any knowledge of them.<sup>53</sup>

However, General Magruder was responsible for the fort’s construction and therefore knew of the location and existence of all redoubts. Colonel Maury further explained that “McLaws of Longstreet’s division . . . knew of them, for Colonel Marigny, with his Tenth Louisiana, occupied this very work.”<sup>54</sup> Colonel Bratton was positioned on the Confederate left flank the morning of May 5th and notified his commanders that the far left redoubt was unoccupied; however he “was told that it was in charge of somebody else.”<sup>55</sup> Longstreet, being located at Fort Magruder itself, should have been able to see the redoubts on the left flank, which were within sight.<sup>56</sup> Thus, it seems that Confederate carelessness, not Hancock’s ingenious military tactics allowed the redoubts to be captured.

Given the importance that these neglected redoubts held for the Confederacy, Hancock’s occupation of these works did not go unchecked for long. Longstreet had become aware of Hancock’s men and requested that Jubal Early take his entire command towards the left to await further instruction. From his new position, Early could hear the

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<sup>50</sup> Stiles, 80.

<sup>51</sup> Maury, Colonel R. L., 285.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 286.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Bratton, 299.

<sup>56</sup> Maury, Colonel R. L., 286.

distant firing of enemy artillery and reported that “General Hill came up and I suggested to him the propriety of moving through the woods to attack one of the enemy’s batteries which seemed to have a flank fire on our main position.”<sup>57</sup> Therefore, after General Hill conferred with General Longstreet, they “moved forward through the wheat field into the woods, and then through that in the direction of the firing, by the sound of which we were guided.”<sup>58</sup>

It was with this decision that Confederate leaders made another irreversible mistake. Early explained that, while they were guided by the din of battle, “The battery itself and the troops supporting it were entirely concealed from our view.”<sup>59</sup> Thus Early was neither aware of the numbers which his men were about to face, nor their exact location. Directing his men, Early was only able to point towards the woods and say “over there.”<sup>60</sup> Bratton reported that “nobody, either officer or scout, had come to the front to reconnoitre.”<sup>61</sup> He also neglected to send out skirmishers who would have helped establish the enemy location.<sup>62</sup> Therefore, as Early began to move “not understanding the topography and guided only by the sound of the enemy’s guns, the brigade moved into a wood traversed by a swamp, and so overgrown with brushwood, that in passing through it the regiments were entirely separated from each other.”<sup>63</sup> As a

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<sup>57</sup> Jubal Anderson Early, *Autobiographical Sketch and Narrative of the War Between the States* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1912), 69.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Maury, Colonel R. L., 290.

<sup>61</sup> Bratton, 300.

<sup>62</sup> Maury, Colonel R. L., 290.

<sup>63</sup> General E. P. Alexander, “Sketch of Longstreet’s Division-Yorktown and Williamsburg,” in *Southern Historical Papers*, vol. 10, ed. Rev. J. William Jones (Richmond: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1990), 43.

result, the Twenty-third North Carolina and the Thirty-eighth Virginia were rendered useless since they never fully made it to the battlefield.<sup>64</sup>

General Early's failure to reconnoiter the area led to horrible confusion among his troops and almost led to an attack on a friendly redoubt. With only Early's meager command to follow, "several of the large companies on the right became detached and mistaking the redoubt held by Bratton for the objective point, rushed towards it."<sup>65</sup> This particular redoubt was held by the 6<sup>th</sup> South Carolina; a Confederate brigade.<sup>66</sup> Unaware that fellow Confederates were in the area, Bratton did not learn of their arrival until he saw them approach on the charge.<sup>67</sup> Bratton recounted that he rushed out to stop the onward rush of fellow Southerners and to point them in the real direction of the Union troops.<sup>68</sup> However, "they would not heed, and on they went until they reached my redoubts when they for the first time learned where the enemy were."<sup>69</sup>

In combination with the lack of reconnoitering, another break from normal military behavior led to further confusion. Traditionally, commanding officers rode to the rear of their troops, however Early and his staff chose to ride before their men. All the field officers of the Twenty-fourth Virginia followed his example.<sup>70</sup> Therefore, as the Twenty-fourth began to emerge from the woods, their officers preceded them on horseback.<sup>71</sup>

To the Union, the onrush of mounted officers appeared to be members of a charging cavalry. Custer recalled that "a considerable force of cavalry dashed from the

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> Maury, Colonel R. L., 293.

<sup>66</sup> Bratton, 300.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Maury, Colonel R. L., 290.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

woods and charged toward the most advanced regiment of Hancock's."<sup>72</sup> Thus by breaking with tradition, the officers rushed, unprotected by regular troops, and became some of the first casualties. Colonel McRae of the Fifth North Carolina reported that many around him fell and that "Maj. Maury of the 24<sup>th</sup> Va. and myself were the only field officers remaining mounted."<sup>73</sup> Left without many of their leaders, the Confederates were thus thrown into even greater disorder.

As a result of less than stellar leadership, Confederate forces also began to enter the battlefield in disadvantageous positions separated from each other. Thus many soldiers were left without support. With no knowledge of the exact location of the Union brigades, Early's men advanced at a "right angle to that of the enemy, so that my left regiment alone came upon him and as it moved into the field was exposed to a flank fire."<sup>74</sup> The remainder of the Twenty-fourth was "away off to the right, and moving in a direction across the enemy's front."<sup>75</sup> No other regiments had emerged from the woods yet, and though Early sent for others to reinforce him, the Twenty-fourth Virginia received nearly all the initial enemy fire. Though they experienced heavy loss, the Twenty-fourth readjusted their lines and continued to meet the enemy head on. Despite their bravery, the Twenty-fourth had become easy targets for their northern adversary.<sup>76</sup>

While the Twenty-fourth Virginia bore the brunt of Yankee fire, the Fifth North Carolina was on its way to support their fellow Southerners. Finally "emerging from the woods . . . Colonel McRae had promptly formed line to the left and moved to the support

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<sup>72</sup> Custer, 692.

<sup>73</sup> D. K. McRae, "Report of Col. D. K. McRae," [www.jstor.org/](http://www.jstor.org/) (accessed April 10, 2004), 196.

<sup>74</sup> Early, 70.

<sup>75</sup> Maury, Colonel R. L., 291.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

of the regiment which was engaged, traversing the whole of the front.”<sup>77</sup> On the double quick, the Fifth North Carolina endured heavy loss as they traversed the wide open field upon which “every other man is down.”<sup>78</sup> The North Carolinians became heavily involved in the fight as they reached the Twenty-fourth Virginia. Colonel McRae recalled that “the fire was terrific; my officers and men were falling on every side. The 24<sup>th</sup> Va. On my left, was suffering in like proportion.”<sup>79</sup>

Despite the large numbers of casualties they were incurring, the Twenty-fourth Virginia and the Fifth North Carolina continued to advance. Described as “advancing rapidly and confidently,” they caught the Union troops off guard with their resilience.<sup>80</sup> As the Confederates pressed forward, northern troops began to panic “for the Virginians are within twenty yards and show no signs of halting.”<sup>81</sup> A few days following the Battle of Williamsburg, a reporter for the *New York Herald* wrote admiringly of these Southerners saying that “still they came on.”<sup>82</sup> The Twenty-fourth Virginia and the Fifth North Carolina certainly caught the attention of Hancock as well.

Later described by Hancock as “immortal,” these two brigades almost brought to reality Hancock’s worst fears.<sup>83</sup> First, Hancock was without many of his staff. As Custer explained, Hancock had sent most off to discuss reinforcements with the division commander and few had returned.<sup>84</sup> Furthermore, a retreat across the dam was suicide. Thus, “Hancock realizing to the fullest extent his precarious situation, strove in every

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<sup>77</sup> Early, 70.

<sup>78</sup> Maury, Colonel R. L., 294.

<sup>79</sup> McRae, “Report of Col. D. K. McRae,” 196.

<sup>80</sup> Custer, 693.

<sup>81</sup> Maury, Colonel R. L., 295.

<sup>82</sup> *New York Herald*, 9 May 1862.

<sup>83</sup> Colonel Richard L. Maury, “Battle of Williamsburg, Va,” in *Southern Historical Papers*, vol. 22, ed. R. A. Brock (Richmond: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1990), 119.

<sup>84</sup> Custer, 693.

possible manner to inspire his troops with confidence.”<sup>85</sup> It was now up to his troops to save his military career from certain disaster.

Hancock had disobeyed a direct order to pull back and thus “the coming contest was destined to become more than an ordinary victory or defeat.”<sup>86</sup> Defeat in this case would have meant the capture of most of his men and, if faced with that option, Hancock would rather have died on the field.<sup>87</sup> He did not want to face the consequences of his unwillingness to retire from the redoubts. Influenced by “thoughts of defeat, and its personal consequences of a court-martial for disobediences of orders,” Hancock continued to encourage his men.<sup>88</sup> Custer quoted Hancock as pleading ““Men, you must hold this ground, or I am ruined.””<sup>89</sup> Hancock had finally realized that his military career relied entirely on his men and that it was up to them to justify his irresponsible decisions.

However, as the Confederates drew within thirty paces, the Union launched a last, desperate volley. Confederate General E.P. Alexander remembered that “few of the Confederates were killed with the bayonet, some were captured and the remainder driven back.”<sup>90</sup> In response to a request for reinforcements, General Hill instead instructed the Confederates to retire.<sup>91</sup> Again this was perhaps a mistake as the Fifth North Carolina and the Twenty-fourth Virginia had to retreat back across an open field.<sup>92</sup> The two regiments became easy targets, as Hancock’s men took shot after shot at the retreating

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Alexander, 44.

<sup>91</sup> Early, 71.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid..

Southerners. Colonel Maury noted that “the retreat was the signal for slaughter and as Colonel McRae says, the regiment ‘was scarcely harmed at all till the retreat began.’”<sup>93</sup>

Though Hancock was able to avoid punishment for disobedience towards a superior officer, he still took some criticism for not following the fleeing Confederates. General Alexander commented that “no pursuit was attempted by the enemy, beyond sending a small force of cavalry, who followed the line of retreat for a few miles, picking up broken down stragglers.”<sup>94</sup> Salem Dutcher also noted that “the Federal commander did not venture to advance.”<sup>95</sup>

It was in fact, the mistakes made by Confederate leadership that created this situation. Union Colonel Custer conceded that “the Federals, favored by circumstances, were enabled to deliver a far more effective fire than their assailants.”<sup>96</sup> Poor planning and poor execution left the rebels unaware of the location of their enemy and were therefore unable to prepare for attack. Several regiments, such as the Twenty-third North Carolina and the Thirty-eighth Virginia were unable to take serious action at all. Confederate leaders had also failed to fully protect their left flank, allowing for this scenario to come about.

Though it was the mistakes of his opponent that enabled General Hancock to perhaps appear superb, the man who credited Hancock with this adjective was really unqualified to do so. Ironically, General McClellan had thought enough of Hancock during the battle to write his wife that “Hancock was superb yesterday,” but was absent

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<sup>93</sup> Maury, Colonel R. L., 295.

<sup>94</sup> Alexander, 45.

<sup>95</sup> Salem Dutcher, “Williamsburg: A Graphic Story of the Battle of May 5, 1862” in *Southern Historical Papers*, vol. 17, ed. R. A. Brock (Richmond: Broadfoot Publishing Company, 1990), 411.

<sup>96</sup> Custer, 694.

for most of the action.<sup>97</sup> Instead of making the trek to Williamsburg with the troops under his command, McClellan opted to stay in Yorktown to straighten out a logistical mess. As part of his plan to trap the Army of Northern Virginia, he was attempting to send troops by boat to West Point. However, this had evolved into a problem that “McClellan decided only he could unravel.”<sup>98</sup> Confederate officers also noted McClellan’s unusual absence. Colonel R. L. Maury of the Twenty-fourth Virginia included in a post battle letter that “McClellan seems to have considered that the position for the general-in-chief on a pursuit was fifteen miles in rear.”<sup>99</sup>

Governor William Sprague of Rhode Island was finally sent to urge McClellan to join his corps commanders at the front.<sup>100</sup> When Sprague reached him, McClellan “tranquilly replied that ‘those in front could take care of that little matter.’”<sup>101</sup> McClellan was largely unaware that the “skirmish” had escalated to a full scale battle, and “despite Sprague’s entreaties and clearly audible battle sounds from the west, ‘Little Mac’ was reluctant to leave Yorktown.”<sup>102</sup> He finally chose to join his men, and arrived at Union headquarters around five in the afternoon.<sup>103</sup> However, Hancock was already engaged with his opponent on the Confederate left flank.<sup>104</sup> By the time McClellan rode to see Hancock’s line for himself, “he encountered the column of prisoners Hancock was sending back.”<sup>105</sup> Thus, given that he was not at Williamsburg for most of the battle, let

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<sup>97</sup> George B. McClellan to Mary Ellen McClellan, 6 May 1862, *The Civil War Papers of George B. McClellan*, ed. Stephen W. Sears (New York: Ticknor and Fields, 1989), 256-257.

<sup>98</sup> Grimsley, 11.

<sup>99</sup> Maury, Colonel R. L., 288.

<sup>100</sup> Albert, 20.

<sup>101</sup> Launce Poyntz, “Broken Idols,” *The Galaxy* 18, no. 2 (1874): 194.

<sup>102</sup> Dubbs, *Defend this Old Town*, 153.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

<sup>104</sup> Grimsley, 29.

<sup>105</sup> Tucker, 88.

alone on the left flank with Hancock, McClellan was able to comment based only on the assumptions and reports of other soldiers and officers.

The glorification of Hancock's role in the Battle of Williamsburg however, did prove to temporarily boost the Union's image. Many of the early battles had not gone as well as the North had hoped they would. In general, those in the North originally thought that the Civil War would end quickly and the rebelling states would be defeated. However, battles such as the First Battle of Bull Run on July 21, 1861 demonstrated that the Union troops would have a more difficult time defeating the rebels than expected. These early battles raised Confederate confidence while at the same time they created "a gnawing sense of inferiority among some Union officers and soldiers."<sup>106</sup> The North was in need of a hero.

President Lincoln, his administration and the Northern public had also become increasingly frustrated with McClellan and his inability to act. Many were even beginning to question his political leanings as a result of his inaction.<sup>107</sup> Therefore, the success at Williamsburg early on in the campaign provided an opportunity to present a much needed hero to boost Northern morale as well as McClellan's standing with the public and administration. Hancock proved an excellent hero and once word of his "superb" performance at Williamsburg reached the press, both the press and the public gladly welcomed the idea of General Hancock the "superb."

On the morning of May 6, 1862, weary Confederate soldiers continued their trek to Richmond while battered Union combatants regrouped and assessed the damage. A lot had changed since the morning before. For the numerous new soldiers, their first battle

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<sup>106</sup> James M. McPherson, *Ordeal by Fire: The Civil War and Reconstruction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2000), 232.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 234.

was over, while others had given the ultimate sacrifice. The Battle of Williamsburg served to exemplify the bravery of some and the blunders of others. From the wreckage, General Hancock emerged a hero credited with saving the Union forces from potential defeat. The commendation of “superb” followed Hancock throughout the rest of his military career and out into his public life as well. General Winfield Scott Hancock is remembered as “Hancock the Superb” because of events that transpired on a rainy afternoon on May 5, 1862. Through the rain however, it is evident that Hancock owed his new hero status to the failures of his foes.

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## Appendix



May 5, 1862  
Williamsburg, Virginia

This map shows the locations of the major combatants that saw action during the Battle of Williamsburg. It should be noted that these divisions did not arrive on the battlefield simultaneously nor did they all fight at the same time. This map serves only to demonstrate positions held throughout the day. Union troops are in blue while Confederate troops are in red.

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