

*Born to the saddle and the gun, for the first two years the Southern soldiers won battle after battle.*

*After devastating losses the Union army began to learn how to fight. With better leadership they may have come up to the level of the Rebel soldier earlier.*

*As it was, by 1863, they soon became an army to be feared.*

*~ Edward Aronoff*

## **Prologue**

*The shad bake*

On April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1865 Colonel Raymond Rutherford's luck ran out. For four years, always at the front of his men, serving with General Ransom's North Carolina Brigade, the colonel never got even a scratch. Today, at Five Forks, he got his first wound.

Taking the falling Confederate banner from the mortally wounded color sergeant, Rutherford turned to the enemy and shouted to his men to follow him. Just at that moment a musket-ball pierced the flag and struck the colonel in the right shoulder, knocking him to the ground.

"Stay down, Cunnel," a private said, kneeling down next to him and shouting over the din of battle, "you'll do no good with yer shootin' arm all banged up. I'll take the flag fer ya." With that he took the flag from his fallen colonel and ran toward the front. Rutherford was soon taken to the rear.

Earlier that day, General Rosser had netted some shad in the Nottoway River and invited the commander of the Rebel Troops, General Pickett, and his cavalry chief, General Fitzhugh Lee, to a shad bake.

It was spring and Pickett's troops were well dug in so the general blithely accepted the invitation. It was an invitation to disaster.

Inexplicably Pickett told no one where he was going, and even more strange, left no one in command.

Rosser's shad feast was leisurely and may even have included some spirits.

Meanwhile the Federals spent all afternoon getting ready and at 4:14 p.m. they struck. General Sheridan led one pincer and Governour Warren the other.

Strangely the sounds of the mighty battle did not reach the diner's ears. Porter Alexander later suggested it was due to some, "peculiar phenomenon of acoustic shadows."

Luckily for the Confederates, General Sheridan miscalculated slightly and the bulk of the Union Army marched away to the right of the Confederate line, almost missing the fight. When Joshua Chamberlain saw the opening created by the mis-guided troops he quickly moved his men into the gap. As he had at Gettysburg, Joshua Chamberlain saved the day. Quickly realizing the refused flank of the Rebels, Chamberlain wheeled his brigade left and joined the fight. The leaders of the errant Brigades marching away saw Chamberlain's movement, quickly turned and rapidly followed him into the fray.

General Sheridan joined them yelling and waving. All the while bullets whizzed around his head as he rode his black stallion, Rienzi, back and forth across the front exhorting his men to, "Get a twist on 'em, boys. If you do, there won't be a grease spot of 'em left!"

Beset on three sides the Confederate line

began to crumble.

General Pickett, still unaware of the battle raging nearby, decided to send a message to Five Forks to see if everything was quiet. He watched his two couriers cross Hatcher's run and was stunned completely when there was a burst of gunfire and he saw his messengers captured by Federal Cavalry.

Pickett sprang to his horse and, aided by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Virginia Cavalry, got through the Yankee Horsemen to the battle at Five Forks, still raging.

Pickett got there just in time to make a final charge with Corse's Virginians, but to no avail. After wavering for a while under the withering Confederate fire, General Warren seized the Federal V corps flag and led a countercharge. In a few minutes it was all over.

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*He is at rest now, and we who are left are the ones to suffer*

"General Lee," Sergeant Tucker yelled, ignoring the orderly's order to halt, "General Hill's been shot daid."

Lee held up his hand to the orderly who had leveled his musket at the sergeant and turned to

Sergeant Tucker. Lee's eyes filled with tears. "He is at rest now," Lee murmured, "and we who are left are the ones to suffer."

Lee dismissed Tucker and turned to his remaining aide, Walter Taylor. "Colonel Taylor, I want you to take a telegram to Secretary of War, Breckenridge:

General Breckenridge:

I advise that all preparations be made for leaving Richmond tonight.

R. E. Lee, Commander, Confederate Troops

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It was Sunday morning at the St. Paul's Episcopal Church. Dr. Charles Minnigerode was waxing eloquently on his latest sermon when the doors to the church flew open and a uniformed courier stepped in. All eyes followed the messenger as the rector slowed his sermon but did not stop. The messenger searched the congregation finally stopping on President Davis. Ignoring the Rector, he made his way quickly to President Davis. As Davis read the note more messengers arrived and, like small tributaries,

flowed down the aisles and approached other officials.

After reading the copy of Lee's note to Breckenridge, Davis' face blanched. Without speaking a word he got up, his face set and unreadable, and walked unsteadily out of the church. From all over the church a dozen other officials got up and followed him.

Dr. Minnigerode, quickly surmising something serious had happened, ended the service. Anxious parishioners poured out of the church and hurried to their homes.

Meanwhile General Lee and his emaciated troops fought valiantly to keep Grant and his minions out of Richmond. It was a vain attempt.

After realizing the Confederate line was thinned out because of the Five Forks victory, Grant, through Meade and then Wright, had the Federal troops converge there and deploy. At 1 p.m., when they were at full strength, the Federals struck the lines defending Petersburg. Although Confederate troops were outnumbered 10 to 1, they sold their lives dearly at Fort Gregg and Battery Whitworth, the Yankees, after hours of continual fighting, finally took those strong points.

Of the 214 Confederates defending Fort Gregg, only 30 were still standing as the day faded into night. Generals Ord and Wright, refusing to add to their own 714 casualties, stopped their troops

as night fell, and that closed a wild and furious Sabbath.

Although the Confederates eventually lost Forts Gregg and Whitworth, their valiant defense gave Lee the time he needed to deploy Longstreet for a last line of defense of Petersburg.

Realizing the defense of Richmond was ending all lower Confederate Government workers and the Richmond civil authority started abandoning the doomed city. Later that evening the fleeing soldiers set fire to the Richmond warehouses. When the city fathers protested they were told the burning was to keep the valuable contents from the Yankees.

When the civil authorities departed the streets were taken over by prisoners, prostitutes and thugs. Somehow they got their hands on a quantity of liquor and a night of madness ensued.

The flickering light of the fires displayed men and women breaking into shops and commissary stores and stripping them bare. Momentary passions possessed them and they ran this way and that. Gunfire and shouts of drunken men filled the night along with screams and cries of distress.

“It was,” as Mrs. George Pickett later said, “A saturnalia.”

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*The Yankees are behaving very well*

As the sun rose on the morning of April 3<sup>rd</sup>, the Federals moved into Richmond led by the Weitzel's XXV Corps, which included the black troops from the IX corps.

The Federal troops immediately set about to stop the fires and feed the city. The Federals behavior was so exemplary that, Francis Hunt, a fourteen year old Richmonder wrote in her diary, "The Yankees are behaving very well, considering it is them."