

Wilderness, May 5, 6, 1864, 13th NC by Rex D. Hovey

The Thirteenth was in winter quarters near Orange Court House, until May 5th, 1864, when they struck tents and marched through the village about 1 o'clock p.m. in the direction of the Wilderness down the Old Plank Road. We met some twelve miles down the road. A. P. Hill's Corps was in the front and Gen Longstreet was up at Madison Court House when we met the enemy. Wilcox's Division, which was Pender's before his death, was put right in. It was composed of Scales', Lane's, Thomas' Georgia and McGowan's South Carolina Brigades. Scales' and Thomas' Brigades were put in and Lane's and McGowan's Brigades were kept back of them as a support. We moved down on them on the right of the road. Charge after charge we made. We drove them back some two miles. It was like fighting fire in the woods again. We were kept in until our boys exhausted their sixty rounds, or some had, and during that time a goodly number of the Thirteenth had gone down to rise no more. Captain Ward, Company I, had only been back from home, from his Chancellorsville wound, about three months. Just before our skirmish line opened fire, marching down the road, he commenced to sing: "Years creep slowly by, Lorena; the snow is on the grass again." I slapped him on the shoulder and told him I knew what he was thinking about; and that was, that he would get another flesh wound and go back to Mrs. Ward. He remarked: "Would to God, that it may only be a flesh wound." Just as Lane's Brigade rushed in to relieve Scales, near a branch, as we faced about to retire, a ball struck him in the back of the leg and lodged under the knee-cap, and if he is living, it is there yet. We bore him off with us. He went home sure enough and never was able to return to duty, but was retired; the writer was promoted to Captain later on.

This was the first day's battle with Grant and Lee. We were drawn off some three-fourths of a mile in the rear of the frontline, issued cartridges and lay there all night, supposing that Lane's and Thomas' men were still in our front. The next morning, not long after light, we were lying behind some old logs and such things as we could pick up. General Scales and our Colonel Hyman were standing behind my company talking, when one of my sergeants called to me, and said: "Look in front." I looked and the woods were blue with the enemy. I turned to the Colonel and General Scales to tell them. The enemy were coming closer behind us. I told them to look; we were about surrounded. General Scales waved his sword above his head and called on the men to follow him. He dashed off at the right angle and took the brigade out by the right flank. They opened fire on us and a goodly number was wounded. I was struck on my shoulder-blade and had the breath knocked out of me, but I kept following our retreating or stampeded troops, who circled back to the road, where we met Longstreet's Corps coming in from Madison Court House. General Lee was standing there. By his direction General Longstreet placed troops on each side of the road and advanced quickly. General Lee started to lead the charge, but was prevented by officers of Longstreet's staff. The 13th NC under Colonel Hyman was reorganized and fell in for the day on Longstreet's left wing and was back in the fight in less than an hour and remained all day.

R S Williams, Co I, 13th NC Captain

The 13th was with General A P Hill, Alfred Scales Brigade, Col J Hyman commanding. The Federals had crossed at the Germanna Ford and were proceeding down the Germanna Plank Road to the Brock Road. General R Lee was watching their actions with General Richard Ewell on the Turnpike and General A P Hill on the Orange Plank Road. Hill had Major Generals Henry Heth and Cadmus Wilcox leading his two divisions, himself was ill. So General Lee was actually taking over for Hill. General Lee made his Headquarters at the Widow Tapp farm. Federal infantry brought Heth to a halt about a mile from the Brock Road. Heth formed a battle line astride the road. General Lee had Wilcox extend Heth's left by moving his division northward. Heth continued his eastward advance when just past 3 o'clock, Heth was under heavy all-out assault from the front.

General Lee recalled Wilcox and Wilcox came back fast, and went in hard just as Heth's flank was about to crumble. Wilcox and Heth held the line along the Orange Plank Road about a mile from Brock Road as darkness settled. Many of the wounded were trapped by fires that sprang up and spread rapidly as the night breeze rose and fanned the sparks in the dry leaves.

As night settled in Heth and Wilcox knew they couldn't hold off another assault that was expected in the morning. Heth went down to General Hill to propose a new line be drawn. in the rear of their present position. Gen Hill was under the impression General Longstreet would be up during the night to relieve his fought-out men. Gen Hill would not let Heth redraw his lines because doing so would mean abandoning many of the wounded and rob his soldiers of their hard earned rest. "Longstreet will be up in a few hours and will form your front....the men have been marching and fighting all day and are tired. I don't wish them disturbed," said Hill. Heth left but soon came back with Wilcox to argue their point again to reform the lines. Once again Gen Hill repeated he wanted the men to get their rest. They left and once again Heth came back for a third try. By now the ill Gen Hill was most perplexed with het and ordered him away again.

The confusion was how you interpret orders and/or the miscommunication. You have first light and sunrise which are about two to three hours different. First light is the darkest part of the night around 3:30-4:00 am in that part of Virginia in May, sunrise is about 6 am. Gen Longstreet and staff understood they were to relieve A P Hill around sunrise, and Gen Hill understood it to be first light. This breakdown by General Lee's subordinates almost led to disaster.

As General Winfield Hancock ordered an all out assault at 4 am, May 6, 1864, into Hill's extremely weak line. The 13th NC with Scales Brigade under Wilcox was to the right of the Orange Plank Road when the assault came. A report by Lt Colonel Gasper W Tyler, 141st Pennsylvania Volunteers, 27 August, 1864: "At day light on the morning of the 6th May, 1864, we received orders to advance and keep intact our connection with the right. We moved rapidly forward, soon engaging the enemy. We drove him before us, carrying two lines of rifle pits. The 141st Pa. Vols, in carrying the second line of pits, captured the colors of the 13th North Carolina Volunteers, together with almost the entire regiment." Sergeant S Rought, Company A, 141st Pa Vols, Birney's Division, Second Army Corps was credited with its capture. It was numbered 123 and was returned to NC on March 25, 1905.

Steven Rought was 22 years old when he joined the 141st Pennsylvania Infantry, Company A, on August 18, 1862. He was promoted to Sergeant on November 18, 1862. Wounded at Chancellorsville on May 3, 1863, and captured the same day.

"On the morning of the 6th of May, 1864, the 141st Pa. Vols., charged the enemy's works at a point occupied by the 13th NC Troops. While "fixing bayonets" preparatory to the charge, Sergeant Stephen Rought of Co A, who had been severely wounded at Chancellorsville, and had just returned to his company from the hospital, found he had lost his bayonet from its scabbard, so clubbing his musket, he remarked with a pretty strong expletive, 'I'll have that flag!' Says Captain Hurst: 'A cheer—a run—the whiz of bullets in our ears—through the powder smoke, and through the bramble bushes, we found ourselves over the works, and the 13th North Carolina Veteran Infantry our prisoners before breakfast, and for that matter without supper, and without sleep the previous night. Sergeant Rought, with some others, went straight for the rebel flag, and when over the works the rebel color sergeant refused to surrender and tried to defend it. Rought with his clubbed musket split his head open and felled him prostrate at his feet, at the same time breaking his own musket off at the stock. Before the flag had hardly touched the ground he snatched it out of the dying color sergeant's hands, shouting, 'I've got it! I've got it!'. What a cheer went up from the victorious 141st as he waved it, and we read on it in golden letters and figures, '13th North Carolina Veteran Volunteers,' and its long list of battles. It was a new flag. The sergeant was ordered to report with it to the brigade commander, and by him to General Birney, commanding the division. Such cheers as went up along the line as he carried it waving to the rear made those old woods ring. While so doing, he was again wounded. Sgt Ethel Fuller, of the same company, took prisoner the captain of the rebel color company. While Sgt Rought was engaged with the hand to hand struggle with the color sergeant for the flag, another enemy drew his gun to shoot Rought, but before he could open fire Captain Warner of Co D, shot him dead with his revolver. The sergeant says: 'I took the colors to General Ward; he

gave me a word of praise and offered me a drink from his flask, which I declined. He unfurled the flag and added more compliments, and told me to take it to General Birney, who received it with many flattering words for my courage and bravery.”
C F Heverly

A congratulatory order was issued the next day by General Birney, very complimentary to the regiment, in which he gave us the honor of taking the first flag captured by the Army of the Potomac under the immediate command of General U S Grant. This flag was on exhibition at the Great Sanitary Commission Fair held in Philadelphia that summer, and Sgt Rought who was in the hospital there wounded, was regarded as a hero

Who was that courageous North Carolina Color Sergeant, that gave his life defending the colors.? Twenty-one year old Grief G Mason was a tobacconist in Davie County, North Carolina before enlisting on April 26, 1861. He joined the Davie Greys in Mocksville and left Weldon on May 1, 1861. Moving over to Garysburg on May 8th, it was assigned Company F of the Thirteenth Regiment. Mason was promoted to Corporal on June 1, 1861. He was accounted for until killed at the Wilderness, May 5th, 1864, “while gallantly carrying the Regimental Colors”. The *North Carolina Troops 1861-1865*, has Mason dying the 5th, and the flag captured the 6th. In 2009, I talked with Tom Belton, then Curator of Military History, NC Museum of History and he stated: “ I would say it is very possible that the record is incorrect in saying that Grief Mason was killed on May 5th instead of May 6th. You probably know the information in the troop roster series comes from the Combined Service Records (CSR) in the National Archives. The North Carolina State Archives has microfilm copies of the CSRs. The CSRs were created by copying information from the original records and then generating a CSR for each soldier. Consequently, for a clerk copying hundreds of entries daily I would suspect it would be quite easy to make a mistake or even read the number 6 incorrectly as a 5 given period handwriting. However, I suspect this may always remain a mystery. I did notice on page 285 in the volume on the 13th NC it lists Henry O Howard as the Ensign (color sergeant) who was captured on May 6, 1864 and taken prisoner until the end of the war. If Rought’s description of hitting the color bearer in the head hard enough to shatter the stock is accurate there can be little doubt that the color bearer died instantly or within a short time.

Authors side note: During the 150th reenactment of the battle of Wilderness in Spotsylvania, Virginia, I arranged for the 141st Pennsylvania Infantry to captures the flag of the 13th NC Troops my unit. It was done with great respect by the 141st and no heads were bludgeoned. They graciously returned the flag later that day.

- R S Williams, *NC Regiments 1861-1865*, Vol.1, pp 675-676, Walter Clark
- *Civil War a Narrative* by Shelby Foote
- *Official Records*, Series 1, Vol. 36, pt 1, pg 477
- *Our Boys in Blue*, Vol. 1, by C F Heverly; 1898, Towanda, Pa.,pp17-19.
- Rick Fetter, great (4x)grandson, S Rought, Troy, Oh.
- *North Carolina Troops:1861-1865 A Roster*, Vol. 5, Co F, Mason, p 343