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REEMS' STATION AND THE FEDERAL LEFT FLANK,
JULY-AUGUST 1864. R. C. Taylor

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REAMS' STATION AND THE FEDERAL LEFT FLANK, JULY-AUGUST 1864.

Reams' Station, on the Weldon Railroad nine miles south of Petersburg, could hardly be called even a hamlet. A short side-track, the station buildings, and a water-tank, were its only important features. Across the tracks was the church and a farm-house. Other farm-houses, the doctor's home half a mile north, and the dirt roads winding in from the Plank Road four miles east, south along the railroad and north to Petersburg, completed the landscape. It is a gently rolling country, well wooded (the fields might well have been described as clearings), swampy in places.

Troop trains rattling through with Confederate soldiers or supplies had been the only contact with war until the spring of 1864. Early in May, that year, there were rumors of the enemy coming up the James River, and the troops came through more hurriedly. On May 7th Federal cavalry came raiding, a few miles to the south, and cut the railroad, but did not reach Reams', their interest being largely the destruction of bridges.^{1.} On May 16th this expedition under General Kautz went back toward City Point, and for over a month no more Federals came to the railroad. Confederate cavalry came and went, and after hasty repairs the trains kept moving.

1. O.R. 68, pp. 171-4.

It was midmorning of June 22^{1.} when squads of Confederates came galloping through, heading north, while a long dust cloud billowed up to the east. There was an occasional shot from the woods as a long column of Federal cavalry wound across the railroad. It was Kautz again, leading an advance of a column under Wilson. A squadron dismounted, and while the rest moved past set² to work burning the station and a train of flat cars on the siding.

As the smoke rose the shooting became more frequent. A Vermont regiment, the Federal rearguard, deployed and a lively skirmish began through the open fields and fringes of woods to the west. Wilson's 5,500 men need not worry about the small Confederate division attacking and though "Rooney" Lee brought his horse artillery into action it was too late for anything more than a running fight.^{3.} By evening the station was peaceful as ever, except for burnt buildings and the wrecked track. The shooting had died away to the west as Wilson headed for the Southside Railroad, the Confederates hanging stubbornly but futilely on his rear.

Barely a week later the war came again. This time it was Confederate infantry that moved in and stood firmly astride the road, awaiting Wilson's return. They built breastworks and put guns in position, apparently ignoring the presence of the Federal Sixth Corps, five miles across country to the northeast. Cavalry bivouacked along the Petersburg road, hardbitten riders under Fitz Lee and Hampton, just returned from the Battle of Trevilian Station.

1. O.R. 80, p.652. 2. O.R. 80, p. 730. 3. O.R. pp.625,645.

At seven in the morning, June 29, the Federals appeared again, tired and battered after their labors in destroying the roads and holding off the Confederate pursuit. The column rode into Mahone's^{1.} infantry, and one of the Confederate regiments advanced against them,^{2.} but was ridden down and lost fifty prisoners. The entrenchments blocked the road, however, and the artillery opened, so Kautz drew back and began entrenching, to await the arrival of Wilson or of assistance from the Army of the Potomac.

Captain Whitaker, of Wilson's staff, volunteered to take forty men of the Third New York and go through the Confederate lines,^{3.} He was successful in this, though losing half his escort,^{4.} and by 11 a.m. General Meade was informed and began issuing orders.^{5.}

Wilson arrived at Reams' about nine and began massing his command with the idea of moving north along the railroad and cutting through between the Confederate force and Petersburg. By the time he was ready to move he found infantry blocking that road also. On this he decided to burn or abandon his wagons and turn back to the south. His scouts brought information that cavalry was moving through the woods on the left flank. Amid the smoke of the wagons, in early afternoon, the tired Federals drew off, while the rear-guard carried on a confused and desperate battle as the Confederates closed in. The artillery fired canister and stopped them in front, but soon had to limber up and escape across country. All the guns

1. O.R. 80, p. 752.

2. O. R. 80, pp. 623, 628)

3. O.R. 80, p. 628.

4. O. R. 81, p. 493.

5. O.R. 80, p. 623.

had to be abandoned by the time they reached the Nottoway, two being thrown into that stream. By four o'clock the battle was over at Reams'.^{1.}

The Confederate infantry gathered up their wounded and prisoners and prepared to depart, while the cavalry pursued Wilson. The Federal infantry were moving too, and about seven o'clock there was another spatter of shots as the advance of the Sixth Corps reached the station, after all but a few of the Confederates had left. Wright's men wiped the dust of the march from themselves, entrenched, and began tearing up rails. Next morning they kept on with the work, constructing a line of works which ran along the west side of the railroad nearly half a mile, then turned sharply back on each flank, to form three sides of a parallelogram. There was no news of Wilson, except from stragglers and the countrypeople. Sheridan was working around to join Wright, after many delays, due to the fatigue of his command, the difficulty of getting supplies, and worst of all the lack of water in that season. In the afternoon Wright decided that his orders meant him to return, and he marched back to the Plank Road. He met Sheridan there and they agreed that there was no use in remaining. Meade disagreed, and Wright finally stayed where he was until July 2,^{3.} when he went back to the old line. A few days later the possibility of a permanent Federal lodgement on the railroad was much reduced, for Early's threat against Washington constrained Grant to send troops there. The Sixth Corps left on July 10, and the Federal line beyond the Plank Road was destroyed and abandoned. The main body of

1. O.R. 81, p. 492. 2. O.R. 81, p. 527. 3. O.R. 81, p. 571.

the cavalry had gone back toward City Point on July 1.^{1.} Generals Hampton and Mahone made periodic visits to Reams',^{2.} and repairs began on the Road, so that the first week of July saw trains going through again.^{3.}

On July 12, Wickham's Confederate cavalry Brigade^{4.} was guarding Reams' when Davies' Brigade was sent over from the Plank Road by General Gregg. Davies drove the Confederates back on the entrenchments at the Station, and remained confronting them until late afternoon, occasionally banging away with a cannon which elicited no reply.^{5.} At the same time two regiments under Colonel Brinton pushed south across Warwick Swamp, and ran into a heavy column of Confederate Cavalry. Brinton fell back half a mile to the swamp. He lost 43 wounded and missing. Just before dark Gregg advanced in this direction with his whole division, and the Confederates, two brigades under Fitz Lee, fell back again toward Reams'.^{6.}

The Federals were now considering another expedition for the destruction of railroads.^{7.} Sheridan was to start with his whole force toward Weldon, N. C. However, on the 15th, Grant, learning that the Confederate expedition had left Maryland, decided to call more infantry to Petersburg, and meanwhile suspended Sheridan's order.

Late in July Sheridan was sent with Hancock to attack on the Richmond front, at Deep Bottom, in order to gain possible advantage

1. O.R. 81, p. 575. 2. O.R. 81, p. 585. 3. O.R. 82, pp. 38, 128
4. O.R. 82, P. 196ff. 5. O.R. 80, p. 614. 6. O.R. 80, p. 614.
7. O.R. 82, p. 241.

there, or failing that, to draw Confederate troops from Petersburg and thus prepare the way for Federal attack at the Crater. Having served the latter purpose at least, the cavalry recrossed the James and moved toward the Weldon Railroad once more. At Lee's Mill, four miles east of Reams', there was a crackle of carbines on the afternoon of July 30, as Sheridan's troopers came looking for water, and Davies' Brigade, in advance, met the Sixth Carolina of Butler's Brigade on picket. Two regiments came to their support and there was a considerable skirmish, but in the end the ^{1.} Federals held the ground that night.

Grant, who seems to have intended this as the start of another move down the Railroad, with infantry support for the cavalry, finally gave up the idea, on reports that neither force was ready, and in the belief that he should be prepared for a Confederate ^{2.} attack.

Gregg's advance had disclosed the presence of a Confederate force on the railroad at the Gurley house. There was comparative quiet in this area until August 18, although Davies' Federal cavalry still picketed the neighborhood of Lee's Mill. ^{3.}

On August 1 most of the cavalry had in fact left the Army of the Potomac: Sheridan was sent with Torbert's and Wilson's divisions to take command in the Shenandoah Valley, leaving the cavalry

1. Brooks, U. R., Butler and His Cavalry in the War of Secession pp. 293, 301. Columbia, S. C. 1909.

2. O. R. 82, pp. 638-9.

3. O.R. 87, p. 628.

of the Army of the Potomac under Brigadier-General David McMurtrie Gregg, a man of thirty-one with a patriarchal beard, who was to keep the new responsibility until March of the next year. It was a large job, especially with Wade Hampton in command on the other side; but Gregg appears to have done his work ably and satisfactorily in general.

On August 18, the Army of the Potomac made its final attempt on the Weldon Railroad at the Globe Tavern, four miles north of Reams'. It began with a steadily rising volume of musketry, soon followed by the booming of heavier guns, and on the twenty-first reached its height when A. P. Hill gathered all the available Confederate force for a last effort to drive Warren from the Road. This failed, and the line of Federal earthworks was extended to that point, Forts Wadsworth and Dushane being built on the west side of the Railroad.

The Federal cavalry, most of which had been engaged in another expedition on the north side of the James River, began to return on the 18th.¹ By the 22nd, Barlow's division of II Corps infantry had also returned and that afternoon began the thorough destruction of the track, laying the rails across piles of burning ties.² Gregg sent a party to Reams' Station³ that night, and found the place unoccupied. Next day the

1. O. R., serial 87, p. 629.

2. " " " " p. 222.

3. " " " " p. 606.

work of the infantry progressed that far, and Barlow occupied the old entrenchments. Gregg's patrols had encountered Confederate cavalry (just returned from Richmond ¹) that afternoon, a mile and a half from the Station, and he went out with two regiments and saw a division, dismounted, in line across the open fields. Gregg brought up seven more regiments, dismounting all but one of them, and about five o'clock Butler's South Carolinians attacked, but Gregg's line held, and at dark the Confederates drew off. ²

Meanwhile Spear's brigade of Kautz's division, serving under Gregg, had patrolled farther south and as far west as the Vaughan Road, stirring up the pickets, but finding no great force of Confederates. ³ On the 24th, Gibbon's division having joined Barlow, the destruction of the railroad was continued as far as Malone's Crossing, two miles south of Reams'. That night Spear was posted near Malone's Bridge, still farther south. The infantry went back to the Reams' Station position ⁴ for the night, and four batteries were placed in position.

The Confederates, having observed the II Corps at work, laid plans to interfere. The Railroad was admittedly lost, so far as through traffic was concerned, but it was still possible to transfer freight to wagons at a point farther south and thus make a detour to Petersburg. It would not do to allow the destruction of an indefinite amount of track; and what was more important, the working party was moving into an increasingly exposed position. Hampton gathered his cavalry, ^{3,000}

1. O.R., serial 108, p. 1035.

3. " " 87, p. 835.

4. " " " 406 ff.

5. Papers, M.H.S.M. vol V p 299. 8

2. O.R., ser. 87, pp. 606, 607

Brooks, U.R., ~~Butler and his~~ Cavalry, Columbia, 1909 P. 311

two divisions, and General A. P. Hill, with about 8,000 infantry,¹ moved out from Petersburg and bivouacked near Armstrong's Mill.

Hancock was informed of the movement that same night, the Confederate force being estimated by the signal officers at eight or ten thousand. Some of Gregg's squadrons were ordered out next morning on a reconnaissance which disclosed nothing, and Hancock determined to try to destroy more of the railroad before he could² be interrupted.

At about eight o'clock on the morning of August 25 then, as Gibbon's division was just setting out from the entrenchments for another day of peaceful hard labor, Spear's cavalry outposts found³ the enemy advancing. Riding forward, Spear saw that Hampton's troopers were coming from three directions, and dispatched a rider to Hancock. By noon the grey cavalry were thick, east, south and west of Reams', and skirmish fire cracked through the woods. Parties⁴ of infantry were sent out to support the Federal pickets. Hampton communicated with Hill, and at his suggestion drew off a little in⁵ the hope of taking the Federals farther from their earthworks. By this time, however, Gibbon's division had moved back to the lines.

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1. N. C. Troops - Vol. V, p. 207, Papers of the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts, Boston, 1906, Vol. V., p. 279. O.R. serial 88, p. 1213. ff.
2. O.R. serial 87, p. 223.
3. O.R. " 87, p. 835, 942.
4. O.R. " 87, p. 223, ff.
5. O.R. " 87, p. 942.

Hill's infantry were moving up, and about two o'clock¹ attacked Miles (commanding Barlow's division) in his position on the northwest face of the line. The brigades of Anderson and Scales made a determined charge, in spite of brush and slashings, coming nearly up to the works before the heavy² infantry and artillery fire forced them back.

Hancock believed there was more to come, and reported to Meade that he was too closely engaged to withdraw before nightfall. Some of Mott's troops and Willcox's division of the Ninth Corps were on their way to him, but were marching by the Plank Road instead of the direct line of the railroad. This route had been directed by Meade, apparently with the idea of protecting Hancock's left flank. The Federal cavalry had left the front on the approach of enemy infantry, and were now lying behind improvised breastworks on Gibbon's left³ flank, extending to a swamp east of Heams'.

Hill's sixteen field-pieces, some of them moved up to⁴ within three hundred yards of the Federal line,⁵ opened fire about five o'clock. The shelling demoralized part of the troops, whose line it took in rear. In fifteen minutes this bombardment

1. O.R. serial 87, p. 224.

2. Papers, Mil. Hist. Soc. of Mass., vol. V, p. 280.
N. C. Troops, vol II, p. 575, III p. 77, IV 564.
O.R. 87, pp. 224, 252.

3. O.R. 87, p. 607.

4. O.R. 87, p. 858.

5. Papers, Mil. Hist. Soc. of Mass., vol. IV, p. 286.

stopped, and the infantry came on, Lane's, Cooke's and McRae's brigades from the west, Hampton's dismounted cavalry from the south. Just as Hancock thought the attack broken, two or three of his regiments near the northwest angle left the line. A brigade, ordered to fill the gap, would not advance, nor even fire. The artillery, unsupported, was overwhelmed in the Confederate rush, the death of gun-teams preventing withdrawal in some cases. Miles rallied a regiment and attempted to clear the line, was partly successful, but now, despite flank fire from Gregg, Hampton's men had swept over the works on the other side. Hancock now formed a new line a short distance to the rear, and from this point Miles and Gregg offered to recapture their works, but Gibbon stated that his men could not do it, and the attempt was not made. Only one of the batteries, Woerner's, of New Jersey, escaped with all its guns. The Twelfth New York, which had lost its guns two months before near the Plank Road, came out this time with a net loss of only one, though all of them had been in Confederate hands for a time.

It was a dreadful scene for the Federals. Not since Chancellorsville had their lines been broken under such conditions. For an hour or so the rough triangle enclosed by the entrenchments must have presented the epitome of confusion, Confederate musketry sweeping it from each side in turn, and fragments of regiments moving in every direction, some counter-attacking, some attempting to form new lines, a good many, no

1. O.R. 87, p. 410.

doubt, trying sincerely to avoid flying lead. The Confederates added to the din, if not to the carnage, by firing a few rounds from the captured guns. General Hancock and his officers, especially Miles, worked with desperate brilliance to retrieve the day. Presently Hancock found time to lean on a friend's shoulder and say "Colonel, I do not care to die, but I pray to God I may never leave this field."¹

Because of the Federal rallies and the coming darkness, perhaps because of their own surprise at the success, the Confederates had to rest content with holding the captured line. The Federals drew back, after dark, to the position of Willcox's division of the IX Corps, halfway to the Plank Road. Hill withdrew also, leaving Hampton to hold the position over night.² The Confederate force, not much superior in numbers to its opponent, had lost 720 in killed and wounded to 668 for the Federals, but 2,072 prisoners went back to Petersburg, and what was more useful, nine cannon in serviceable second-hand condition.³ The 6,000 bayonets Hancock had mustered in the morning were reduced by very nearly half that night.⁴

The last bugle had not yet blown at Reams' Station. Confederate detachments continued to hold the place for another month, until the start of the Peebles' Farm operations. In connection with these, Gregg ordered the

1. Papers, M. H. S. M., vol. V, p. 295.

2. O. R. ser. 87, p. 944. 3. Ibid., pp. 129, 940.

4. Ibid, p. 228.

the First New Jersey Cavalry, on the morning of September 29, to drive the Confederates out of the neighborhood. Accordingly, Major Myron H. Beaumont sent two squadrons out for the purpose. With a great whoop and halloo, the troopers raced in, and the Confederates incontinently departed, though in considerable strength. A dozen men and a few horses were taken.¹ After that, Reams' Station ceased to be a name in dispatches.

In justice to the soldiers of the Second Corps, any account of the Battle of Reams' Station must point out that the organization which fought there was a different body of men from that which stood under the same flag at Gettysburg. The heavy losses of the 1864 campaign, the inferior replacements who found their way, untrained or half-trained, into the army at this stage of the war, and the unremitting fighting and marching of the preceding few days: all these should be considered before dealing out praise or blame.

For the Confederacy, this was the last victory of the campaign. On many more fields, in the next seven months, the grey troops beat off the blue or made them pay dearly for small gains, but never again was there to be such a clear day of triumph for the Army of Northern Virginia.

1. O. R. ser. 87, p. 634.

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