

The Battle of the Wilderness:
An Analysis from Pennsylvania and Georgia

The Battle of the Wilderness occurred May 5-7, 1864 in Spotsylvania and Orange Counties, Virginia. With an inconclusive ending, this battle was part of Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant's Overland Campaign in which Lt. Gen. Grant directed the actions of the Army of the Potomac commanded by Major General George G. Meade. Overall, the Overland Campaign was a strategic Union victory, even though Lt. Gen. Grant suffered heavy casualties throughout the months of the campaign. The Battle of the Wilderness specifically had an estimated casualty count at 29,800 total troops, with 18,400 Union and 11,400 Confederate soldiers dead; Grant continued his offensive campaign well into June of 1864.¹

This battle, even though high in casualties, was low in newspaper coverage minus obituary and discharge write-ups. However, some accounts of the battle from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in Pennsylvania and the *Columbus Daily Enquirer* and the *Macon Telegraph* from Georgia appear between the dates May 7, 1864 through January 15, 1865. Comparing the articles found from these two states obviously approach the battle from opposing sides, but they also summarize personal accounts from the battle in similar ways: highly focusing on the violence and fighting that ensued as well as prisoners' accounts. Both the Union and the Confederate States of America newspapers listed the battle as one in a string that were plaguing the Western theater at the time. Personal accounts of the violence and the "interesting" or "amusing" events

¹ CWSAC Battle Summaries, The American Battlefield Protection Program,
<http://www.nps.gov/hps/abpp/battles/va046.htm>

that were reported kept the citizens of each side informed and continued support for their respective armies; each side thought they were winning and were fighting for the right thing. However, different approaches to coverage of the Battle of the Wilderness from both sides of the war lead to different insights about the purpose or underlying intentions of the reports. Conflicting coverage on the Union side from Philadelphia, Penn., can give insight into the power struggle of the Union army, even though it seemed they had an infallible unity. On the Confederate side, it is evident that reporters were trying to publish stories that kept Confederate moral high despite repeated defeats or inconclusive results on the battlefields.

With three articles referencing the Battle of the Wilderness in the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and two from Georgia, it can be argued that the Union was more interested in accounts of the battle, probably because it was part of Grant's Overland Campaign, a campaign that is largely considered a strategic Union victory. Grant was considered a Union hero by retaking the Western theater for the Union and greatly shifting the moral and momentum of the Union armies. Even though the Union suffered more casualties than the Confederacy during this particular battle, that doesn't necessarily mean that the Confederacy performed better.

In the first article from the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, the Battle of the Wilderness is mentioned in "An Interesting Letter from the Ranks," in which a wounded soldier from the 21st Massachusetts gives a personal account "amidst the clash of arms and glare of official 'bulletins.'" His letter, as he states, is an account from the "voice of the ranks;" in other words, he wishes to tell Union citizens of his divisional corps', the Ninth Corps of the First Division, contribution to the Battle of the Wilderness. This soldier insists that the notable Army of the Potomac is getting all the credit for the charge to the Confederate brigades: "There seems to be a determination on the part of the 'Army of the Potomac,' or at least on the part of the reporters in

its pay, to ignore the services of all troops not originally part or itself.”² This soldier claims that the papers are paying attention to the famous and strong Union armies and the notable generals and commanders instead of giving due credit to all who are involved. The soldier continues, “When they know us better we will be appreciated.”³ This soldier clearly wants to be recognized for his contribution to the Battle of the Wilderness, and in addition, wishes that “the papers” would give due credit to the all soldiers involved. This contributes to the overall idea that we discussed in class that the Civil War was a rich man’s war but a poor man’s fight; meaning, that the rich and powerful wanted to wage war on the enemy but weren’t willing to fight on the frontlines and instead sent the poor men to fight for them.

The soldier’s concern is evidenced in another article from the *Philadelphia Inquirer* from the headquarters of General Butler in which the Battle of the Wilderness is addressed in discussion of effectiveness of “The United States Regular Army” and that “a distinct organization [The Regular Army] has been overshadowed by the volunteer boost...”⁴ This article makes the claim that volunteers entering the army at a rapid pace are overshadowing a distinguished division of the Union army, and that the papers are giving them more attention.

To counter, a third article from the *Inquirer* covers the capture of General Joseph Hayes of Massachusetts. The article outlines the General’s heroic duties as a commander at the Battle of the Wilderness, and his promotion by Grant and Meade to Brigadier after the battle. The article ends in describing General Hayes as “distinguished by his fine personal appearance as well as his gallantry.”⁵ General Joseph Hayes was a volunteer that entered the Union army and worked his way up through gallant fighting under Generals Grant and Meade. These articles outline the

² *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 25, 1864, 2.

³ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, May 25, 1864, 2.

⁴ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 2, 1864, 3.

⁵ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 26, 1864, 2.

struggle of soldiers, commanders and reporters trying to make sure all receive their due credit for their performances during warfare and further, that no matter how unified the Union armies appeared, there was a constant power struggle between the hierarchy of the notable officers and volunteer troops.

Down south in Georgia, two articles mentioning the Battle of the Wilderness appear in the *Columbus Daily Enquirer* and the *Macon Telegraph*. These articles contain an “amusing incident of the Battle of the Wilderness” along with an article about a Union prisoner that was “very grateful to the confederates,” respectively. These stories presented in these accounts bring lightheartedness to the warfare raging on, and mention of a Union prisoner thankful he did not have to fight for Grant any longer. These articles differ from the Union newspaper articles in that the coverage is scarce, probably because by this time, the outcome looked bleak for the Confederacy. The “Amusing Incident of the Battle of the Wilderness” from the *Daily Enquirer* is a short paragraph about a lighthearted exchange between Brigadier General G. T. Anderson and General Benning on the morning of the battle. Regardless of its length, this write up has a funny punch line, and amidst articles of violence, death and disease, this “amusing incident” probably brought a fresh breath of comedic relief to pages of depressing news.⁶

The *Telegraph* article is part of a larger story, “A Trip to General Lee’s Army,” and spins accounts of a prisoner of war insisting that he wanted to be captured: “He was grateful for his capture, and was not alone in his gratitude, for many others were with him—both officers and privates, who were in the finest spirits at the prospect of a short rest in Virginia.”⁷ This article in particular may have been mentioned in the larger story in the *Telegraph* to lead readers to believe even captured Union soldiers were on the side of the Confederacy. To continue this argument,

⁶ *Columbus Daily Enquirer*, June 29, 1864, 1.

⁷ *Macon Telegraph*, May 26, 1864, 1.

another blurb in the story, “A Trip to General Lee’s Army” talks about “the spirit of our army,” which states,

The spirit of our army is splendid, and much better than could be expected even under continued success, after so much heavy labor. The men are hearty and cheerful, and will fight forever, or until the last of them expires. They believe this [the Battle of the Wilderness] to be the last struggle for Richmond, and every one of them is determine to see it out. Hence we find *no straggling* in our army. Every man is at his post and there he means to stay until he is taken away. Everybody is confident and hopeful, and success with them is a foregone fact.⁸

This paragraph is written as an obvious reassurance to Confederate readers: it was vital to keep support for the war high not only on the battlefield, but on the home front as well.

Civil War warfare was by and large bloody, long, and the results were inconclusive. On the home front, newspapers had an obligation to report facts and accounts from the battlefields, but this sometimes came at a cost. In the North, Union newspapers were accused of only reporting about notable, famous armies and military leaders, but the volunteers and “lowly” troops wanted their due recognition as well. In the South, Confederate newspapers were trying to keep attitudes about the waning Confederate war effort high. By 1864, there had been so many battles that reports of the strategy and casualties had become mundane and discouraging for both sides, an argument for the scarcity of coverage from this particular battle. On the home front, citizens were waiting for peace or surrender (depending on which side one favored) or were paying more attention to the 1864 presidential campaign and the long-term consequences of President Lincoln’s attempts to address the “peculiar institution” of slavery in the South.

⁸ *Macon Telegraph*, May 26, 1864, 1.

Civil War politics and its effects on both the Union and Confederacy were slowly overshadowing the Battle of the Wilderness and Lt. Gen. Grant's Overland Campaign as a whole during the months after the Battle of the Wilderness occurred. Union and Confederate supporters alike were looking ahead to the implications of the Emancipation Proclamation and rumors of peace between war leaders and a constitutional amendment to abolish slavery. The Battle of the Wilderness was indeed important; one soldier reporting from General Butler's headquarters considered it "the culminating battle of this war."⁹ In addition, reports of the same battle on opposite sides of the war yield different interpretations as to why the article was written and the message meant to be conveyed. Yet, reports of it became secondary during the political turmoil between 1864 and 1865.

⁹ *Philadelphia Inquirer*, August 2, 1864, 3.