

# The Battle of Five Forks

31 March-1 April 1865

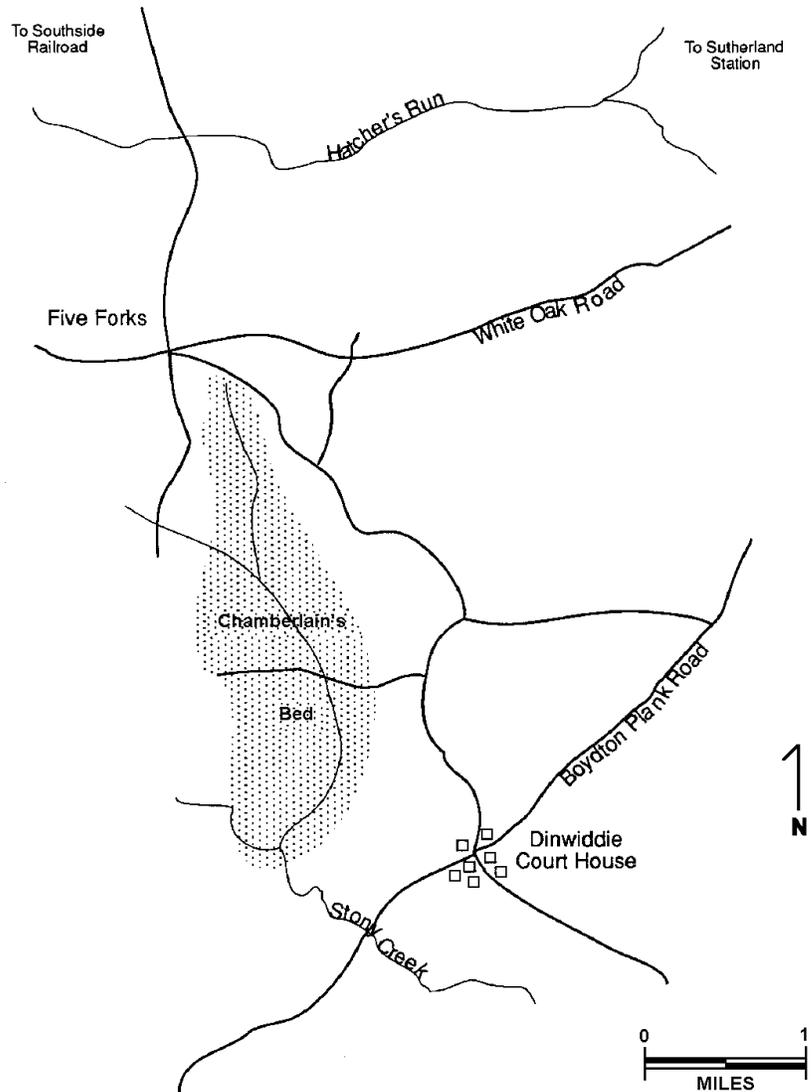
by Captain Kenneth C. Blakely

*"I tell you, I'm ready to strike out tomorrow and go to smashing things!"*

*P.H. Sheridan*

For two days in the spring of 1865, detachments of two great armies fought in the dark woods around Petersburg, Virginia. Like exhausted boxers, one army jabbed and the other countered. The resulting clash, the Battle of Five Forks, was barely a skirmish on the scale of most battles of the American Civil War. In terms of strategic impact, however, it arguably ranks with Gettysburg, Vicksburg, and Atlanta. On the ground Five Forks was a small battle, but to the Confederacy it signaled the end of meaningful resistance.

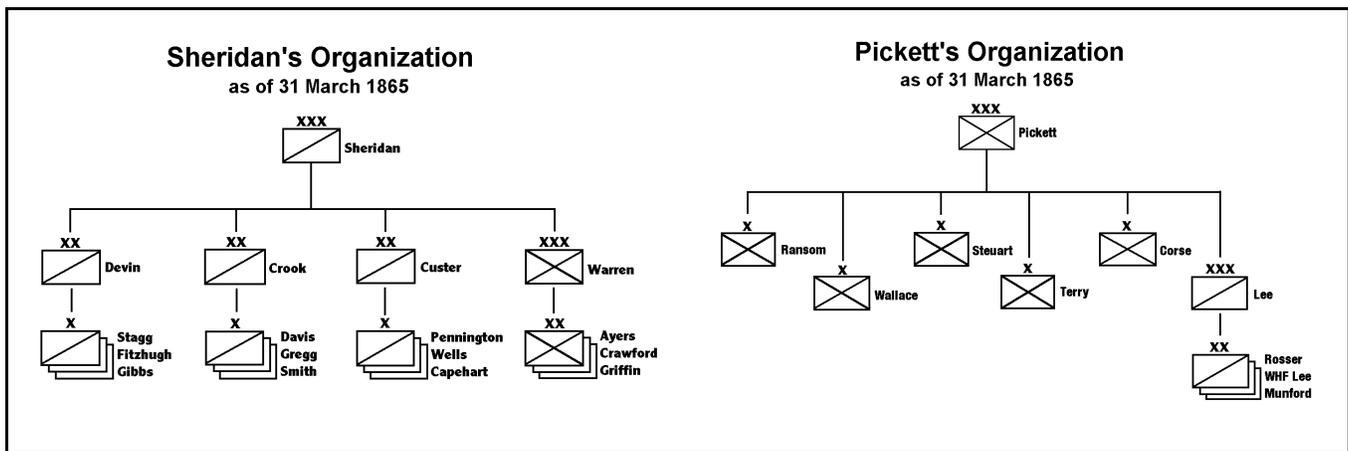
The two forces that met at Five Forks, Virginia, were detachments from the Union Army of the Potomac and the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. For the Union, Major General Philip H. Sheridan led 10,000 hard-riding cavalry troopers. Fresh from decisive victory at the Battle of Waynesboro in the Shenandoah Valley, Sheridan's men were comparatively well rested, well fed, and well mounted. Sheridan himself seemed to smell victory, and his men were ready and eager for the fight. Supporting Sheridan was the V Corps of the Army of the Potomac, commanded by MG Gouverneur K. Warren. The hero of Little Round Top led a powerful corps of three divisions. His men had been manning the Petersburg trenches during the past winter and, while they were not quite as fresh as Sheridan's troopers, they trusted their general and they were ready to fight. All told, Sheridan commanded over 18,000 of the best cavalry and infantry the Union had to offer.<sup>1</sup>



**Dinwiddie Court House and Five Forks, Va.**

For the Confederacy, another cavalry-infantry force commanded by MG George Pickett was being fielded. Besides his own division, Pickett was given two brigades from MG Anderson's corps and three divisions of cavalry under General Fitzhugh Lee. These soldiers and troopers were battle-hardened veterans of every eastern campaign since the Peninsula in 1862. Arguably, they were the finest fighters of the entire Civil War. Like Warren's

men, though, they had been in continuous contact since Grant crossed the Rapahannock the previous spring. The siege of Petersburg had taken its toll on them and their thinned ranks showed the result of desertions and battle losses. In spite of all this — hunger, disease, boredom, and almost constant combat — the 12,000 infantry and cavalry under Pickett still exhibited the spirit and determination that had made them famous at Gettysburg.<sup>2</sup>



At stake was the survival of Lieutenant General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. After a winter of siege in Petersburg, the Army of the Potomac had so encircled Lee's force that his only remaining link to the outside world was the Southside Railroad. This rail line stretched southwestward from Petersburg and was the only major means of supply or evacuation left. If it were cut, Lee would be trapped, and his surrender within a few weeks would be assured. If it were protected, however, Lee could move his army out of the trenches, link up with LTG Joe Johnston's Army of the Tennessee in North Carolina, and continue the fight. Within reach of Union forces, the only roads leading to the Southside Railroad came together just south of a creek called Hatcher's Run at an isolated trail intersection known as Five Forks. The army that controlled Five Forks controlled the Southside Railroad and, by extension, the course of the war.<sup>3</sup>

The area around Five Forks was similar to most of southern Virginia. Low, rolling hills and thick, heavy vegetation made off-road movement very difficult and slow, especially for units deployed for battle. The forest was sporadically broken by small clearings which, in some cases, extended line of sight, but for the most part 50-100 meters was the limit of observation in the woods. The few roads that crossed the area were unimproved dirt trails. The intersection at Five Forks was little more than an isolated crossroads with no buildings or settlements, made important only by its position at the western end of Lee's trench lines.<sup>4</sup> South of Five Forks was a small marshy area called Chamberlain's Bed and a stream called Stony Creek, both of which ran north-south and restricted east-west movement.

On 25 March 1865, U.S. Grant started the beginning of the end for

Lee's army by instructing Sheridan to move his three divisions of cavalry out of bivouac at White House on the Pamunkey and proceed around the Union rear toward the Southside Railroad.<sup>5</sup> Having put his forces on the road, Sheridan arrived at City Point the next day for a personal interview with his commander. There is some controversy over which of the two generals, Grant or Sheridan, motivated the other, but the result was twofold. First, Sheridan was given status as an independent Army commander so that he reported directly to Grant, and second, Grant committed himself to the ultimate goal of capturing the Southside Railroad and turning Lee's right flank.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, the alert Confederate cavalry noted and reported these movements.<sup>7</sup> Lee, having identified this threat long ago, correctly interpreted the intelligence he received. To counter it, he sent three divisions of cavalry, one under General Rosser, and the others under his kinsmen, W.H.F. Lee and Fitzhugh Lee, to Five Forks. As the senior, Fitzhugh Lee commanded the group, and Colonel Munford took over command of Lee's division.<sup>8</sup>

Because this force totaled less than 6,000 sabres, General James Longstreet proposed to R.E. Lee that one of his divisions, George Pickett's, be designated a "special mobile force,"<sup>9</sup> and move with the cavalry. In desperation for more mass on his right flank, Lee acquiesced to this unorthodox tactic. At this point, Lee still did not know if the force heading for his flank was pure cavalry or if it had been reinforced with infantry.<sup>10</sup> This was to become a critical question in the next few days.

By 1700 on 29 March, Sheridan had arrived at Dinwiddie Court House, a tiny community some four miles south of Five Forks.<sup>11</sup> Dinwiddie was an excellent staging area to begin his assault

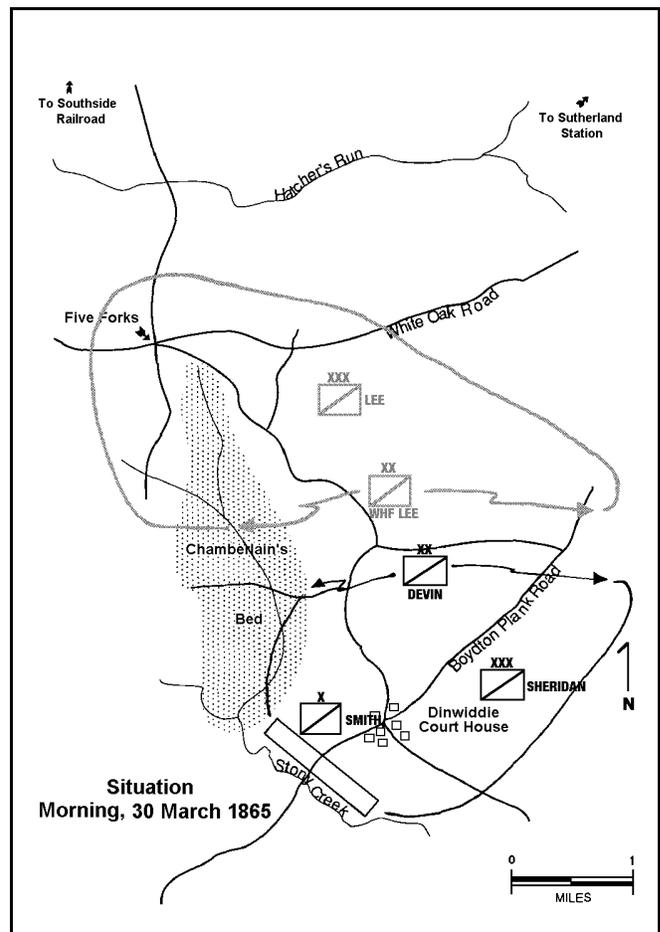
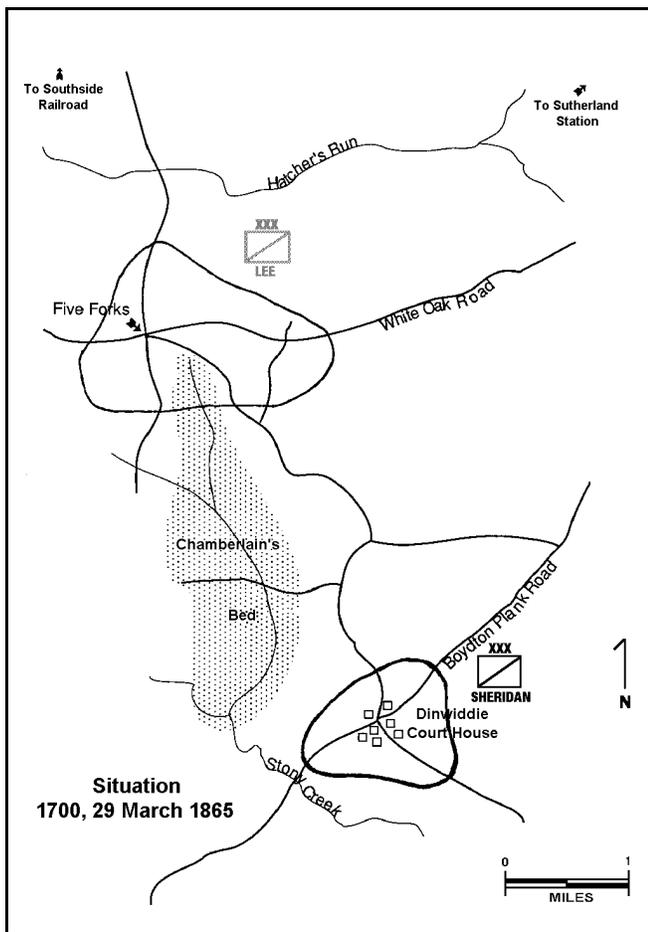
through Five Forks to the Southside Railroad, and Sheridan paused to assemble his forces. By that evening, both Crook's and Devin's divisions had joined him at Dinwiddie, while Custer's division was occupied bringing up the trains through the clogged rear area.<sup>12</sup> Enthused by Sheridan's excellent progress, Grant changed his tactical focus somewhat and issued Sheridan new instructions.

*"I do not want you to go after the [rail] roads at present. In the morning, push around the enemy, if you can, and get in his right rear. I now feel like ending the matter, if it is possible to do so."*<sup>13</sup>

Pickett, meanwhile, had been instructed to move by rail to Sutherland Station, a tiny rail station on Lee's extreme right flank.<sup>14</sup> He made this move quickly and had detrained by the time Sheridan arrived at Dinwiddie. Fitzhugh Lee's cavalry force was already encamped at Five Forks and screening southward. It began to rain that night, first softly and then in torrents. It was not to stop for three days.<sup>15</sup>

By the next day, the rain had transformed roads in the Dinwiddie area from marginal to impassable. Thick, gooey mud clung to everything and threatened to swallow entire supply columns. Custer's men set to corduroying the roads with felled trees but the logs seemed to disappear under the bottomless mud.<sup>16</sup> Brevet Brigadier General Horace Porter, Grant's Chief of Staff, commented that "it looked as if the saving of the army would require the services, not of Grant, but of Noah."<sup>17</sup>

Despite the adversity, Sheridan lost no time on the 30th in deploying his forces for battle. He put a brigade of Crook's division in a blocking position



over the Boydton Plank Road at Stony Creek and pushed Devin's division north on the Five Forks Road to locate the enemy.<sup>18</sup> He was soon rewarded, as Devin almost immediately ran into a brigade of Confederate cavalry, probably from W.H.F. Lee's division.<sup>19</sup> A lively fight ensued and Sheridan was looking forward to a successful day when he encountered the first of several stumbling blocks.

Around midmorning, a courier from Grant's headquarters arrived at Dinwiddie and gave Sheridan this message from the commanding general.

*"The heavy rain of today will make it impossible for us to do much until it dries up a little or we get the roads around our rear repaired. You may therefore leave what cavalry you deem necessary to protect the left...and send the remainder back to Humphrey's Station where they can get hay and grain."*<sup>20</sup>

Sheridan was more than a little perturbed by this change in plans, especially after the optimistic instructions he had been given the previous day. After considering it for a few moments,

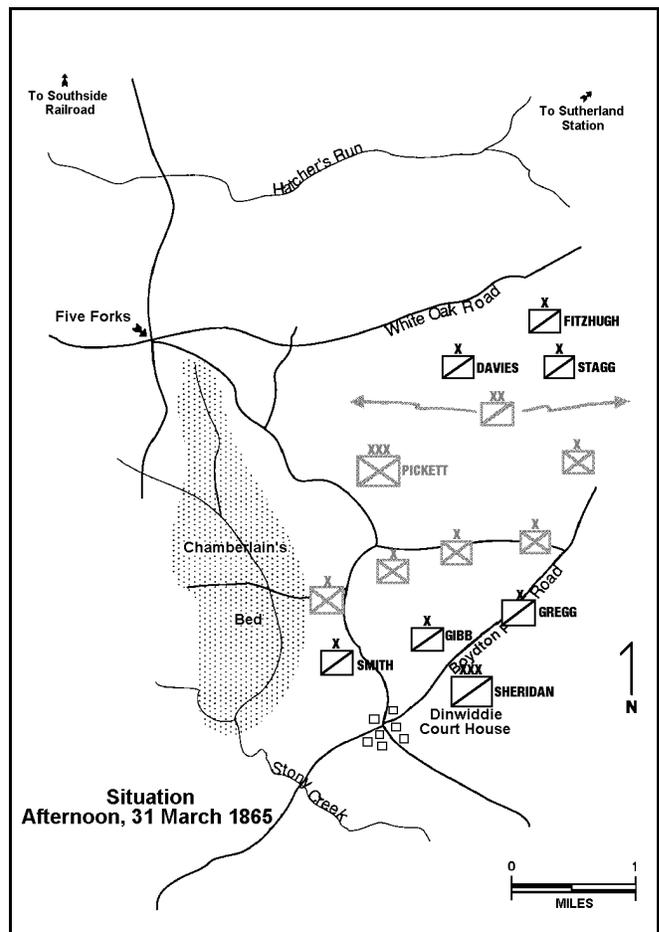
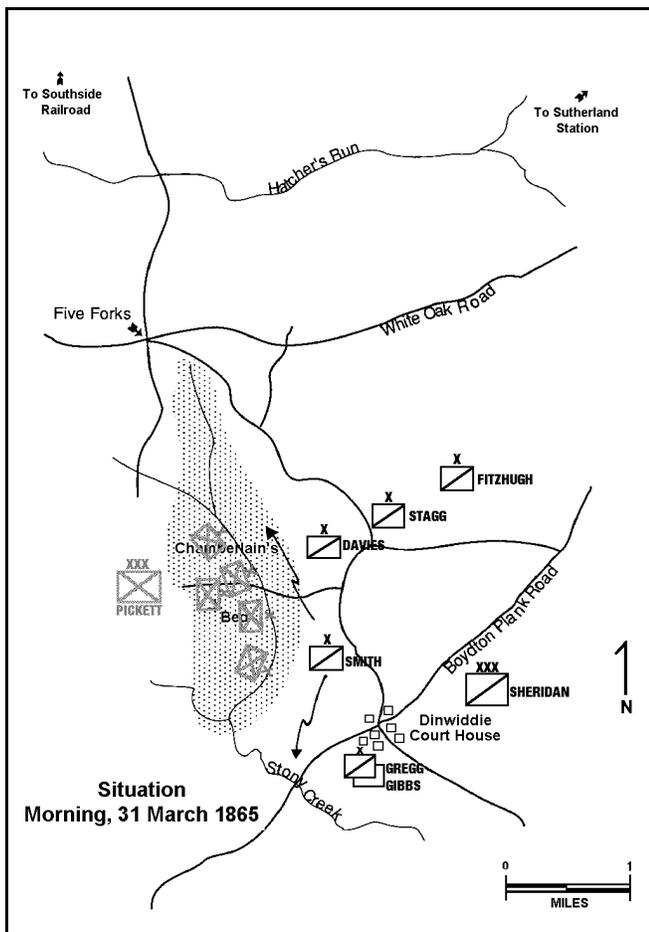
he halted all offensive actions for that day, threw out a heavy screen, and then mounted his horse and set out for Grant's headquarters. As he said later in his memoirs, it seemed to him "that a suspension of operations would be a serious mistake," and he intended to see his commander personally so that he could "get a clear idea of what it was proposed to do."<sup>21</sup>

While Devin's and W.H.F. Lee's cavalry were clashing south of Five Forks that morning, the commander of the Army of Northern Virginia was holding a council of war at Sutherland Station.<sup>22</sup> Pickett was in attendance, as were other generals that occupied positions on Lee's right flank. Lee knew that Sheridan's force had occupied Dinwiddie, but it was still not known if he was accompanied by infantry. A pure cavalry force in such an exposed position, far to the left of Grant's trenches, was a tempting target. If it were destroyed, not only would Five Forks be safe, but the Confederates would be in a position to turn the entire Union line. Of course, Fitzhugh Lee was already in place at Five Forks with his three divisions of cavalry, but if the operation was to have any real chance of success,

Lee had to be reinforced. Pickett's "mobile force" had been created just for such an occasion. The decision was made, and by noon Pickett's division, reinforced by two brigades from Anderson's corps, was marching westward toward Five Forks.<sup>23</sup>

The march was slow and agonizingly difficult because of the mud. Making it worse was the constant harassment of Pickett's column by federal cavalry. Every time his flanks were assailed by enemy horse, Pickett halted his column and deployed regimental battle formations and awaited an attack.<sup>24</sup> While this slow, cautious approach exasperated Fitzhugh Lee, it was understandable in light of Pickett's experience. Fortune had not been kind to George Pickett either at Gettysburg or since.<sup>25</sup> He now had an opportunity for fame and glory and he did not intend to lose it in an ambush.

Pickett finally reached Five Forks in the evening of 30 March 1865.<sup>26</sup> Once there, he located Fitzhugh Lee and, as senior officer, took command of the entire operation. While the rest of his force bivouacked, Pickett pushed out two brigades as local security. They



soon came in contact with Union cavalry under Devin, and Pickett was informed that the force to his front was equipped with repeating rifles.<sup>27</sup> What was still not known, however, was whether there was any Union infantry in the dark, wet woods to the south.

By this time Sheridan had returned to Dinwiddie with new orders from his commander. His trip to Grant's headquarters had been wholly successful. It had taken three hours of riding to reach Grant's encampment, three hours of forcing his horse through knee deep, sucking mud. When he arrived, Sheridan found Grant's staff standing on logs and planks around a roaring fire and the commanding general in his tent conferring with one of his corps commanders. While waiting for an audience with Grant, Sheridan was unrestrained and excited. He paced back and forth, pounding a clenched fist into his open hand and, as Porter put it later, "chafed like a hound on a leash." When another staff officer prodded him, Sheridan uttered his now famous statement, "I tell you, I'm ready to strike out tomorrow and go to smashing things!"<sup>28</sup>

Grant's staff was caught up in the cavalryman's infectious optimism and an audience with Grant was arranged immediately. Sheridan spoke with Grant for close to an hour. The exact arguments he used have not survived, but when Sheridan emerged from his commander's tent, he had received new orders. "We will go on," Grant had said.<sup>29</sup>

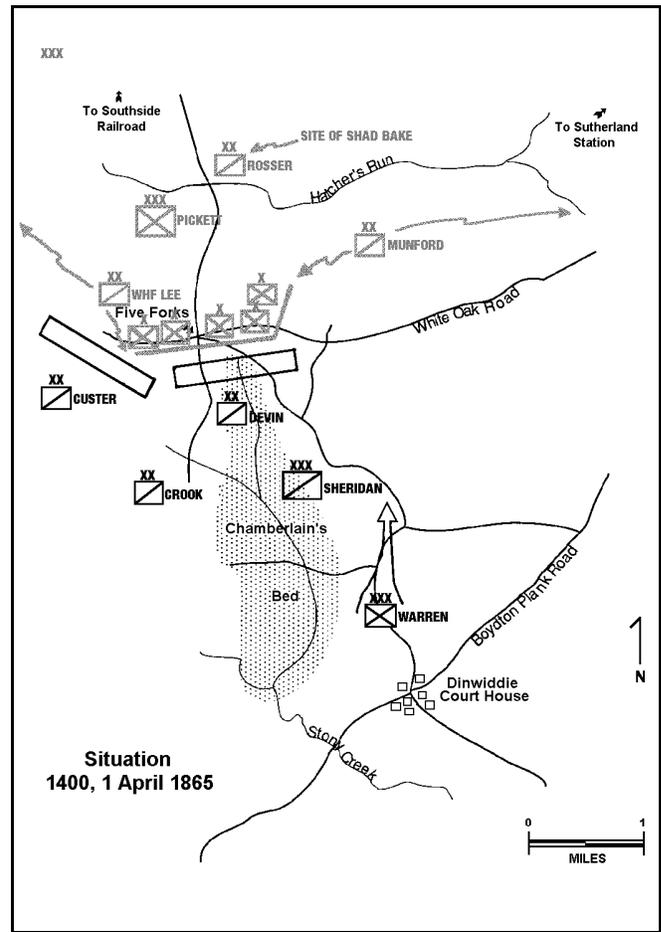
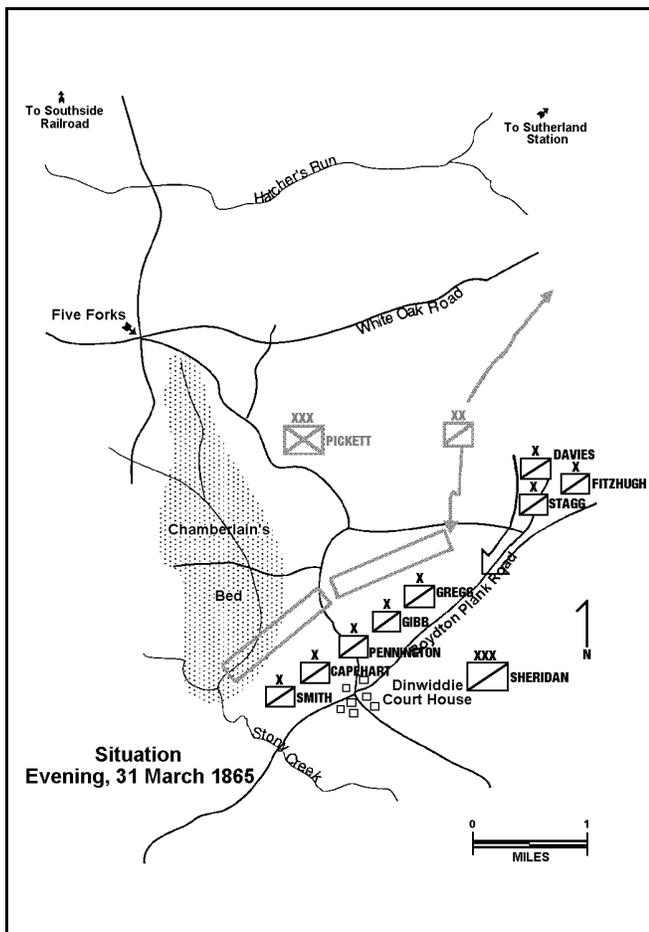
And so, when Sheridan drew rein that evening at Dinwiddie, the ingredients of a major battle were already in place. Ironically, Grant's vacillations had cost the Federals an entire day, a day which Lee had used to insert five brigades of infantry into the equation. Had Sheridan been allowed to continue the attack that morning, there is an excellent chance that his three powerful divisions would have swept aside Fitzhugh Lee's tired and depleted force. Sheridan would have advanced on the railroad, cutting the Army of Northern Virginia off from escape, and the Battle of Five Forks might never have happened.

March 31, 1865, began with light fog and damp, sticky air. The constant rain of the last two days had slowed considerably but was still an ever present an-

noyance. Sheridan began his movements by pushing Davies', Stagg's, and Fitzhugh's brigades north toward Five Forks.<sup>30</sup> He detailed Smith's brigade to guard the crossing over Chamberlain's Bed, and Gregg's and Gibbs' brigades he held in reserve at Dinwiddie.<sup>31</sup> His cavalry screen had identified Pickett's force moving into Five Forks the previous day, but Sheridan still was unsure of Pickett's intentions so he instructed his three forward brigades to move carefully.<sup>32</sup>

Pickett also began moving early in the morning. Some of Fitzhugh Lee's scouts had identified a concealed road through the woods to the west of Chamberlain's Bed. Pickett, with an eye toward decisive victory, sent his forces down that road, hoping to take the Federals in the flank.<sup>33</sup>

Sheridan first made contact around midmorning when some of Smith's pickets were driven away from Chamberlain's Bed. The Confederates were coming into his flank and rear, apparently in large numbers. Sheridan called Davies and instructed him to move southwest and reinforce Smith. Despite the danger, it looked as if the penetration could be contained.<sup>34</sup>



In fact, Pickett had crossed Chamberlain's Bed in two places. The crossing that Sheridan was reacting to was the southernmost and less powerful one. Davies, answering Sheridan's call for help, left a picket line in position and marched to aid Smith. By the time Davies arrived, however, Smith had already pushed the penetration back. At this point, Pickett's northernmost attack hit home exactly in the position Davies had just left.<sup>35</sup>

Davies countermarched quickly and even managed to get his brigade in front of Pickett's penetration,<sup>36</sup> but the damage was done. The Confederates pushed inexorably southwest, driving a wedge between Sheridan's forces that got wider with each passing hour. The Federals were now split with Davies, Stagg, and Fitzhugh to the north, Smith, Gregg, and Gibbs to the south, and at least 12,000 Confederates in between. Each of the separated Union forces was now less than half Pickett's force and could easily be destroyed in detail.<sup>37</sup>

George Pickett was now the master of the hour. He could either destroy Sheridan's forces or continue to march into

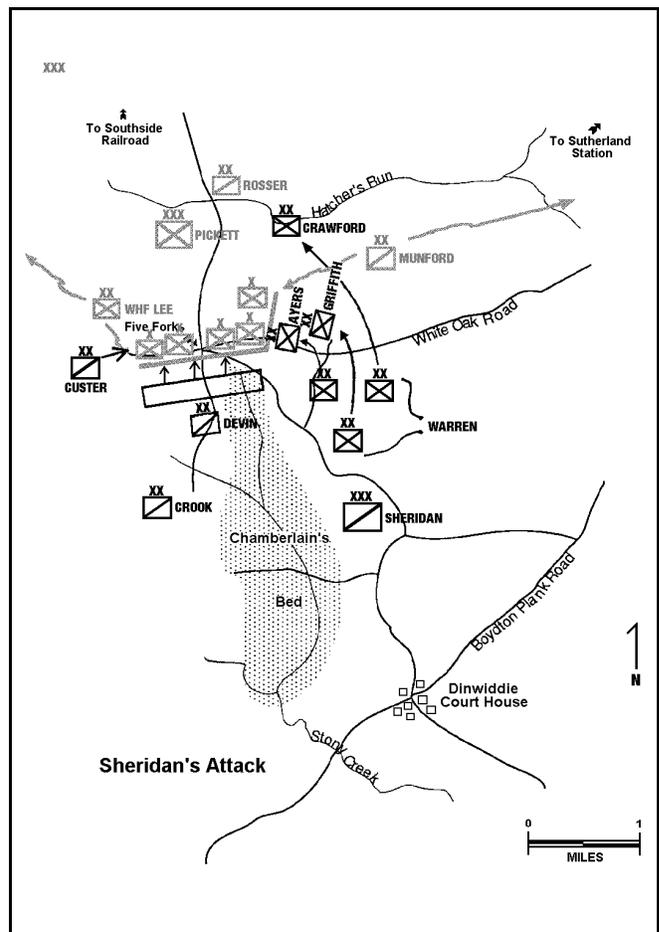
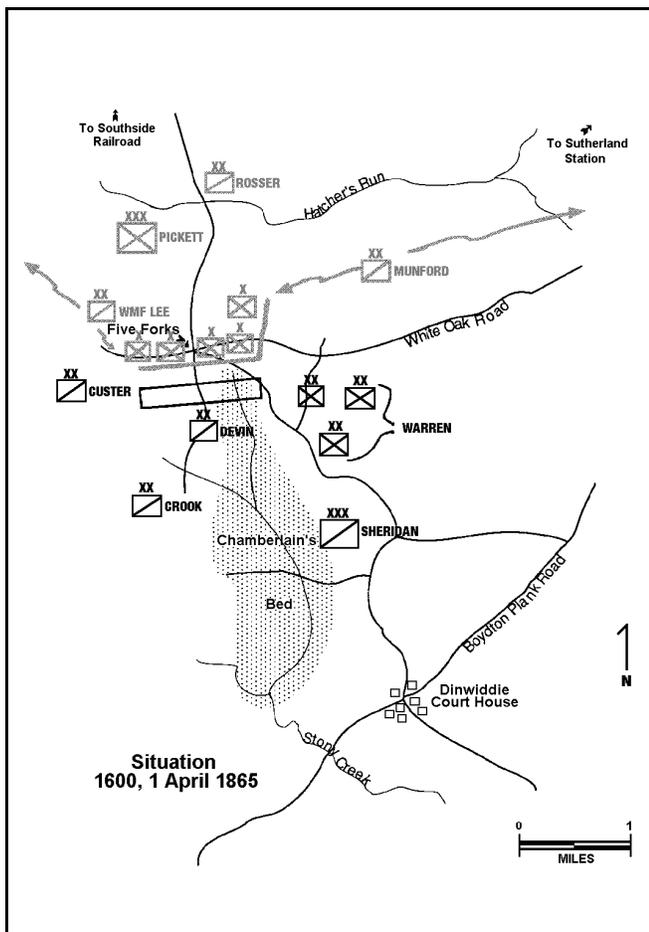
the Union rear. It is unclear whether Pickett realized what he had achieved, but what is clear is that he continued his march southeast, sweeping away Union cavalry to his front and heading directly for the flank of the Union entrenchments around Petersburg.

Sheridan now had to concentrate on limiting the damage. Fortunately, Pickett's advance meant that his flank would be exposed to Gibbs' and Gregg's brigades, which had been called out of reserve. At the proper moment, Sheridan had these two brigades concentrate repeating rifle fire on Pickett's advancing ranks.<sup>38</sup> The attack forced Pickett to stop and face south, stalling his attack. At the same time, Sheridan called up two of Custer's three brigades from the wagon trains in the rear. Custer arrived just before Pickett broke the Union line, and Sheridan threw his two brigades in between Smith and Gibbs. To the tune of "Nellie Bly," played by one of Custer's bands, the Union reinforcements shored up Sheridan's line and saved him from destruction.<sup>39</sup> That evening, Pickett made one final assault across Sheridan's entire line, but the withering fires of Sheridan's repeating carbines held

him off. The day ended with Pickett solidly in command of the field and Sheridan, as one author put it, "on the ragged edge of a major defeat."<sup>40</sup>

Soon after nightfall, Sheridan sent a message to Grant telling him that while Pickett was too strong to be attacked, he (Sheridan) would hold at Dinwiddie as long as possible.<sup>41</sup> The three separated brigades of Davies, Stagg, and Fitzhugh rejoined Sheridan around 2200 by swinging wide to the east of Pickett's penetration and marching to Dinwiddie on the Boydton Plank Road.<sup>42</sup> Their arrival buoyed Sheridan's spirits somewhat, and he began to think that perhaps his situation was not so precarious as he had imagined.

Sheridan's dispatches and reports throughout the day painted a dire picture at Grant's headquarters, though. After some suggestions from his subordinate commanders, Grant decided to pull Gouverneur K. Warren's V Corps out of its position in the trenches and send it to aid Sheridan.<sup>43</sup> Warren received his marching orders and immediately sent one of his divisions, Ayers', striding toward Dinwiddie.<sup>44</sup> The other two divisions, Crawford's and Griffin's,



came much more slowly. Grant also sent General Porter as a liaison officer to Sheridan to guide him concerning the commanding general's intentions. Porter arrived at Dinwiddie somewhere around 2300 and told Sheridan that the V Corps should reach his position around midnight.<sup>45</sup> At that point, Sheridan realized his opportunity, saying to Porter,

*"This force is in more danger than I am. If I am cut off from the Army of the Potomac, it is cut off from Lee's army, and not a man in it should ever be allowed to get back to Lee. We at last have drawn the enemy's infantry out of its fortifications and this is our chance to attack it."*<sup>46</sup>

Sheridan was not the only one who realized the Confederates were in danger. After a successful day Pickett had put his men in bivouac, thinking to begin the battle anew the next morning. Somewhere around 2300, however, two prisoners were captured on Pickett's left flank and brought to him. They were infantrymen, members of the lead brigade of Ayers' division of the well-known V Corps.<sup>47</sup> Suddenly the picture

had changed. Pickett realized that when the sun rose the next morning he would not be facing eight unreinforced brigades of cavalry, but an entire corps of Union infantry. He made what was probably the only viable decision he could and ordered his force to fall back on Five Forks to "discharge his main duty, which was that of protecting the approaches to the Southside Railroad."<sup>48</sup>

The Confederates began executing their withdrawal quickly. The small contingent of artillery left the area of Dinwiddie at 0200 on 1 April. The infantry was supposed to withdraw at 0400 but was delayed until 0500.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, by the time Sheridan peered across his front northward, the Confederates were nowhere to be seen. Sheridan immediately sent his cavalry forward and found that the Rebels were not that far away after all. The Federals stayed close on the heels of their retreating enemy, close enough to know what was happening, but not so close as to draw a backlash from Pickett's still dangerous infantry.<sup>50</sup>

Sheridan would have attacked the retreating Confederates, but to his exas-

peration, Warren had not yet arrived on the field. Ayers' division was on hand at Dinwiddie by 0900, but General Warren's march with his remaining two divisions was so slow as to disgust Sheridan.<sup>51</sup> In all fairness, the condition of the roads had a lot to do with Warren's snail-like pace, but by 1300 when Warren finally presented himself to Sheridan, the cavalryman was beside himself with annoyance. "We have accomplished nothing," he spat, "but to oblige our foe to retreat!"<sup>52</sup>

By 1400, Pickett's forces were firmly ensconced in their entrenchments at Five Forks, which consisted of shallow trenches and hastily thrown up barricades of fence rails and branches.<sup>53</sup> There is no doubt that Pickett should have been more diligent in placing his forces and fortifying their positions. Pickett's excuse, such as it is, was twofold. First, Pickett's rear guard had identified no infantry following him, since Warren had not yet arrived on the field, so he simply did not expect an attack.<sup>54</sup> He was confident he could hold off the cavalry that faced him and he had already requested reinforcements from the main army, so he felt

secure that he had done what was reasonable.

The second reason for Pickett's negligence was more immediate. General Rosser, whose division was resting in Pickett's rear, had managed to net some shad in a nearby river the previous day. Around 1300 on 1 April, he had the fish cleaned and broiled and invited his two commanders, Fitzhugh Lee and Pickett, to a shad bake. As one of Pickett's chroniclers said, the two officers accepted gladly "in the assurance that this would provide a meal delectable at any time and incredible in the hungry days of bone-gnawing war."<sup>55</sup> So around 1400, just as Gouverneur K. Warren was receiving instructions from Sheridan on how to defeat Pickett's little band, their Confederate counterparts left the business of war in the hands of their subordinates and trotted off to a shad bake.

Sheridan, however, was more concerned with destroying his enemy than filling his belly. Once Warren arrived, Sheridan quickly got down to business and laid out his battle plan. Devin's division would be dismounted in the center of the Union line and would use their repeating carbines to suppress Pickett's center. Custer would be on the left and would demonstrate against Pickett's right flank to draw the Confederates' attention. Warren, with his entire corps, would attack Pickett's line on the Union right, just where Pickett had refused his left and created an angle in his line. Crook's division would remain in reserve. Once Warren's attack was launched, both Devin and Custer would attack as well and, hopefully, the enemy would crumble from his left to right.<sup>56</sup>

It was a good plan and, with the exception of Warren's continuing leisurely pace, it was executed flawlessly. Custer and Devin were both in place and pouring fire into the enemy before Warren finally got his three divisions arrayed properly. General Porter, who was still accompanying Sheridan, said that Custer's repeating carbine-armed cavalry "created a racket...that sounded as if a couple of army corps had opened fire."<sup>57</sup>

Around 1600, Warren finally got his people placed where he wanted them with Ayers' division on the left, Crawford's on the right, and Griffin's in the rear.<sup>58</sup> Almost immediately after stepping off, however, Warren began to ex-

perience problems with controlling his units. Ayers began to wheel left toward his objective but Crawford continued north and soon lost contact with the rest of the corps.<sup>59</sup> Fortunately, Griffin followed Ayers, not Crawford, and when Ayers began to take fire from the Confederate line, Griffin was there to shore him up. There were a few tense

---

*The way to Lee's flank was now open. Within a day or two, Union forces would be astride the Southside Railroad. Lee had two choices. He could stay in Petersburg and be starved into submission, or he could evacuate — immediately — and try to escape. Either way, as he well knew by that point, the days of the Confederate States of America were numbered.*

---

moments when it looked as if Ayers' attack would break, but Sheridan, through force of will and enthusiasm, was able to rally Warren's men and press the attack home.<sup>60</sup> Warren, meanwhile, had gone off to find Griffin, who was unwittingly marching into Pickett's rear. By 1630, the Confederate line was broken. With few exceptions, entire brigades broke and ran, only to be rounded up as prisoners. The only unit to escape intact was W.H.F. Lee's division, which rejoined Rosser's division on the north side of Hatcher's Run.<sup>61</sup>

Pickett, Fitzhugh Lee, and Rosser, of course, were oblivious to most of this. They were enjoying their baked fish and, probably, a shot or two of spirits.<sup>62</sup> Around 1500 a messenger arrived from Munford's division saying that Union infantry were advancing on all roads to Five Forks. In fact, Munford was at that very moment observing the dispositions of Warren's corps. He sent numerous messages to Pickett, but the Confederate commander had told no one where he was going and only one of the many couriers Munford dispatched was able to find him.<sup>63</sup> Pickett and Lee read the dispatch, but they could hear no firing or commotion so they assumed that any small skirmishes that might begin could be handled by the officers at the front.<sup>64</sup>

Around 1600, Pickett sent a courier to Five Forks with a message for Munford. All was still quiet, but the ease of the gathering was shattered when a line of Union infantry — Crawford's errant division — emerged from the woods and captured the courier in sight of the party.<sup>65</sup> Pickett and Fitzhugh Lee immediately rode for the front, but by the time they arrived, the position was lost. Both generals were among the few

Confederates who escaped Sheridan's expanding net.

Sheridan pursued the broken Confederates until nightfall halted him. All told, he killed or captured over 6,000 enemy cavalry and infantry, as well as six field pieces, 8,000 muskets, and 18 battle flags.<sup>66</sup> The Union loss was slightly more than 1,000 killed and wounded.<sup>67</sup> More important than the numerical returns, though, is the strategic importance of the battle. The way to Lee's flank was now open. Within a day or two, Union forces would be astride the Southside Railroad. Lee had two choices. He could stay in Petersburg and be starved into submission, or he could evacuate — immediately — and try to escape. Either way, as he well knew by that point, the days of the Confederate States of America were numbered.

Of course, learning the intricate nuances of a military conflict does us little good unless we can take some lessons away from the study. It is all very good to tell ourselves that the Battle of Five Forks had repercussions well out of scale with its size, and that, as Porter said, "Five Forks meant the beginning of the end, the reaching of the last ditch."<sup>68</sup> The value of the study comes from how we can fit the battle into categories or principles so that we may draw conclusions from it. In this case, the nine Principles of War are a good starting point, specifically the principles of Objective, Mass, and Offensive.

In military parlance, "objective" means the designated purpose or goal of an operation, and the lack of a clear objective appears to have been one of Pickett's most serious problems. This is not so much in evidence at Five Forks, where Pickett's mission of holding the crossroads was clear, but at Dinwiddie Court House on 31 March. Early in the day, Pickett had split the Union force opposing him and he could either defeat them in detail or march on into Grant's rear. Unfortunately, he did neither with conviction. It appears that he initially intended to march into the Union rear but he instead allowed a vastly inferior force to fix him until nightfall, when all the variables changed. Either one of the two courses would have brought some kind of victory, however fleeting. Pickett's mistake was to do neither.

The principle of Mass denotes bringing together overwhelming force at one place to influence a battle. To his credit, Sheridan seems to have mastered this concept, as he illustrated twice during the two days' fighting. On 31 March, after Pickett had split his forces, Sheridan was in somewhat of a bind. He correctly recognized, however, that massed fire from two cavalry brigades sporting repeating carbines might induce Pickett to stop his advance. The high rate of fire of these two brigades into Pickett's flank did indeed stop him, for that much force at one point was more than the Confederate commander felt he could ignore.

The use of Mass is shown even more clearly on 1 April, though, when Warren's two divisions smashed into Pickett's refused left. A salient in a line of entrenchments is a naturally weak spot in any case, since fires on either side of the salient cannot interlock and support. For Sheridan to hit this very spot with his most powerful combat element while simultaneously suppressing the rest of the line with less powerful elements shows a solid use of the principle of Mass.

The last principle is probably the most significant. The principle of Offensive tells us that the only way to achieve ultimate victory is to attack. Ostensibly, U.S. Grant understood this, as his previous campaigns clearly show. Perhaps it was fatigue or the knowledge that he could hardly lose the war at that point that made him call off the attack on 30 March, but it was apparently Sheridan's enthusiasm that put him back into the offensive mode. Sheridan's determination to let nothing stand in his way, to "strike out tomorrow and go to smashing things," was the spirit that won the Battle of Five Forks. Without it and almost in spite of it, considering the day wasted on 30 March, the Confederates may well have shored up their position to such an extent as to make an attack superfluous or worse, escaped Petersburg. The final end of the war would most likely have been the same, but it might have ended in 1866 instead of 1865, with a corresponding loss of American life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*The Union Cavalry in the Civil War*, Vol. II. Stephen Z. Starr, Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, 1861, pp. 428-429.

<sup>2</sup>*The Civil War — A Narrative*, Vol. II. Shelby Foote, Random House, New York, 1974, p. 863.

<sup>3</sup>*Lee's Lieutenants*, Vol. III. Douglas S. Freeman, Charles Scribner & Sons, 1944, p. 655.

<sup>4</sup>Freeman, p. 659.

<sup>5</sup>Starr, p. 424.

<sup>6</sup>Starr, pp. 424-425.

<sup>7</sup>Freeman, p. 656.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Freeman, pp. 656-657.

<sup>10</sup>Freeman, p. 656.

<sup>11</sup>Starr, pp. 431-432.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Starr, p. 432.

<sup>14</sup>Freeman, p. 657.

<sup>15</sup>Starr, p. 433.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid.

<sup>17</sup>*Sheridan the Inevitable*, Richard O'Connor, Bobbs Merrill Co., Inc., Indianapolis, 1953, p. 245.

<sup>18</sup>Starr, p. 434.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid.

<sup>21</sup>*The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan*, Vol. II. Philip H. Sheridan, New York, 1888, p. 143.

<sup>22</sup>Freeman, p. 658.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid.

<sup>24</sup>Ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid.

<sup>28</sup>O'Connor, pp. 245-246.

<sup>29</sup>Starr, p. 436.

<sup>30</sup>Starr, p. 437.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid.

<sup>32</sup>Starr, p. 436.

<sup>33</sup>Starr, p. 437.

<sup>34</sup>Starr, p. 438.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid.

<sup>36</sup>Starr, pp. 438-439.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid.

<sup>39</sup>"Five Forks and the Pursuit of Lee," *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Vol. IV, Horace Porter, Castle Press, Secaucus, N.J., 1890, p. 711.

<sup>40</sup>Starr, p. 439.

<sup>41</sup>Starr, p. 442.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Starr, pp. 442-443.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid.

<sup>45</sup>Starr, p. 444.

<sup>46</sup>Foote, p. 868.

<sup>47</sup>Freeman, p. 660.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid.

<sup>49</sup>Freeman, p. 661.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid.

<sup>51</sup>Starr, p. 447.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid.

<sup>54</sup>Freeman, pp. 661, 664.

<sup>55</sup>Freeman, p. 667.

<sup>56</sup>Starr, pp. 447-448.

<sup>57</sup>O'Connor, p. 254.

<sup>58</sup>Starr, p. 448.

<sup>59</sup>O'Connor, p. 253.

<sup>60</sup>Starr, pp. 448-449.

<sup>61</sup>*To Appomattox, Nine April Days, 1865*, Burke Davis, Rinehart & Co., New York, 1959, pp. 48-49.

<sup>62</sup>Freeman, p. 668.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Freeman, p. 669.

<sup>65</sup>Davis, p. 45.

<sup>66</sup>Starr, p. 450.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid.

<sup>68</sup>Foote, p. 874.

## Bibliography

- Davis, Burke. *To Appomattox, Nine April Days, 1865*. New York: Rinehart & Co., 1959.
- Foote, Shelby. *The Civil War — A Narrative*. New York: Random House, 1974.
- Freeman, Douglas S. *Lee's Lieutenants*, Vol. III. Charles Scribner & Sons, 1944.
- O'Connor, Richard. *Sheridan the Inevitable*. Indianapolis: Merrill Co., Inc., 1953.
- Porter, Horace. "Five Forks and the Pursuit of Lee." *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*, Vol. IV. Secaucus, N.J.: Castle Press, 1890.
- Sheridan, Philip H. *The Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan*, Vol. II. New York, 1888.
- Starr, Stephen Z. *The Union Cavalry in the Civil War*, Vol. II. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981.
- U.S. War Department. *Official Records of the Union Army*. Washington, D.C., 1891-1895.

Captain Kenneth C. Blakely graduated from USMA and was commissioned in Armor in 1986. He has held positions as a tank platoon leader, company XO, BMO, AOB Senior Class Advisor, and battalion S3 Air. He is a graduate of the Armor Officer Basic Course, Ranger Course, Cavalry Leader's Course, and Armor Officer Advanced Course, where he won the writing award for this article. He is presently in command of A Company, 1-32 Armor at Fort Lewis, Wash.