

# ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

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## The Bermuda Hundred Campaign

By **Daniel F. O'Connell**

In the spring and early summer of 1864 General Ulysses Simpson (Hiram Ulysses) Grant's Overland Campaign and Major General William Tecumseh Sherman's Atlanta Campaign justifiably garnered most of the country's attention. The important nature of their objectives, the enormous stakes invested in the endeavors, and the huge size of the armies involved in these two campaigns overshadowed all other military actions. But these campaigns did not happen in a vacuum. They were just the largest part of Grant's overall scheme to "concentrate all the force possible against the Confederate Armies in the field." At least three smaller campaigns accompanied these massive efforts. Major General Franz Sigel led a campaign in the Shenandoah Valley; Major General Nathaniel Prentice Banks operated against Mobile, Alabama; and Major General Benjamin Franklin Butler would simultaneously threaten Richmond from the south. As Abraham Lincoln put it when Grant outlined the strategy for him at the White House, "Those not skinning can hold a leg." Similar operations against the Confederate capital had been proposed on at least four other occasions but had been deemed impractical or simply ignored by the administration. Now with the backing of the new commander of the Union armies it would become a reality. Butler would pose the threat by transporting his army from Fort Monroe by water to the area near City Point and establishing a position in the Bermuda Hundred. The tiny peninsula, formed at the confluence of the James and Appomattox Rivers, looked like the perfect spot from which to challenge both Richmond and the railroad system that supplied it.<sup>1</sup>

Grant knew that it would be politically unacceptable to surrender any territory to the Confederates by vacating the Virginia peninsula for the purpose of consolidating Butler's force into the Army of the Potomac. He therefore determined that Butler would use his army to act independently. Grant met with Butler at Fort Monroe on 1 April 1864 to discuss the plan. In his memoir Grant writes that: "This was the first time I had ever met him. Before giving any order as to the part he was to play in the approaching campaign I invited his views. They were very much such as I intended to direct, and as I did direct in writing before leaving."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U.S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: Charles L. Webster, 1885), 313; Brooks D. Simpson, "Lincoln and His Political Generals," *Journal of the Abraham Lincoln Association* 21 no. 1 (Winter 2000):13.

<sup>2</sup> Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 314.

Grant was also well aware that Butler had precious little combat experience. He was better known for his tenure as military administrator in New Orleans where his infamous General Order No. 28 allowing women who displayed acts of defiance against the Union occupation to be treated as prostitutes infuriated the South and Europeans as well. To correct this deficiency and to reinforce Butler's effort he sent Major General Quincy Adams Gillmore's X Corps from the Department of the South with an additional 10,000 troops and the newly promoted Major General William Farrar Smith's XVIII Corps. He left the campaign details for Butler and his new commanders to work out for themselves.

With approximately 36,000 men under his command Butler's objective was Richmond. A secondary task of disrupting the flow of supplies to Lee by cutting the railroads into the Confederate capital was meant to aid the advance of the Army of the Potomac. Grant hoped that the newly formed Army of the James could put enough pressure on the vital supply line to force Lee to send reinforcements from the Army of Northern Virginia to protect it, thus weakening him for Grant's main thrust.

Opposing the Union army south of Richmond would be a cobbled together force of about 18,000 that would eventually fall under the command of General Pierre Gustave Toutant Beauregard. Initially an emergency force from the Petersburg City Battalion and the second class militia called out by Major General George Edward Pickett was the only opposition faced by the Federals. All the signs pointed toward a major Union success.

On May 5, the same day that Grant's main effort at the Battle of the Wilderness began, a flotilla of vessels of every description departed Fort Monroe and Newport News with the Army of the James. In accordance with Grant's directive the first order of business was securing City Point. Butler's main force landed unopposed at Bermuda Hundred early on the morning of May 6. Shortly after disembarking, Major General Smith sent a vanguard west across the peninsula. At 8:30 a.m. they reached Point of Rocks and nearby Cobb's Hill overlooking the Appomattox River. Engineers began laying out a defensive line anchored on this natural strongpoint. By early afternoon the construction of a set of works was begun across the peninsula that would eventually become the base for Butler's operations.

A reconnaissance was ordered forward to reach the railroad at Port Walthall Station. The four mile march went unopposed until the column reached the Barnes Plantation. Here a small Confederate force was formed behind a fence in a sunken road. Thinking themselves outnumbered the Federals made only a weak effort to displace the stubborn Confederate line before falling back to their main body.

Determined to accomplish the mission of destroying the railroad Butler formed an impressive task force of five brigades of infantry, a battery of artillery and a cavalry contingent numbering about 8,000 men under the command of Brigadier General William Henry Turner Brooks. They headed west in the early morning hours. The Confederate forces were also being hastily reinforced. Brigadier General Bushrod Rust Johnson arrived with the remainder of his division after the previous evening's brief engagement.

In the morning Major General Daniel Harvey Hill arrived at the Confederate position to assume overall command of the 2,668 defenders. Hill and Johnson skillfully deployed their troops and artillery along the Old Stage Road and waited. At 10:00 a.m. Hill became impatient and set out at the front of Major General Johnson Hagood's brigade in search of the Federals. The Confederates marched only about a mile before they bumped into the vanguard for the infantry. Gradually the delaying action was pushed back and the Union forces drew up battle lines in front of the rebels. They overlapped the Confederate line easily on the left and the fighting began, eventually dying down around 5:00 p. m.. Content with destroying about a quarter mile of track, some telegraph lines, a saw mill, and a quantity of lumber, the Union forces retreated back to their main defenses. The Confederates retired to the south side of Swift Creek at 10:00 p.m. where they spent May 8 and the morning of May 9 digging rifle pits and artillery emplacements at their new position.

Frustrated by these marginal gains, Butler decided to make an effort at destroying the railroad bridge and the turnpike bridge over Swift Creek. Once again he assembled a task force that should easily have been enough to accomplish the mission. Five brigades from XVIII Corps and two brigades from X Corps marched southwest with artillery and cavalry in support. Additionally Butler arranged for a foray of gunboats to support the efforts on the far left of his line at the Confederate stronghold at Fort Clinton. The Federal task force arrived at Arrowfield Church in the early morning and deployed.

Opposing the Federal thrust was 4,200 men of Brigadier General Johnson Hagood's Brigade, supported by eighteen pieces of artillery and the heavy guns at Fort Clinton. The badly stretched Confederates had spent the previous day entrenching their troops and digging in the artillery. Although outnumbered at least four to one the Confederate line presented a formidable appearance to the Union leadership, who feared heavy losses in a direct assault. The corps commanders, Gillmore and Smith, had an alternate plan to avoid the unnecessary bloodshed they knew would accompany an attack on the rebel line. They proposed that Butler's plan be abandoned and an all-out drive made for Petersburg by crossing the Appomattox on a pontoon bridge. They reasoned that the city would be lightly defended and since all rail lines ran through the city the communication network with Richmond could be more readily disrupted by seizing the city. The inexperienced Butler, however, could not or would not think outside the limits of his assigned mission and probably fearing failure more than inviting success, passed on a great opportunity. He rejected the proposal and insisted on Richmond and the railroad network into the capital as their objective. He believed that his cavalry expedition would cut the rail south of Petersburg making the city invalid as a military target.

Federal advances were successfully repulsed all along the line and the valuable bridges remained intact. The Union gunboats fared no better against the gunners at Fort Clinton. Using plunging fire to their advantage they sank the *USS Brewster* and badly damaged the *USS Chamberlain* as it ran aground and had to be pulled to safety by the *USS Putnam*. At 7:00 a.m. the next morning the Union forces were gone.

Following the fighting at Swift Creek Major General Gillmore and Major General Smith, the corps commanders, met with Butler to plan their next move. Keeping in mind what he believed was the primary objective, to unite with Grant at the Virginia capital he ordered the Union forces withdrawn to the Bermuda Hundred Line.

Meanwhile the Confederates were not inactive and Major General Robert Ransom Jr. ordered a reconnaissance in force in the direction of the Union forces.

After initial success, the Confederate attack was brought to a standstill. General Terry ordered a counter-attack northward along the Richmond Turnpike. The outnumbered Confederates were forced back. Ransom was rightly convinced that he could not match the growing Union strength and determined that retreat was in order. The two brigades withdrew to the main Confederate line at Drewry's Bluff.

In conjunction with the reinforcement of Butler's infantry forces Grant also organized a small cavalry division for his use in April, 1864 under the command of Brigadier General Augustus Kautz. These 2,700 men were assigned the mission to destroy the bridges at Stony Creek and the Nottaway River.

The troopers headed out on May 5 and reached their first objective, Stony Creek Station, on the afternoon of May 7. A small force of Confederates was captured and the bridge destroyed along with the *"two woodsheds, two water tanks, a large lot of extra bridge timber, three freight cars loaded with lumber, a culvert and turn-ins."*<sup>3</sup>

On May 8 the Union cavalry approached the bridge across the Nottaway at Jarret's Station. The 210 foot span was guarded by several hundred Confederates who showed no inclination to give up their responsibility without a fight. The Union cavalry managed to drive the defenders across the bridge and into a redoubt about 300 yards from the bridge. The structure was then fired. With the bridge down and the fighting over the two commanders met in the Confederate redoubt under a flag of truce to discuss the situation. The two men exchanged some prisoners and struck an unusual deal. The Confederates no longer had a bridge to protect but did not want to surrender. The Union cavalry was not interested in losing men in an attack on the strongpoint and then being impeded by prisoners. So the two agreed to let matters lie where they were and the Federal troopers simply rode away unchallenged, leaving the Confederates to guard nothing, while the Federal cavalry destroyed the station and tore up more track.

The column arrived at Bermuda Hundred on May 11 and was immediately provisioned for another raid. The target this time was the Richmond and Danville Line. The division set out again on the May 12 and moved on to Coalfield where the station, water tank, railroad cars and track were destroyed. On May 13 Powhatan Station suffered

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<sup>3</sup> United States War Department, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 36, part 2, p. 172 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 36, pt. 2, 172).

the same fate when the “*freight house, station house, water tank, and a considerable portion of the track and about 15 freight cars*” were destroyed. Chula Station was next on May 14 but the Federal troopers found the iron Mattoax Bridge across the Appomattox heavily guarded. An attack on the bridge was driven off. The troopers had to content themselves with the destruction of a locomotive and tender and some telegraph lines. After “*breaking the South Side Railroad at Wellville and Blacks and Whites*” the column rested at Lawrenceville on the May 15. On May 16 the troopers returned to Jarret’s Station and found the track, water tank and bridge repaired. Again they tore up the track, took down the water tower, and burned an unprotected pontoon train. After a short run in with a small command of rebel cavalry the raiders returned to City Point. In operations from May 5 to 17 Kautz reported 101 casualties for what must be considered limited gains. The Confederates’ ability to repair the damage inflicted by the cavalry minimized the overall effect of their operations.<sup>4</sup>

After the repulse at Swift Creek and retreat into the Bermuda Hundred line Butler spent two days deciding his next move. The lull gave Beauregard, newly arrived from North Carolina and commanding from Petersburg, time to reinforce his army and occupy a strong defensive line along Proctor’s Creek. With 18,000 men he hoped to block any Union move on Richmond.

Butler accommodated Beauregard’s design by sending a strong column on a thrust toward the Southern capital. Gillmore moved elements of his X Corps along the axis of the Richmond and Petersburg Railroad to form the left of the Union line while Smith’s XVIII Corps troops followed the Richmond Turnpike on the right. When the Federal columns approached the Confederates they deployed for battle. Butler waited until May 13 to launch his attack on the Confederate right. The assault managed to take the outer set of works and push the defenders back to Drewry’s Bluff. Butler, however, would not follow up on this early success because the gunboats that were intended to support his right failed to materialize when the water level was discovered to be too low. Instead of remaining aggressive Butler simply followed the retreating enemy back to their main line of prepared positions. There they spent May 14 trying to establish a line opposite the sturdy defenses. Problems surfaced almost at once. Colonel William Barton noted in his report that the line stretched out “*reaching nearly to the James River*”. Major General Smith informed Butler that the line was short and requested reinforcements to extend it on to the river and fill the dangerous gap. Two regiments were sent to Heckman on the extreme right. With these reinforcements the line was stretched but was still, in the words of Gillmore, “*long, thin, and weak.*” The Union commanders were not the only ones noticing trouble near the river. Beauregard, now in personal command, saw it as well.<sup>5</sup>

While the tentative Federals built up for an all-out attack on the fortress the Confederate leader decided to go on the offensive. In his instructions for a surprise attack Beauregard told Major General Robert Ransom that “*we shall attack and turn by the river*

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<sup>4</sup> *O.R.*, I, 36, pt. 2, 173; *Ibid.*, 183.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 102; *Ibid.*, 123.

*road his right flank*". To accomplish this he stacked four brigades, under Ransom, on his extreme left with orders to begin the assault early on the May 16. The morning of the assault found a dense fog enveloping the entire area. The poor visibility initially aided the attack force by masking their movements into their jump off positions. Anticipating a grand success Beauregard gave Ransom a secondary mission of cutting the Union forces off from their line at Bermuda Hundred. The Confederate commander expected that Butler would give way under his attack and make for the safety of his own entrenched line. To assist Ransom in preventing the Yankees from reaching their line Beauregard ordered an attack by a force from Petersburg, the responsibility of Brigadier General William Henry Chase Whiting. It was a bold, imaginative and elaborate plan.<sup>6</sup>

Ransom hit the Federals like a thunderbolt at 4:45a.m. The entire right end of the Union line collapsed in confusion. A follow on assault met much stiffer resistance but still the blue line was pushed back. The Confederate right experienced the same problem against rugged Union resistance. The fog made it impossible to take full advantage of the early success. The overwhelming success of the attack actually proved to be its downfall. The rapidly advancing Confederate lines became entangled and lost in the fog in their rush forward. The Confederates were forced to bring the advance to a halt to sort out the scrambled units. These pauses, created by the confusion in the Confederate ranks, allowed Butler enough time to begin his fighting withdrawal. The battle lasted thirteen hours as the Rebels pursued Butler's troops southward. Brigadier General Whiting's force, that was supposed to block the retreat route, never appeared. Suffering from poor communications and the extremely timid leadership of Whiting the blocking force did not reach the expected location in time and ended up bivouacking while Butler made good his escape. The action was costly for both sides. About 6,600 equally divided casualties littered the field. Hundreds of Federal prisoners, including Brigadier General Heckman, five battle flags and several artillery pieces were claimed. Beauregard was disappointed that the complete destruction of the Federal forces had not been accomplished and placed a major portion of the blame on Whiting, who asked to be relieved, which was granted.

Beauregard's magnificent break out attack from the Drewry's Bluff fortifications set the stage for Whiting's monumental failure. When Beauregard moved off to coordinate the attack on Butler's Federal forces he left the relatively inexperienced Whiting in command of the Petersburg defenses.

Unfortunately, Beauregard also had faith in Whiting's ability to accomplish the necessary actions to ensure the success of the plan and he ordered Whiting to march northward from the Swift Creek line at the sound of his guns. From the very outset the operation seemed to be beyond Whiting's comprehension. Hearing the first guns of Beauregard's attack Whiting ordered his men across Swift Creek and immediately began to push the small Federal skirmish line back. Shortly thereafter Whiting was forced to make his first important decision. The highway split and he divided his force between the main road, the Richmond Turnpike and the road to the northeast, the Old Stage Road.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 201.

Despite the apparent lack of resistance Whiting became extraordinarily hesitant. He deployed his troops more for sluggish defensive action than a rapid advance. Facing Whiting was Union Brigadier General Adelbert Ames with a small force. A report from his cavalry thoroughly convinced Whiting that he was facing the threat of a crushing blow from his left. But Ames understood the dangerous position he was in and began a slow withdrawal attempting a delaying action against a numerically superior force. The Confederates started a cautious advance, but against the advice of D.H. Hill, along as an aide, Whiting called a halt to all movement while a scout was sent to examine the supposed threat to his flanks. Instead of an attack Whiting irrationally opted to wait while urging his subordinates to continue to watch to the flanks.

Then Whiting made the inexplicable decision to retreat. Aghast, Hill rode forward to judge the situation for himself. He was not impressed by Ames efforts and urged Whiting to attack at once. Whiting would not be swayed and ordered a general retreat before a Federal attack could swamp them. The decision convinced several of those involved that Whiting was intoxicated. Hill attempted to alter the situation but the retreat quickly fell into complete disorder and a disgusted Hill excused himself from the scene.

These pauses created by Whiting's confusion and timidity allowed Butler to escape, however, he was back where he started and now had very little hope of influencing the campaign.

Beauregard's audacious attack on May 16 pushed Butler back almost to the original line established on May 6. Determined to drive the Union forces back on to the peninsula Beauregard launched a vigorous attack on May 20. Nearly 10,000 men fought until the union pickets were driven in and the outer line of rifle pits were won by the Confederates. The Federals now faced the disheartening task of counter-attacking their own works. Ames attempt was repulsed with heavy loss. The retreat of the Union army into their old positions allowed Beauregard to construct a parallel set of works effectively hemming in Butler. His new line consisted of eight miles of trenches, rifle pits and artillery redoubts that ran from the Appomattox River in the south to the James River in the north. Here stood Battery Dantzler. This dominating position, named for the fallen Colonel Olin Dantzler of the 22<sup>nd</sup> South Carolina Infantry, interdicted all water traffic trying to move up the James River. So intimidated by this position was the Union navy that the Dutch Gap Canal was started to bypass its guns.

Life along the contending lines quickly fell into pattern of artillery duels and an occasional outbreak of picket clashes. June 1 saw a particularly aggressive attack by the Confederate pickets on Hawley's brigade which was repulsed. In another incident, Confederate gunners tired of being harassed by Yankee sharpshooters in a nearby church, stole out in the night and burned it to the ground.

During the first week of June Beauregard was so convinced that Butler could make no further moves against his line that he began sending portions of his force to reinforce Lee. This was exactly the opposite of the scenario Grant had envisioned when

he sent Butler on this campaign. Realizing the futility of Butler's effort Grant removed XVIII Corps from the peninsula to strengthen his own army for operations at Cold Harbor. Intermittent skirmishing continued but for all real purposes the Bermuda Hundred Campaign was over.

The Bermuda Hundred Campaign has, for the most part, been lost to history. From a Federal standpoint that may be the best result. The campaign was horribly managed from the outset. Butler was much too inexperienced at field leadership to handle an operation of this size. He would not yield authority over field decisions to those put in place for that purpose and they, in turn, did not exercise the requisite initiative to assert their experience. Even had they done so they did not prove to be the fire-eaters that Grant had hoped for. The early opportunities of the campaign were crushed under the weight of miserably poor leadership. A review of the objectives will clearly reveal this campaign to be a complete failure.

Butler's troops never got near the capital. Early in the campaign Butler could have taken either Richmond or Petersburg had he dedicated himself to one or the other and powered his way through the available defenses. Instead indecisiveness and disagreement among the Federal leaders led to half-hearted attempts at each. Every effort met with disaster. There seems to have been confusion about the primary objective of the campaign. Butler believed that he was to secure City Point as a base of future operations, although his remark here may be colored by the eventual result of the campaign. Grant did little to clarify the situation by specifically designating Richmond as the objective of Butler's force while emphasizing the importance of Petersburg. This sort of confusion could do little to help the decision making process of the commanders involved. The poor communication failed to properly establish the commander's intent for the campaign and went a long way to explaining the poor result. Butler and his two chief subordinates did little to exercise any command initiative and let a golden opportunity pass by.

Butler's campaign was intended to force Lee to reinforce his southern flank and thereby weaken himself for Grant's main thrust. The campaign had almost the opposite effect. Troops that were otherwise out of the fight were rushed north with Beauregard to meet the threat. When Butler proved not to be the threat that he was intended to represent many of these men bolstered Lee's army in the defense of Petersburg. A move intended to shorten the war actually ended up helping to lengthen it through mismanagement.

Throughout the war commanders on both sides had a tendency to overrate the impact of their efforts. This was clearly demonstrated here. The damage caused by Butler to the railroads proved easy to repair or bypass. No significant impact was achieved by these efforts. If anything positive can be salvaged from this campaign for the Union forces this would have to be it. Possession of this key terrain, at almost no cost, allowed Grant to shift his army south of the James River and invest Petersburg. From a Confederate viewpoint this campaign was a masterstroke of war making under dire circumstances. Surprised, outnumbered, and poorly prepared the cobbled together defense humbled the Federals. In contrast with their opponents the



Confederate leaders exhibited calm, efficient, and resourceful leadership that proved decisive. Even the much maligned Pickett was steady, if unspectacular, in the early phases of the crisis. Beauregard was nothing less than magnificent here. He made judicious use of the available troops while he had them and became aggressive when the situation dictated it. He might have claimed a larger victory but for Whiting's failure.

An iota of audacity on the part of the Federal commanders here might have proven to be decisive. Butler, Gillmore and Smith could muster none and an excellent opportunity went unfulfilled. To paraphrase the old military adage that a plan never survives the first bullet, this plan could not even survive the men chosen to execute it.

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