

ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Battle of Malvern Hill

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“It was not war—it was murder.”¹ This comment, from the Confederate then-Major General Daniel Harvey Hill, was written more than 20 years after the battle of Malvern Hill. It is one of the more famous summaries of a battle to come out of the vast literature on the Civil War. Yet Malvern Hill was more than the cause of D. H. Hill’s comment. It was the culmination of the Seven Days and the cap on General Robert E. Lee’s first triumph over the Army of the Potomac.

July 1, 1862 began with Lee and the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia at or near the Glendale crossroads, over which they had fought the previous day. The Yankees had gone. Only Brigadier General Joseph Hooker’s division had remained as a rear guard until that morning, when it withdrew down the Willis Church Road to Malvern Hill, a few miles south. For the first time during the Army of the Potomac’s change of base that began on June 28, most of it was together, taking advantage of the terrain to make one last defense before it could reach the James River and safety. Its line on the hill had an inverted U shape. Brigadier General Fitz John Porter’s V Corps held the left side of the line. Brigadier General George Sykes’ division was on the west slope of Malvern Hill, from River Road that ran south of the hill to the building commonly known as the Crew House at the hill’s northwest corner. Brigadier General George Webb Morell’s division was posted from the Crew house to Willis Church Road running from Glendale over the hill to the River Road, covering part of the hill’s north slope. Brigadier General Darius Nash Couch’s IV Corps division took over the line east of Willis Church Road, past the West house to a ravine on the hill’s northeast side. The III Corps and II Corps manned the east side of the line, with the VI Corps and Brigadier General John James Peck’s IV Corps division extending the line to River Road. The army’s artillery was arrayed around the hill, including the siege artillery on the south side of the hill; 13 batteries set up on the west or north side of the hill.

¹ Daniel Harvey Hill, “McClellan’s Change of Base and Malvern Hill,” in Robert Underwood Johnson and Clarence Clough Buel, eds. *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*. 4 vols. (New York: The Century Company, 1887), 2:394.

The Union position was naturally very strong. Malvern Hill's east and west slopes were steep; on the east side a creek was at the bottom of the slope. On the north side the slope was gentle, but open fields of fire extended well north from the hill. In Sykes, Morell, and Couch, the Federals had three fresh divisions on the front line closest to the Confederates. In many places, artillery formed the front line, as it had at Glendale the day before, so it would have the ability to fire without fear of hitting friendly troops. The position was known to several Rebel officers; one, D. H. Hill, said on the morning of July 1, "If General McClellan is there in force, we had better let him alone."²

The man Hill was referring to was the Army of the Potomac's commander, Major General George Brinton McClellan. While many of his men rested on Malvern Hill, McClellan was busy elsewhere. After pointing out the general nature of the position, McClellan rode along the lines. He then boarded a gunboat for a trip to Harrison's Landing on the James River, the army's chosen destination. McClellan did return to the field during the battle, staying on the right side of his line at Porter's urging.

The right side of McClellan's line would not see much action on July 1. The Confederates were coming from the north and headed straight toward McClellan's front via two roads, the Willis Church and Carter's Mill roads, that converged at the base of the hill. Major General Thomas Jonathan "Stonewall" Jackson's command of four divisions marched down Willis Church Road. Lee's plan positioned Jackson mostly east of Willis Church Road near the Willis Church parsonage. Major General William Henry Chase Whiting's division, in the lead, took that position by mid-morning.

Major General Benjamin Huger's division came down Charles City Road to near Glendale and then headed toward Carter's Mill Road, west of Willis Church Road. Brigadier Generals Ambrose Ransom Wright and Lewis Addison Armistead were in the lead with their brigades.

Major General John Bankhead Magruder, with his three small divisions, was set by Lee to march down the west side of Willis Church Road. However, here a confusion arose. Willis Church Road was known by some as the Quaker Road. However, locals knew a different road, to the west of Carter's Mill Road, as the Quaker Road. Lee's order to Magruder used "Quaker Road" to refer to Willis Church Road, but Magruder's guides led him to the other Quaker Road.

As for the rest of Lee's units, Major Generals Ambrose Powell Hill and James Longstreet rested their divisions after their work at Glendale the day before; they were in reserve. Major General Theophilus Hunter Holmes' small command was still on River Road after his repulse by the artillery on Malvern Hill.

As the Army of Northern Virginia approached the hill, Lee was trying to decide whether to force battle. He asked Longstreet to help investigate possibilities. In riding

² Hill, "McClellan's Change of Base," 391.

over the country, Longstreet saw that artillery massed on both the left and right of the Confederate line could subject the Yankees to a crossfire and recommended it to Lee. During his scouting Longstreet also found Magruder marching to the wrong Quaker Road, and after some communication with Lee Magruder turned around, coming to Malvern Hill by Carter's Mill Road.

The first moves of the battle involved Confederate attempts to make Longstreet's vision a reality. Jackson, on the Southern left, got about 20 guns into action at one point or another. That was not nearly enough to deal with the Union batteries east of Willis Church Road in their elevated positions, and Jackson's artillery all had to withdraw over time. On the Confederate right, two of Huger's batteries tried to set up (a third was dismissed because the commander expressed concerns about the idea); both of them were routed by the Federal guns west of Willis Church Road. The basic Rebel problem was the Northerners' advantages of position and their setup, fairly widely spaced, that allowed individual guns to aim at many different points depending on the direction of the threat. Longstreet's idea never had much of a chance.

Meanwhile Confederate infantry were getting into position. As Whiting's men filed into position east of Willis Church Road, D. H. Hill's division moved into some woods just north of the junction of the Willis Church and Carter's Mill roads. To Hill's west Armistead, followed by Wright, came through the fields west of Carter's Mill Road. Parts of Armistead's brigade advanced, pushing back Union skirmishers and taking shelter in a depression a few hundred yards from the Union line. Wright followed, but he ordered his men to retire after Armistead stopped. Hearing of Armistead's position, and thinking his artillery might still have an impact, Lee ordered that if Armistead saw a Union retreat he should charge with a yell; that would be the signal for a general advance.

By this time Magruder was back on the right road, having been ordered to support Huger. He moved his divisions to Armistead's right. Colonel William Barksdale's Mississippians led the way, followed by some of Brigadier General Thomas Howell Cobb's brigade. Major General David Rumph Jones's division was next, Colonel George Thomas Anderson's brigade set up behind Cobb's men, and Brigadier General Robert Augustus Toombs's men behind Anderson's. Major General Lafayette McLaws' division was in the rear, straddling Carter's Mill Road.

Then came a defining moment in the battle, one of confusion piled on confusion. After the artillery duels and the Union bombardment of the Confederate infantry as they moved into the open fields north of Malvern Hill, some Union batteries ran low on ammunition. Other movements on top of the hill added to a picture that, viewed from an optimistic perspective, might seem to show the Army of the Potomac retreating from the hill. Whiting thought so, and he reported that to Lee. Magruder, arriving on the field, saw Armistead's forward position and reported that success to Lee, who then ordered Magruder to follow up on Armistead's success. Of course, Armistead's success as reported by Magruder was already known to Lee—but Magruder reported it as if it were

new, and Lee read it as something additional to what he knew had happened. Thus was sown the seeds of disaster.

Magruder, receiving Lee's order, immediately ordered his units into motion. These units included Huger's men, as Magruder was in overall command west of Carter's Mill Road. The first to attack was Wright's brigade, which had moved to Armistead's right and attacked up a ravine toward the northwest corner of the Union line near the Crew house. Brigadier General William Mahone's brigade of Huger's division followed Wright. Both brigades stopped in a hollow about 300 yards from the Union line. Armistead, seeing that movement, charged in response directly at the Union line. He was stopped by a combination of artillery fire and Brigadier General Charles Griffin's infantry of Morell's division. Wright and Mahone, seeing Armistead charge, advanced out of their hollow, to be stopped by others of Griffin's brigade, especially the 14th New York. Wright and Mahone charged several times that day, and each charge failed. More of Magruder's men joined the charge, as Cobb and the rest of Armistead's brigade joined with Armistead's forward regiments, and again multiple charges failed to reach the Federal line. The combined pressure, however, wore down Griffin's brigade, and it was replaced along much of the line by Brigadier General Daniel Adams Butterfield's brigade (also of Morell's division).

The locus of attacks shifted to Jackson's command, specifically D. H. Hill's division. Hill heard cheering (likely Armistead's men cheering Wright and Mahone) during a council with his brigade commanders and immediately told them to attack following Lee's order. The brigades of Brigadier General Roswell Sabin Ripley and Colonels John Brown Gordon and Charles Courtenay Tew charged Couch's men east of Willis Church Road, along with some reinforcements that had arrived. They were decimated and got no closer than 200 yards from the Northern line. Brigadier General Samuel Garland's men made even less progress on the right of the line against Butterfield's Federals, even though they were supported by Colonel Alfred Holt Colquitt's brigade.

The futile attacks continued on Magruder's front. Toombs's brigade veered to its left into the woods from which D. H. Hill's attacks had come, and it advanced no further. G. T. Anderson advanced as far as the base of the hill and then retreated without attacking. Barksdale moved to support Wright and Mahone but wound up between them and Armistead and could not get close to the Union line, which had changed again. Brigadier General John Henry Martindale's brigade, the last of Morell's units, supported Butterfield. Porter, concerned about the number of Confederate attacks, brought up much of Sykes's division and asked Brigadier General Edwin Vose Sumner for two of his II Corps brigades. It turned out that Sumner sent the Irish Brigade of his corps, and III Corps commander Brigadier General Samuel Peter Heintzelman sent his Excelsior Brigade of New Jersey troops.

Those fresh troops would see action, as more Confederates tried to break the line on top of Malvern Hill. Brigadier General Robert Ransom, of Huger's division, tried to

break the defense near the Crew house but fell back with more than 400 killed or wounded. Brigadier General Paul Jones Semmes of McLaws' division attacked next to Ransom; the Irish 10th Louisiana actually reached the enemy line but met Yankee Irishmen from the Irish Brigade and were forced back. Brigadier General Joseph Brevard Kershaw, also of McLaws' division, advanced toward the II and III Corps men who had reinforced Couch, but he could not reach their line and fell back. On Jackson's front, Brigadier General Charles Sidney Winder, Colonel Leroy A. Stafford, and Brigadier General Alexander Robert Lawton all launched assaults; none of them came close to succeeding. Others of Jackson's forces moved to front line positions, including Brigadier General Isaac Ridgeway Trimble; he wanted to attack, but Jackson told him, "I guess you had better not try it. General Hill just tried it with his whole division and has been repulsed. I guess you better not try it, sir."³

Malvern Hill was described by one Confederate as "majestic murder."⁴ About 30,000 Southerners were engaged in the battle, and more than 5,100 of them were killed or wounded—unusually for a Civil War battle, many by artillery fire. Wright's and Gordon's brigades each lost 40 percent of their effectives; Mahone, Armistead, and Cobb about 25 percent each; D. H. Hill's division as a whole about 20 percent. Union casualties were much less: of 27,000 Yankees, about 2,100 were killed or wounded. About 500 of those were in Griffin's brigade (four regiments each lost more than 100 men), and about 600 in Couch's division (less than 10 percent of its effectives). Griffin's 14th New York was in combat all day near the Crew house, but its advantageous position allowed it to suffer only 121 killed and wounded while inflicting substantial damage on Wright, Mahone, and Ransom.

Malvern Hill was a battle that should never have been fought. One Southerner said, "Someone again made a grievous mistake here."⁵ It was not a battle Lee could win by any type of assault. The Union setup, especially the artillery, was too good, and the field too advantageous for the defense. With artillery spaced relatively far apart, in easy supporting range of one another and the ability to aim anywhere within a 145 degree or so radius of open field, infantry stood very little chance of getting close enough to force the gunners from their positions. Lee had not committed himself to fight at Malvern Hill, and his setup was reasonable, but a combination of errors not only triggered the battle but fed more and more men into the fight well after it should have been obvious that nothing could be accomplished. First, an artillery barrage was not likely given the difficulty of setting up enough guns under concentrated artillery fire. Second, the order given after Armistead's initial advance was nonsensical. Lee should have been observing the field himself to judge whether McClellan was giving up the field, not relying on a brigade commander and the uncertainty of determining whether a yell was coming from his troops. And his continued pushing of Magruder forced many men into combat well after the day was decided.

³ Austin C. Dobbins, *Grandfather's Journal* (Dayton, OH: Morningside Press, 1988), 89.

⁴ J. W. D. (J. Wood Davidson), "Horrors of the Battlefield," *Confederate Veteran*, 15: 306.

⁵ I. G. Bradwell, "Soldier Life in the Confederate Army," *Confederate Veteran*, 24: 24.

For his part, Magruder was energetic and followed Lee's orders as well as he could, but he also made mistakes. First, by taking the wrong road (not entirely his fault), he fouled up Lee's initial positioning. Second, he misread Armistead's advance, making it more than it was and triggering the series of orders that committed his men to their nearly hopeless attacks. Third, he lessened any realistic hope for those attacks' success by a lack of coordination among the attacking units, allowing the artillery to concentrate on one or two attacks at a time instead of having to deal with a coordinated assault.

In contrast, it is difficult to imagine a better-fought battle than Malvern Hill from the Union viewpoint. The setup was strong, with fresh troops in good defensive positions and a heavy reliance on the branch of arms most favoring the Union, the artillery. The guns themselves were well handled all day—one soldier, in his memoirs, remembered Malvern Hill as “the most infernal fire that has ever been concentrated in America”⁶—this after considering Antietam and Gettysburg. The infantry fought hard, made judicious counterattacks, and stayed out of the artillery's way. Porter, Couch, and the other commanders on hand worked well together, supporting each other promptly and willingly.

Malvern Hill turned out to be a Union victory bereft of positive results, however. Despite Porter's best efforts, and those of others, McClellan decided to retreat from the victorious ground. Perhaps he was too wary of Lee's one real option for victory at Malvern Hill, a flanking maneuver, or perhaps his vision of an army double the size of his could not allow him the vision to see what might happen in an attack against a possibly spent foe. In any event, the Army of the Potomac left Malvern Hill the night of July 1-2, and by late July 2 it was gathered at Harrison's Landing. Tactically it had succeeded; strategically Lee had beaten McClellan, and it would be 23 months before the Union would again get close to the Confederate capital of Richmond.

⁶ Bradley T. Johnson, “Memoir of the First Maryland Regiment,” *Southern Historical Society Papers*, 10 (Jan-Dec, 1882): 216.