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WPS 36408 AMERICA'S CIVIL WAR

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Bristoe Station

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Mother  
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Baton Rouge

Union's  
War Eagle



# BURY THESE POOR MEN

Prickly, impetuous A.P. Hill looked down on the blue-clad enemy wading across Broad Run, near Bristoe Station, and thought he saw a golden opportunity for a rout. What followed was not what Hill envisioned.

By Robert C. Neul

**M**ajor General Gouverneur K. Warren had every reason to be satisfied with himself in October 1863. Not three months before, at Gettysburg, Warren had distinguished himself—indeed, some said he had saved the Union from certain defeat. While serving as chief engineer for the Army of the Potomac, Warren had arrived at the signal station atop Little Round Top on the second day of fighting, a bare hour before Major General John Bell Hood's Confederate division launched a ferocious assault on the Federal left.

Conducting a hasty reconnaissance by fire into the tree line in front of the hill, Warren discovered the concealed Confederates when he saw the flashing of their bayonets as they reacted involuntarily to Union shells. Thus alerted, he singlehandedly deployed Federal troops on the crest of the hill, just in time to successfully defend the key position of the Northern defensive line along Cemetery Ridge.

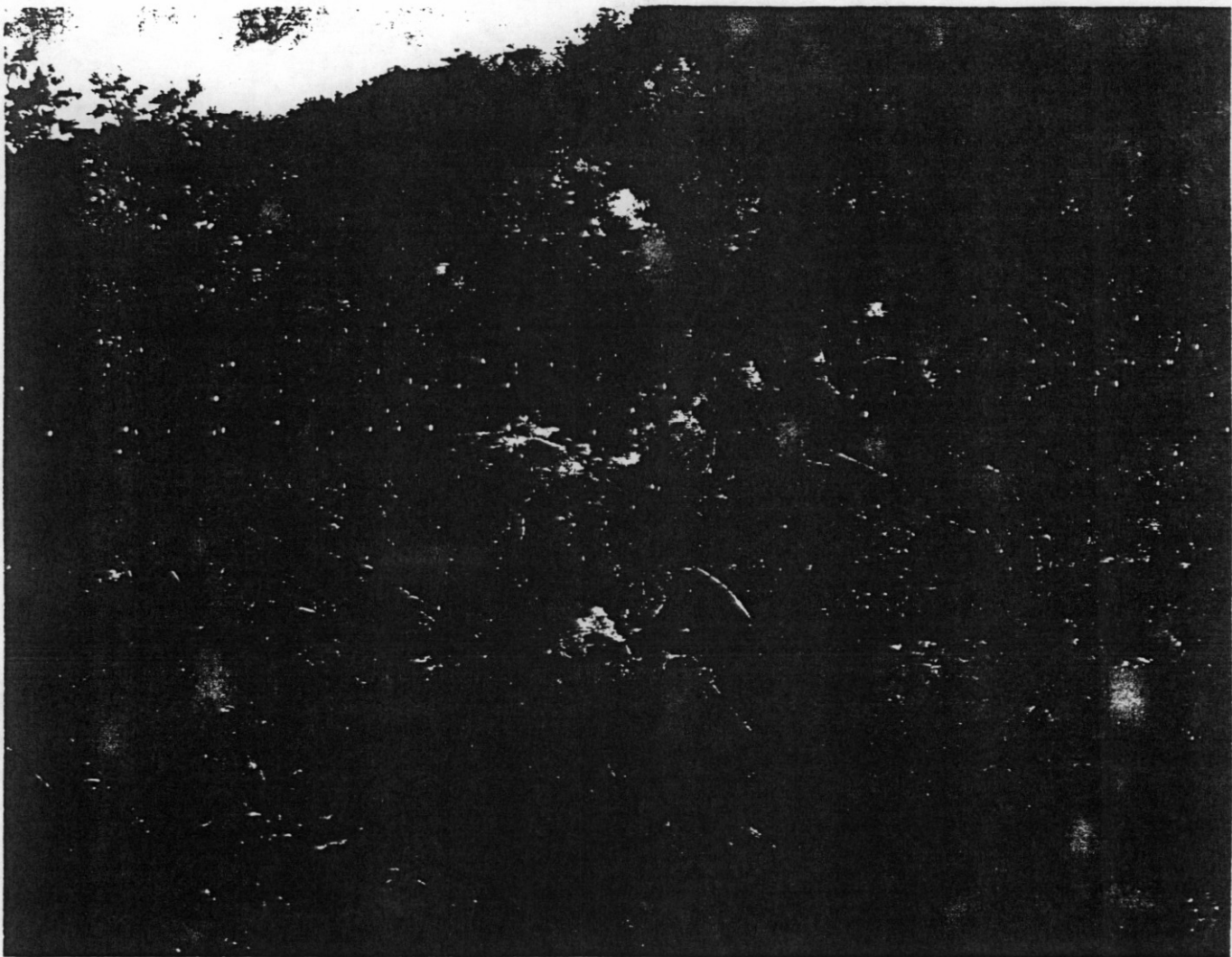
"There was not room for more than two cannon on the hill top," Warren later wrote, "and I and some stragglers from the Third Corps took hold of the gun carriage of one gun and lifted it bodily over the rocks where it was caught by a projecting piece of the summit." Acting with notable heroism in the midst of a battle where conspicuous acts of bravery were commonplace, Warren stayed on the hill, overseeing the defense of the vital position, until wounded by a musket ball.

Major General George Gordon Meade, commander of the Army of the Potomac, was not slow in rewarding his chief engineer for saving the Union flank. He appointed Warren to fill in for wounded Maj. Gen. Winfield Scott Hancock as commander of the II Corps—the same tough veterans who had turned back the final desperate Rebel assault on the Union center on the last day of fighting at Gettysburg.



*Clad in his familiar red flannel "battle shirt," Confederate General A.P. Hill leads his men across Antietam Creek in this Dale Gallon print, Beckoning Thunder. Less than a year later, many of these same men would die needlessly at Bristoe Station, the victims of Hill's hasty and ill-considered frontal assault.*





The architect of the Union's flawless ambush at Bristoe Station, Maj. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren, first won fame for his defense of Gettysburg's Little Round Top, depicted in this Keith Rocco print. Many credited Warren with saving the Union Army that day.

The slight, mustachioed, 34-year-old Warren was quite popular among the men he commanded, both at brigade and corps level, for he showed a coolness under fire and a spectacular contempt for danger. These qualities went a long way toward balancing his faults as a corps commander, among them a fanatical attention to minute details that should have been delegated to his staff. He also had the habit of placing a higher value on his own opinions than those of his superior officers, a trait that would lead him to grief later in his career.

Neither of these weaknesses, however, would be in evidence on October 14, 1863, when Warren and his men would teach Confederate Lt. Gen. Ambrose Powell Hill a painful lesson in the pitfalls of impetuosity, and the hard-learned value of looking before you leap.

In an army noted for individualists and eccentrics, A.P. Hill still managed to stand out from the crowd. He was a man of average height and build who covered his face with a massive auburn beard, highlighting eyes that seemed to burn with the heat of a fire smoldering not far beneath the surface. In battle, at the head of his famed "Light Division," he sported a flaming red shirt, defying enemy sharpshooters. His soldiers knew they were going into action when they saw him change into his fighting shirt.

On September 17, 1862, after a grueling forced march from Harpers Ferry, Hill and his division had saved the day for the Army of Northern Virginia along the banks of Antietam Creek with a crashing, headlong assault on advancing Feder-

al forces. For that act alone, Hill might have garnered far more acclaim among his peers than, in fact, he did. But there were problems with Hill, both on the surface and below it.

Powell Hill's contentious nature was well-known in the army, and his explosive temper had caused him trouble with more than one of his superior officers. Under the command of Lt. Gen. James Longstreet during the Seven Days' Battles, the fiery Hill strained his relationship with Longstreet so severely that a duel between the two appeared imminent. The new commander of the army, Robert E. Lee, acted quickly, however, and headed off the affair of honor by reassigning Hill to the command of Lt. Gen. Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson.

Hill's tour of duty with the II Corps was marred by discord, as well. Jackson placed his temperamental division commander under arrest for dereliction of duty during the march into Maryland in 1862, and later preferred formal charges against Hill, pressing for a court-martial of his troublesome subordinate. The death of Jackson at Chancellorsville and the consequent reorganization of the army saved Hill from court-martial and possible disgrace. Instead, he was promoted to command of the newly formed III Corps on May 24, 1863.

Longstreet, a Georgian, argued at the time that there were other candidates for the job who were either senior in rank or better qualified than Hill. "They were not Virginians," Longstreet said, hinting at the statist elitism that pervaded the Army of Northern Virginia. Lee, on the other hand, said that Hill was "upon the whole . . . the best soldier of his grade with me."



Workers repair the often-damaged Orange & Alexandria Railroad, a frequent target for raiders on both sides in the war. Warren was retreating up the railroad when Hill caught up with him.

That Hill was a good division commander is open to dispute. He was personally popular with the troops, and his men hit hard whenever they fought. But Hill was also accused of recklessness, impetuosity and even disobeying orders at previous engagements at Mechanicsville and Gaines' Mill. His division took heavy and unnecessary casualties in these ill-considered assaults, but his conduct nevertheless was highly praised in the Richmond newspapers after the battles, fixing his reputation in the hearts and minds of the South. Whatever the case, Lee thought enough of Hill's performance to give him command of an entire corps.

Hill would prove that a good division commander does not always make a good corps commander. He fell ill the night before the opening shots at Gettysburg and was confined to his tent. This was the first of many instances in which Hill would be physically incapable of performing his duties during a major engagement. He recovered somewhat the next day, though by the time he rejoined his men, the corps had spent itself in furious fighting. A portion of his command took part in the Confederate assault on the Federal center on July 3, but they were attached to Longstreet's command, leaving Hill a witness to that legendary charge.

Hill became sick again just before the Battle of the Wilderness in May 1864, leaving Lee and his staff to run the III Corps for most of the battle. He was ill again at Spotsylvania, and his health deteriorated even more during the winter at Petersburg. For the men of Brig. Gen. John R. Cooke's brigade of Maj. Gen. Henry Heth's division, October 14, 1863, might

have been a good day for Powell Hill to have stayed in bed, as well.

Three months had passed since the Battle of Gettysburg, and both armies were back on war-ravaged Virginia soil. The Army of the Potomac lay in position between the Rapidan and Rappahannock rivers, between Lee's army and Washington—a familiar posture for the Northern army. On October 9 and 10, the Army of Northern Virginia probed the Federal right flank and got an immediate reaction. Meade had seen other Union commanders come to grief in the constrictive "V" of land between the two rivers, and he was not about to repeat their mistakes. The army pulled out of its position and retreated past the Rappahannock.

Meade was fearful of another deep flanking move, similar to the one Jackson had performed at the Second Battle of Manassas. Fully expecting a portion of the Rebel army to turn up in his rear, Meade took no chances, withdrawing up the line of the Orange & Alexandria Railroad and waiting for an opportunity to strike the enemy. Cautiously, he kept the army well closed up, each corps within supporting distance of the others.

As Meade had feared, the Army of Northern Virginia was in hot pursuit, hoping perhaps for a repeat victory on the plains of Manassas. Powell Hill and his III Corps were in the van of the Confederate army on October 14. After a hard march of 15 miles, Hill arrived about noon on the high ground overlooking Broad Run, near Bristoe Station. What he saw there stirred him to instant action.



At Frayser's Farm, in the Seven Days' Battles, Hill won a costly reputation as a hard-charging general. But he also strained relations with his corps commander, Lt. Gen. James Longstreet—not the last time Hill would clash with superiors.

Below, on the plain, were thousands of Federal soldiers on either side of Broad Run, a swift-moving, north-south stream. The bluecoats were wading across at the fords, or waiting their turn to do so. Discarded knapsacks and overcoats littered the road behind them. An entire Union corps seemed to be ripe for the taking, if only Hill moved quickly. His entire attention was focused on the fords in front of him. Hill felt he would have to act now, or the entire enemy corps would escape. "No time must be lost," he said.

Acting with his usual impetuosity, Hill sent word to Heth, whose division was marching at the head of the column, to deploy in line of battle and go forward immediately. He also sent orders to Maj. Gen. Richard Anderson, whose division was behind Heth's, to come up on the double and support Heth's attack. Heth did not have to be told twice. It was his division that initiated the fighting at Gettysburg, forcing Lee to fight the great battle of the war before he would have liked. Like Hill, Heth was sometimes rash—he was always ready.

As the men of Heth's division went forward to attack the supposedly disorganized Federal force pinned against Broad Run, Hill deployed two batteries of artillery on the heights overlooking the fords. The gunners opened fire on the milling crowd of soldiers at the crossings, and the shelling seemed understandably to hasten the Federal withdrawal. It also revealed something that would have given most men cause to reconsider.

Behind a railway embankment on the right flank of the Confederate advance, the telltale glint of bayonets shifting under cannon fire told Heth that danger was concealed there.

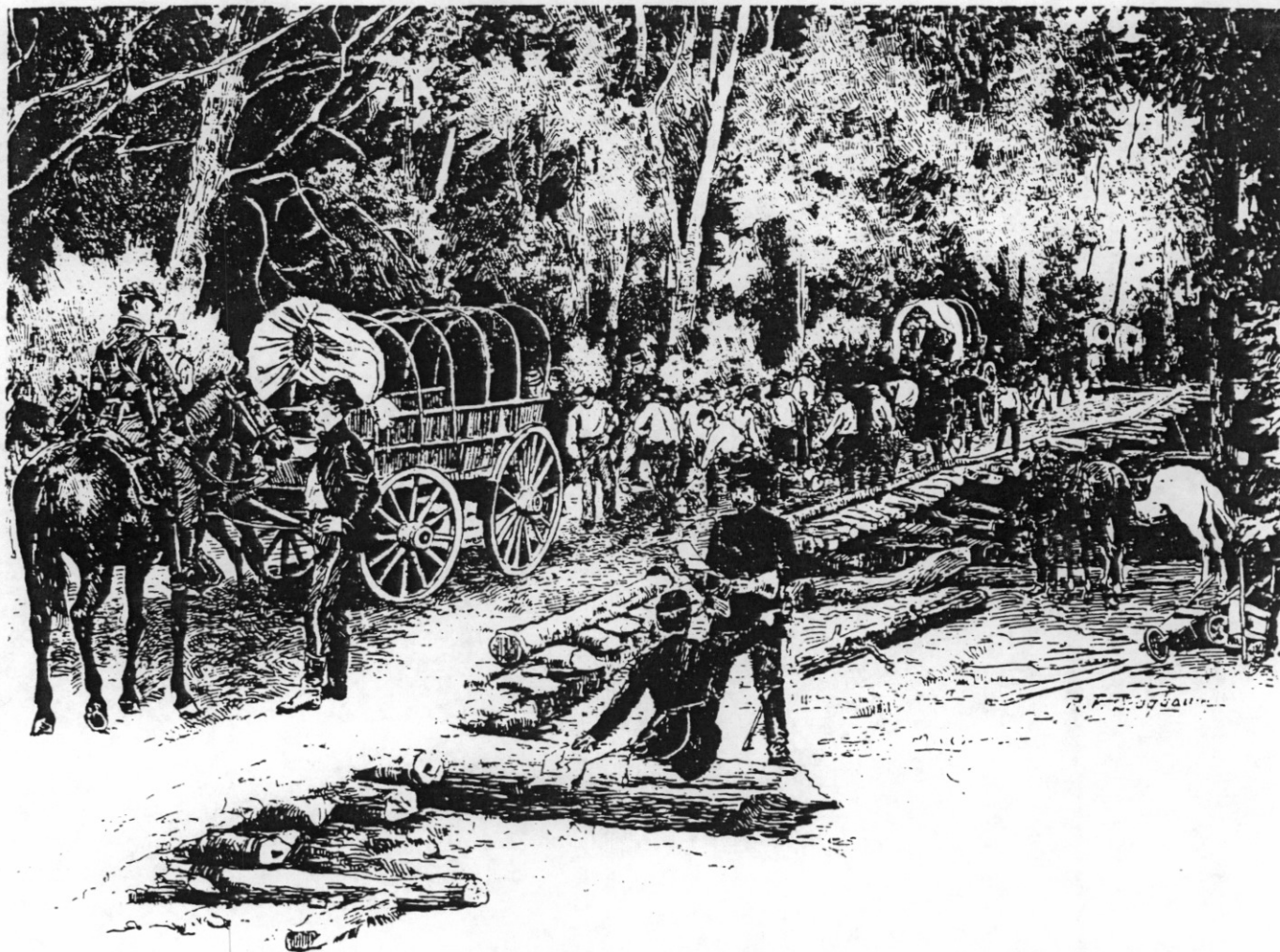
Heth immediately reported to Hill what he had seen and asked if they shouldn't suspend his two-brigade assault until a proper reconnaissance could be made. Hill told him to keep going forward; there wasn't a moment to lose. Anderson's division would be up soon to cover his right flank.

Heth's brigades plunged on, lines abreast. Brigadier General John R. Cooke's brigade of North Carolinians was on the right, nearest the railway embankment, while Brig. Gen. William Kirkland's brigade, also composed of Tarheels, advanced on the left. "Well, I will advance," Cooke said, "and if they flank me, I will face my men about and cut my way out." He would soon get a chance to do just that.

Waiting patiently in its concealment behind the embankment was the entire Federal II Corps, watching the enemy division advance diagonally in front of it. The corps was about to spring "as fine a trap as could have been devised in a month's engineering," said an admiring observer.

The architect of the trap was Gouverneur K. Warren, who was showing again, as he had at Little Round Top, that he possessed a good eye for terrain. Warren's II Corps was the rear guard of the Union army. As he approached the Broad Run fords, Warren had quickly sized up the situation, weighed the nearness of the advancing Confederates, and then deployed his men under cover of the embankment to the side of the fords and at right angles to the Confederate approach. This brilliant improvisation quickly bore fruit.

John R. Sloan of the 27th North Carolina, one of Cooke's regiments, later described the ground across which the Southerners advanced. "The space between us and the rail-



Union troops fall back toward the Grapevine Bridge after the Battle of Gaines' Mill in 1862. A.P. Hill's division, once more, was in the thick of the fighting. "These brave men," he said of his troops, "had done all that any soldiers could do."

road was a barren, open field, descending with a gradual declivity to the railroad embankment. Across and beyond the railroad about 300 yards, upon a considerable elevation, were extensive woods and thickets; here the enemy had posted their artillery. In front of these woods, and on the face of the hill descending to the railroad embankment, was posted what we supposed was the enemy's skirmish line."

As the two Confederate brigades came abreast of the Union positions, the three concealed divisions opened fire on the Rebel flank with devastating effect. The embankment Hill had failed to reconnoiter was soon wreathed in smoke as the quick-firing Union veterans poured round after round into the stunned Rebels.

Cooke and Kirkland wheeled their commands to the right in a vain attempt to save their brigades. They faced the embankment and charged, in a desperate effort to drive the concealed Federal corps from cover. But it was no contest. Said one Tarheel: "We were mowed down like grain before a reaper." In Sloan's 27th North Carolina, three color-bearers were shot down in quick succession as they grabbed the falling colors.

The 30-year-old Cooke, the son of Union General Philip St. George Cooke and brother-in-law of Jeb Stuart, fell wounded with a shattered leg (one of seven war wounds for the gallant, if ill-starred, officer). Kirkland, too, soon suffered a gunshot wound to the arm, but continued leading. The Confederates managed to get within 40 yards of the Union position, but another volley poured into the Southern ranks and "almost swept the remnant of us out of existence."

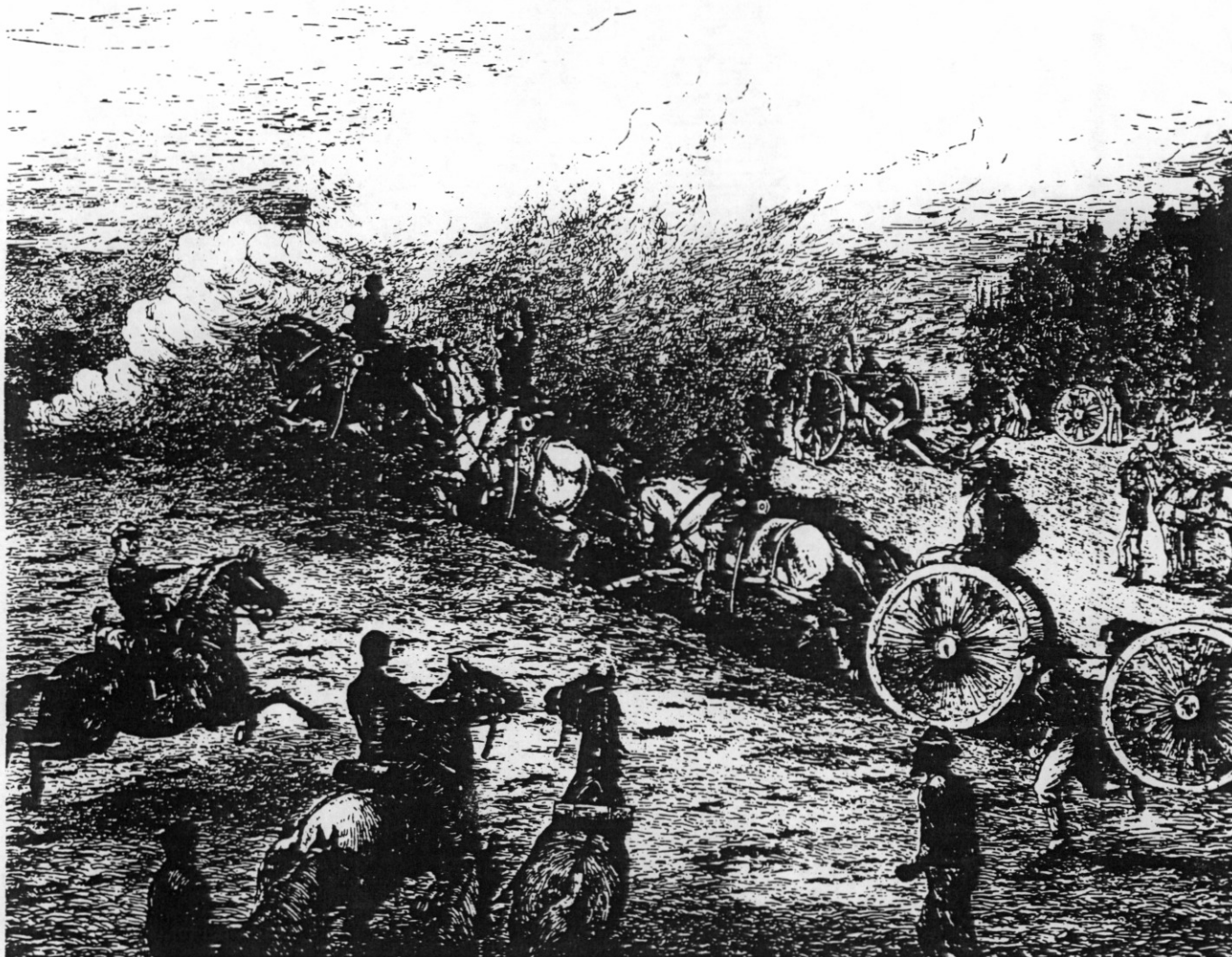
The dazed survivors of the doomed assault came staggering back up the hill, pursued by gleeful Federal troops who captured five pieces of artillery and two stands of colors before retiring unmolested back across the stream with their prizes. Hill reported, falsely, that his men had withdrawn in "good order," a claim belied by the inexplicable loss of his artillery. In fact, the 40-minute battle was a barefaced rout, and everyone involved recognized it as such.

Cooke's brigade was hardest hit, losing some 700 men. Kirkland's losses amounted to 602 casualties, almost half of whom were men who made it as far as the embankment and then surrendered rather than running the gauntlet of fire again. The 27th North Carolina alone suffered 290 casualties, out of 416 total members. Thirty-three of its 36 officers were either killed, wounded or captured. Federal losses were light in comparison, 50 killed, 335 wounded and 161 captured or missing—less than half of Hill's butcher bill.

Warren was glowingly mentioned in Union dispatches. "The skill and promptitude of Major General Warren, and the gallantry and bearing of the officers and soldiers of the Second Corps, are entitled to high commendation," said Meade on the day after the battle.

On the other side of the line, it was a different story. No blame was attached to Heth, although it was his division that was so fearfully cut up. Heth had merely followed orders. The firestorm of blame was rightfully placed on A.P. Hill's doorstep.

The entire army was angry with the temperamental commander, especially the North Carolinians, for every soldier killed, wounded or captured in Heth's division came from a



A Union battery rushes into action at Antietam, the most costly day in American history. Nearly 17,000 casualties fell during the horrific fighting, many of them from A.P. Hill's crack "Light Division." Hill's eleventh-hour arrival staved off disaster.

North Carolina regiment. "Hill is a fool & woeful blunderer," wrote one officer. The *Richmond Enquirer* chimed in sarcastically: "It is certainly a little singular, and a fact calling for explanation, that a pursuing army should have its artillery captured by a retreating adversary."

Hill was surely aware of the groundswell of resentment against his ill-considered assault. To his credit, he accepted full blame for the fiasco. "I am convinced," he wrote in his official report, "that I made the attack too hastily and at the same time that a delay of half an hour, and there would have been no enemy to attack. In that event I believe I should equally have blamed myself for not attacking at once."

There was a public outcry over the debacle at Bristoe Station, as well as a military one. Confederate President Jefferson Davis read over Hill's report and wrote tersely, "There was a want of vigilance." Secretary of War James Seddon tried to soften the president's criticism. "The disaster at Bristoe Station seems due to the gallant but over-hasty pressing of the enemy." A still-angry North Carolinian wrote after the war, "A worse managed affair than this. . . did not take place during the war."

The loss of some 1,300 men in a skirmish would seem like small change in the currency of a war that cost the Confederate Army more than 20,000 casualties at Gettysburg alone. But it wasn't. Bristoe Station was a decisive defeat that no amount of posturing or rationalization could change. The two wounded generals could be replaced; the dead men couldn't. A.P. Hill had thrown away a valuable resource of

the army, its manpower, and the South was getting near the bottom of the barrel after the bloodletting in Pennsylvania that summer.

Hard-hitting, impetuous attacks were a hallmark of Hill's tenure as division commander in the Army of Northern Virginia, but they did not serve him well as a corps commander. His service as leader of the III Corps was, with the disastrous exception of Bristoe Station, marked merely by a failure to live up to the expectations of his superiors. He didn't fail abysmally in his corps duties; he just didn't succeed. Neglecting such elemental procedures as a reconnaissance of any sort before a division-scale assault was a flaw that left him in the shadows cast by such other Confederate commanders as Jackson, Longstreet and Jubal Early.

The day after the debacle at Bristoe Station, Hill led his superior, Robert E. Lee, over the blood-soaked ground, explaining—as well as possible—what had happened. Lee said little as he listened to Hill's labored explanations and apologies, his eyes taking in the sight of dead North Carolinians in Confederate gray still littering the field.

"Well, well, general," said Lee at last, cutting off the pointless conversation. "Bury these poor men and let us say no more about it." □

*Indianapolis, Ind., writer Robert C. Neul is a first-time contributor to America's Civil War Magazine. For further reading, please see James I. Robertson, Jr.'s General A.P. Hill, or Lee's Lieutenants, by Douglas Southall Freeman.*