

## BRISTOE STATION, 1861-1865

Bristoe Station began the Civil War as a sleepy gathering of buildings along the Orange and Alexandria railroad, with little knowledge of the important and often vital role it was to play in the oncoming war. As the armies of both sides gathered in northern Virginia in 1861, the railroad became a vital supply link between the Confederate army at Manassas Junction and the Southern Capitol and base at Richmond. Train after train passed by Bristoe loaded with both soldiers and supplies for the main Confederate base at Manassas Junction.

The actual occupation of Bristoe Station began after the First Battle of Manassas on July 21, 1861. The Confederate high command decided that rather than carry the war into the North, they would adopt a defensive posture and await any Northern advance. The immediate problem facing the Confederate generals was how to feed and care for their evergrowing army. The first solution was to deploy some of their units along the Orange and Alexandria railroad. Accordingly, in the first or second week of August 1861, the first Confederate infantry occupied the fields around Bristoe Station.

These Confederate troops soon found the encampment very unhealthy. Diseases such as typhoid fever and meningitis swept the camps, causing a member of the 10th Alabama to write in the unit history of the "great deal of sickness and considerable mortality." Another Confederate was walking over the fields and "very unexpectedly came across the grave of my cousin, Joseph M. Chambers ... He was a member of Co C 11th Miss. Vols. It made me feel quite sad, for Joe was a school-mate and friend as well as a relative of mine." The sanitation problems of gathering so many men in such a small place resulted in many casualties in both armies, for many of the soldiers lived in isolated rural communities and had little exposure to disease before entering the army.

The sickness continued to run through the camps around Bristoe, causing the Confederates to abandon the station as a camp site in late September, 1861. The bodies of the dead were left behind in neat cemeteries such as the 10th Alabama cemetery still at Bristoe today. During the rest of 1861 and the first few months of 1862, Bristoe had only occasional occupation by Confederate troops such as small bodies of provost troops, the military police of the

Confederate army. In the absence of military occupation, Bristoe became the place of business for sutlers providing whiskey and supplies to the Confederate soldiers, much to the chagrin of authorities.

On January 29, 1862, one North Carolinian wrote, "This muddy day I spent at Bristoe Station, one of the most disagreeable places at which it has ever been my lot to stay. There is more mean whiskey sold and drunk at Bristoe than any other place of its size in Virginia...The grog-shop and hotel keepers ask exorbitant prices for everything and are so stingy that they would squeeze a quarter of a dollar so hard that the eagle would squall." Occasionally, the sutlers would go too far and would have their supplies of whiskey poured out, but for the most part, they provided a service in great demand by the citizen soldiers.

On March 7, 1862, the Confederate army withdrew from northern Virginia, to better defensive positions closer to Richmond. Bristoe Station was left behind, open for Federal occupation. Elements of the Army of the Potomac advanced past Manassas to scout the Confederate positions, led by the 5th New York Cavalry, who skirmished with the rear guard elements of the Confederate rear guard between Manassas and Bristoe, but Bristoe was abandoned to the Federal cavalry who continued to Warrenton before returning to Federal lines in Fairfax county. The cavalry raid marked the beginning of Federal occupation in 1862.

Bristoe Station was under Federal control but was not occupied by Federal troops until the summer of 1862, when the Army of Virginia was created for Major General John Pope, a victorious general from the Western theater brought east to defeat the Army of Northern Virginia under General Robert E. Lee. In July, 1862 Pope concentrated his army near Culpepper, using the Orange and Alexandria railroad as his supply line to Washington.

Pope's army was halted by General Thomas J. Jackson's detachment from the main Confederate army at Richmond and on August 26, 1862, Jackson had marched completely around Popes army, and cut the supply line at Bristoe Station, routing the two companies of Federal troops around the station after a brief battle, killing two, wounding seven, and capturing 43 Federals, at a loss of only three wounded.. The Confederates had waited until dusk to attack, knowing that Pope's supply trains returned to Alexandria every evening. Jackson's men were gathering around the station when they

heard a train whistle coming from Warrenton. The Confederates hurriedly piled railroad ties across the track to halt the train but the train simply pushed the ties aside, saw the masses Confederates along the track and sped up the line amid a hail of bullets. A work detail then removed several sections of track and the Confederates waited for the next train to arrive.

The whistle of the second train was then heard. The train struck the gap in the track, jumped off the rails and went down the railroad embankment, "screaming and hissing, and down on it rushed the cars, piling up one upon another until the pile reached higher than the embankment," remembered one Confederate staff officer. The last few cars remained on the track, and the third train along struck the rear of the wreck at dusk, "plowed under the first three boxcars, setting them crossways on its back and on the back of the tender. The cars telescoped each other and many were forced out upon the pile over the locomotive." A fourth train approached the wreck but was able to halt and back down the track, escaping capture and providing warning to General Pope.

General Jackson ordered the bridge span over Broad Run destroyed the telegraph lines cut, and interrogated the Federal prisoners, belonging to a company of infantry and one of cavalry. He spent the evening at Bristoe and the following morning took his army to the main Federal supply depot at Manassas Junction, leaving behind the three brigades of General Richard S. Ewell to protect Bristoe Station.

General Pope, learning of Jackson's attack on the evening of August 26, ordered General Joseph Hooker's division to advance up the railroad and drive the Confederates from Bristoe Station. Between 2 and 3 p.m. on the afternoon of August 27, the lead brigade of Hooker's division neared the Confederates at Bristoe. The Federals immediately attacked directly down the railroad and came under severe artillery fire. The Union infantry pressed their attack and were reinforced by the second brigade. A Federal soldier recalled the "musketry that rattled through the leaves like hail."

Ewell had orders from Jackson to withdraw to Manassas Junction if hard pressed, so after an hour of fighting, he withdrew his force to the east bank of Broad Run and ended the battle. The Confederates left behind fires burning with half cooked meals and fresh geese and turkeys ready to be eaten. The Federals quickly filled their own haversacks with food and then searched the local buildings

for more plunder. An old man tried to halt the stealing by complaining to the Federals but was asked about some bloody Union clothing found in the houses. The old man said he knew nothing of the clothing which enraged a Union soldier, who took the eyeglasses from the old man's head in retribution. The Federals soon moved on to follow the Confederates across Broad Run, leaving behind the wreckage of war in Bristoe.

With the following defeat of Pope's army at Manassas, Bristoe was again in Confederate hands until a Union cavalry expedition on 25 September 1862 moved through the station. The remainder of 1862 saw Bristoe under watch by the Federal cavalry, including a skirmish at Bristoe on October 24 but no further engagements. The year 1863 began quietly for Bristoe Station. The main armies were based to the southeast around Fredricksburg, so that the Orange and Alexandria railroad was not of prime importance in supplying either army. Occasional Federal patrols passed through Bristoe, but no major actions occurred in the area until summer, when both armies passed north on their way to Gettysburg. The armies returned to Virginia in late July, with Lee's army basing itself around the town of Culpepper and nearby Madison County. The Army of the Potomac, now commanded by General George G. Meade, followed Lee and positioned itself on the Rapidan River, basing a route of supply again on the Orange and Alexandria railroad.

Once again, Bristoe Station became an important juncture along the railroad, seeing the passing of both men and supplies between Washington and the Northern army. Both commanders rested their armies from the devastating battle of Gettysburg. By September, the Confederate high command decided to detach General James Longstreet's corps from the Army of Northern Virginia and deploy them to the western front by rail. Longstreet left on 9 September, leaving Lee behind facing a far more numerically superior enemy. Lee's mission until Longstreet returned was to keep the Federal army occupied so they could not reinforce the western armies and at the same time not to lose any ground in Virginia.

The two armies sparred along the Rapidan for the rest of September, when Meade learned of the transfer of Longstreet. Two Union corps were then detached from the Army of the Potomac to the west on September 25. Lee began to maneuver his remaining forces to prevent any further detachments. The Union army still outnumbered the Confederate army 75,000 to 45,000, but Lee took the

offensive. On October 10, the Confederate army began a movement around the Union right flank. Meade withdrew his army up the railroad toward Manassas Junction, avoiding the same type of flanking manuver as had befallen General Pope the previous year.

October 11 through the 13 were days of manuver for both armies. The two Confederate corps marched to Culpepper and then Warrenton, taking circuitous routes often across country to conceal their movements from Union signal stations. The Union army had the advantage of interior lines, and withdrew directly up the railroad to avoid being cut off from their supply line to Washington. "Jeb" Stuart's cavalry shielded the Confederate advance and at the same tried to harass the Federal retreat. at 10 a.m. on 14 October, General A. P. Hill's Third Corps reached to Greenwich on the road to Bristoe Station, where they found evidence of the Federal line of march, in this case that of the Third Corps of the Army of the Potomac. Campfires were still burning in hastily evacuated bivouacs. Abandoned blankets, knapsacks and other articles of equipment littered the road to Bristoe, all giving evidence of the close proximaty of the enemy.

Hill ordered his men to pursue the Federal column to Bristoe, approximately five miles away. As the Confederate column neared the station, General Hill rode ahead to locate the Union infantry. He halted on the high ground north of the station and observed the entire Federal Third Corps encamped across Broad Run, while the last of the Corps rear guard was crossing the stream near the railroad bridge, having passed through the Station. Hill ordered his lead division, commanded by General Harry Heth, to quiken their march, being only 1 1/2 miles from the station. Nearing the high ground overlooking the Bristoe, Heth deployed his first three brigades in line of battle and waited for the other three brigades of the division to form a reserve. Hill, afraid the Federals would detect his advance and excape the trap, ordered Heth to advance his three bigades on the field and attack the enemy at once.

As Heth's three brigades neared the open ground overlooking Broad Run, Hill depolyed Poague's battalion of artillery to fire on the unsuspecting Federals. The artillery pieces wheeled into action, and their first shots signalled the opening of the battle of Bristoe Station. The Fifth Corps infantry on the plain across Broad Run watched the artillery going into position but believed the

guns to be Union. The sound of shells passing overhead convinced the Yankees that the guns were Confederate. The Fifth Corps infantry quickly moved to safety towards Manassas as one of their own batteries returned the fire. One of the advancing Confederates watched the Union retreat, and later wrote, "we saw the the mass of men spring to their feet and start to run. The wagons started to run for dear life and then the men ran like a flock of sheep...I never laughed so hard in my life."

General A.P. Hill observed the rout and ordered Heth's men to advance and strike the Federals while they were disorganized. The three lead brigades broke into the open fields and moved toward Broad Run. The Confederates expected an easy battle and advanced as one North Carolinian remembered, "we sprang forward laughing and gay down the hill." As the battline advanced, they were struck by rifle fire from the vicinity of the railroad track.

Unbeknownst to General Hill, the entire Federal Second Corps under the command of Major General Gouverneur Warren was marching on the far side of the railroad to join the waiting Fifth Corps. Some of the lead units had already started to cross Broad Run. Warren realized the danger of his position and directed his men to form a line of battle behind the railroad track from Bristoe Station to Broad Run, a natural fortification.

Heth reported to Hill that a strong enemy force was now on his flank, but Hill was caught up in the pursuit of the retreating Fifth Corps and believed other units of his corps now approaching the battlefield would protect the Confederate flank. He ordered the advance to continue. The Confederates in the advance recognized the disastrous consequences of a further advance but moved forward anyway. Brigadier John R. Cooke tersely commented, "Well, I will advance and if they flank me I will face my men about and cut my way out."

The two brigades, both composed of 4,000 North Carolinians, changed their line of advance and attacked toward the railroad. Three Brigades of about 3,000 men the Second Corps awaited them, backed by three artillery batteries. The North Carolinians were for the most part unaware of the presence of the Federal infantry hidden behind the railroad embankment but saw the batteries on the hills beyond and ran quickly forward to engage the guns before they could cause too much damage to themselves. One North Carolinian wrote, "we ran and yelled and men swore officers swore and cried shoot damn you shoot, fell every one of them before ty them before they can shoot the guns." The Federal infantry calmly waited behind the railroad until the North Carolinians were at point blank range and then raised up and poured a

devastating volley into the Confederate battleline, at a range of only thirty to forty yards. One Federal surgeon remembered, "Hundreds of Confederates dropped; others, bewildered, rushed back, some forward, while our fellows, with a wild cheer fired volley after volley into them." Both Confederate Brigade commanders were wounded almost immediately, as were many of the field officers. Colonel E. D. Hall of the 46th North Carolina took command of the Cooke's brigade, knowing that his men must either move forward or retreat, for as every second passed, more Confederates fell. He told the commander of the 27th North Carolina, "I expect we had better make a charge." The regiment led the Brigade forward, but as the regimental historian later wrote, "The point from which we started was distinctly marked; at least four, and in some cases ten men from each company were lying dead or wounded in that line." The regiment got within twenty steps of the railroad but were ordered back for the rest of the regiments of the Brigade had not followed.

Kirkland's Brigade was not as exposed as Cooke's and actually managed to capture part of the embankment. The 11th and part of the 47th North Carolina captured several prisoners and drove the rest of the Federals back from the railroad but finding themselves alone, withdrew back across the deadly field. Other individual Confederates mounted the embankment and engaged in hand to hand combat with the Yankees, but were soon overcome. One North Carolinian was able to get over the embankment and bayonet a member of the 1st Minnesota before himself becoming a casualty.

Both brigades began to retreat up the open hill they had just come down so boldly. The 44th North Carolina, of Kirkland's brigade, had to be ordered three times to withdraw before giving up the field. Other Confederates hugged the ground until a lull in the firing, when they threw down their weapons and ran as prisoners beyond the railroad to safety. In only fifteen to twenty minutes, the first Confederate attack had been bloodily repulsed. Over 1300 men in grey had fallen in the assault, compared to about 600 Federals.

As the two brigades withdrew, the reinforcements that Hill had promised to protect the right flank arrived, and attacked to the right of the North Carolinians. Two brigades actually broke the Union line on the railroad in a wooded area but were driven out by rapidly arriving Federal reinforcements. Both commanders then began to consolidate their positions as more men arrived on both sides. As evening fell, Warren had his entire corps in position around Bristoe, using the railroad line as his main defensive position. Hill drew his corps up opposite

Warren. Major General Richard S. Ewell's Corps arrived at Bristoe in the evening to complete the concentration of Lee's army, but no offensive action was taken, and the Federals were allowed to withdraw during the night to Centreville to join the main body of the Union army.

Lee recognized the strength of Meade's position and declined pursuit. He made his headquarters at Bristoe until October 17, and the following day withdrew his army back to the Rappahannock River line after destroying the railroad from Bristoe to the river to delay Meade's return to the area. After leaving Bristoe Station, the Army of Northern Virginia would no longer see the familiar fields of Prince William county again.

The remainder of 1863 was again quiet for Bristoe Station. The railroad was rebuilt and was again providing supplies to the Union army. In 1864, there was a cavalry skirmish on February 1, and again on March 16 as Confederate partisans under the overall command of Colonel John S. Mosby tried to interrupt the Union supply line, but to no avail.

The final action at Bristoe Station occurred on 15 April as three members of Mosby's command ambushed the Union pickets of the 13th Pennsylvania Cavalry above the station on Broad Run, killing one Federal and capturing four horses. With this small action, the fighting ended at Bristoe. The main armies moved south around Richmond to begin the battles that would eventually result in the end of the war. The railroad was still under guard for the remainder of the war due to Mosby's raids, but Bristoe was not again touched by fighting as the war ended in 1865.

Bristoe Station was the scene of two major battles in August 1862 and October 1863, as well as eight minor skirmishes. As important as these actions are in reflecting Civil War battles and partisan warfare, the main importance of Bristoe Station is in its use in the often overlooked art of war of supply. The major function of Bristoe was as a terminal in the supply lines of both armies, resulting in the many engagements during the war. Without bases such as Bristoe Station, no army could have functioned for any length of time.