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The struggle in the Shenandoah: The relationship between tactics and attrition in the Shenandoah Valley Campaigns of 1864

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The Struggle in the Shenandoah:
The Relationship Between Tactics and Attrition in the Shenandoah Valley Campaigns of 1864

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Abstract

This research seeks to inform on the relationship between tactics and attrition during the 1864 campaigns in the Shenandoah Valley. Many studies have broadly examined these campaigns but have not focused their analysis on the relationship between tactics and attrition. By doing this it allows this examination to gain a deeper understanding of how particular engagements were decided, and ultimately the fate of the Shenandoah Valley. This research utilizes a chronological approach and relies on numerous primary sources from officers that provide an accurate appraisal of troop strengths and tactics employed. Various sources such as letters, diaries, and correspondence have been used to support these findings. Official reports have also proven to be quite useful as they provide thorough and comprehensive information on the progression of many engagements. Memoirs and post war manuscripts also provide valuable insight into the role of attrition and the relationship with tactics. This study demonstrates how attrition and tactics were closely related. It exposes that tactics often dictated how extensive attrition would be in a given engagement. Additionally it demonstrates how attrition, or the prospect of it, would dictate to the commanders what tactics could be used. It is also evident that the army that best marshaled their resources to mitigate or accentuate numerical disparities would be most successful. The field would benefit from an incorporation of this type of analysis, as it would provide a clearer explanation of how individual battles were decided. This type of analysis distills the sometimes overly complex nuances of many works and provides a clear and concise appraisal of how battles were decided.
Introduction

Early autumn in the Shenandoah Valley was a serene period full of vibrant transformations in foliage and a welcome change from the oppressive heat. The pastures and fields around Belle Grove Plantation presented a picturesque scene that one would hardly associate with a battlefield. The rising sun beamed golden rays across the peak of Massanutten Mountain, which summoned an orchestra of singing birds. Suddenly, a series of deep rolling booms echoed throughout the placid Shenandoah Valley. If it were any other day, these resonations could have been mistaken for an early morning thunderstorm. However, this day was quite the exception to the norm; the thunderous disturbance was the deep thud of Federal artillery as it frantically attempted to thwart a Confederate surprise attack. As the battle raged, the fate of the Shenandoah would be determined and by the evening of October 19, 1864, the Confederate army there had been shattered, never again to roam the Valley.

This scene did not come to fruition independently, but was the culmination of a complex and dynamic campaign that spanned several months while covering multiple states. In order to understand the profound implications of that fateful October day in the Shenandoah, it is essential to conduct an analysis of the events and battles leading up to it. While external factors such as population size and economics tangentially factored into this campaign, it would be impractical to include them in this type of analysis. However, for the sake of this appraisal it is necessary to analyze the events that directly related to the campaign and what important factors contributed to its outcome.

As with most military related subjects, there exists a myriad of different approaches by which a topic of this nature can be analyzed. The 1864 campaigns in the
Shenandoah are no exception to this overarching trend. Much of the existing research on the subject examines topics such as how the campaigns related in a larger context to the war itself or provide an evaluation of key personalities. This research, however, intends to address two critical factors that influenced the outcome of numerous battles during the 1864 campaigns in the Shenandoah Valley. This examination will focus primarily on the relationship between battlefield tactics and numerical disparities as a result of attrition, and how these two variables altered the outcome of numerous clashes during the period.

Traditionally the term attrition has been used in a broad sense to describe the gradual reduction in usable resources for combat and the support of an army. These could include a broad number of variables such as lack of food, clothing, ammunition, casualties, or a general loss of support for the war effort. This research, however, utilizes a much narrower definition of attrition. This analysis defines attrition as occasions when troops are forced away from combat roles for the following reasons. Firstly, the most prevalent cause of attrition was injuries and deaths sustained during battle and ancillary operations. However, men being detailed to care for wounded or being deterred from actively participating in actual fighting and maneuvering for any other reason is also recognized as attrition in this analysis. This narrower definition of attrition is adopted for the purposes of this analysis because it allows for an isolation of the actual battles themselves rather than including an array of other variables such as morale and national will which would be beyond the scope of this research and deserve their own individual treatments. This examination does acknowledge the importance of economic shortfalls in the Confederate war effort and how they tangentially affected the outcomes of
engagements, but it is not the primary emphasis of this analysis. Much of the existing literature on the 1864 Shenandoah Valley Campaign only occasionally addresses the relationship between attrition and tactics. Many of the works primarily examine the campaign on a broader scale, but fail to focus their analysis on this specific range of parameters. To this end, the following research seeks to fill a gap in the field and provide a fresh analysis on these influential events.

This research employs a chronological approach, which is helpful in charting the progression of tactics and attrition in various campaigns. It will perform an examination of the relationship between attrition and tactics on major battles in all three campaigns in order to analyze developing trends and similarities. In order to perform this appraisal the following research will utilize resources that provide insight into tactics and decisions relating to the outcomes of battles. Official reports, diaries, and memoirs of high level officers are all useful in gaining accurate information about attrition levels and various tactical maneuvers.¹

Jeffery Wert’s text *From Winchester to Cedar Creek: The Shenandoah Campaign of 1864* provides a well-rounded appraisal of the campaign that covers an array of subjects. While this study does address attrition and, at times, its relationship to tactics it is not the primary focus of Wert’s analysis. However, Wert does an excellent job of narrating the sequence of battles and providing valuable information on the many personalities involved in General Phil Sheridan’s Shenandoah Valley Campaign. Wert’s broad analysis spans only the months when Sheridan was present in the Valley and leaves out significant segments leading up to Sheridan’s arrival.²

Gary Gallagher’s *The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864* is another important series of arguments on the subject that cover a myriad of topics, not all of which examine attrition and its influence on tactics. This study is useful in gaining an understanding of varying perspectives but, like Wert’s analysis, falls short in its scope. This assemblage of articles narrows their evaluation primarily to Sheridan’s exploits in the Shenandoah Valley but provides little review on the two campaigns prior. This research, unlike that of previous mentioned texts, will include the two campaigns leading up to Sheridan’s appearance in the Shenandoah in order to provide a more comprehensive examination of the topic.³

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On a broader scale, this research seeks to parallel and expand upon some of the ideas presented in Gary Gallagher’s *The Confederate War: How Popular Will, Nationalism, and Military Strategy Could Not Stave Off Defeat.* This text covers a variety of subjects but asserts that Confederate failure was not necessarily the result of a waning support for the war. He also debunks some of the myths that the Confederacy never truly had a chance of victory due to economic and industrial weaknesses. The crux of Gallagher’s assertions is that the Confederacy ultimately failed to achieve victory in the military theatre by simply not winning enough critical battles. This segment of Gallagher’s work inspired this research to expand upon the role of tactics and attrition and how they facilitated the outcomes of various battles.4

Prior to the American Civil War, the United States had gradually divided between two distinctly different economies. The South became known for its slave-based agricultural economy that relied heavily on the production of cash crops and exported goods. The North enjoyed many fast-moving waterways, which were ideal for the construction of mills, but it lacked the climate to produce major cash crops. Over time, the North developed an economic system that was initially anchored in agriculture but moved into a range of industrial endeavors. The South’s need to maintain high levels of crop production spurred its inhabitants to rely progressively more on slave labor.5 By the late 1850s, moral and ethical qualms regarding the institution of slavery became increasingly popular topics in the media and the chambers of Congress. By 1860, the failure of representatives from both sides resulted in the secession of South Carolina from

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the Union. By April 1861, Virginia had followed the lead of neighboring states and joined the newly formed Confederate States of America.\textsuperscript{6}

The South’s decision to place the Confederate capitol in Richmond had profound implications for the entire state and specifically, the Shenandoah Valley. Richmond naturally became an important strategic target for the Union, and Federal commanders, along with President Abraham Lincoln, almost immediately initiated plans to capture the city. Richmond’s position so close to the Union meant that it required a constant military presence to defend it. The Shenandoah Valley subsequently became an ancillary target for the Union war effort as it represented a route into central Virginia where a Federal expeditionary force could disrupt Confederate internal lines that supplied Richmond.\textsuperscript{7} To this extent, the Shenandoah Valley was a prime corridor that could facilitate an invasion into central or southern Virginia. Furthermore, this region could also be utilized by the Confederacy as an invasion route into the Union.

The Shenandoah Valley possessed added value as a military target because of its resources and economic contributions to the Confederate war effort. The Valley enjoyed the benefit of a meandering river that coursed through the region, which dramatically aided agricultural endeavors. The many streams throughout the region that feed the river were also utilized for mills and the river itself was harnessed to transport goods to market. These resources spurred the Confederacy to protect the region and subsequently made the Shenandoah an even greater target for the Union. In his memoirs, Grant stated, “Shenandoah Valley was very important to the Confederates, because it was the principal

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{6} Stephanie McCurry, \textit{Confederate Reckoning: Power and Politics in the Civil War South} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), Page 11-38

\footnotesize\textsuperscript{7} Gallagher, \textit{The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864}, Page 34-47
storehouse they now had for feeding their armies about Richmond. It was well known that they would make a desperate struggle to maintain it.”

By 1862, a Union army had been dispatched to capture Richmond from the south via the waterways adjacent to the Chesapeake Bay. To mitigate the Federal troop strength around Richmond, General Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson was dispatched to the Shenandoah Valley to create a new front of sorts that would warrant a realignment of Union resources to quell the new Confederate offensive. In this sense, Jackson’s 1862 campaign utilized the Shenandoah Valley in a diversionary capacity to alleviate pressure around the Confederate capitol. During this campaign, Jackson repeatedly defeated or thwarted Federal attempts to crush his severely outnumbered force and succeeded in drawing troops away from the effort to capture Richmond. The success of Jackson’s campaign made the Shenandoah Valley internationally famous and created a precedent in the minds of Confederate strategists that the Valley could be utilized for similar purposes in the future.

Jackson’s campaign was not the only major Confederate military operation in the region that garnered the attention of the Union. In 1863, Robert E. Lee sought to gain a decisive victory north of the Mason-Dixon and damper, if not extinguish, Union support for the war. In order to do this, Lee needed to amass segments of his Army of Northern Virginia somewhere near his intended route north. Lee recognized the Shenandoah Valley as an ideal staging area where he could prepare elements of his force for an

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8 Ulysses S. Grant, *The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant* (Washington: Create Space Independent Publishing), 528

invasion of Pennsylvania. Here, Lee used the Valley to launch one of the most iconic campaigns of the war when he journeyed north and suffered a devastating defeat at Gettysburg. Lee’s northern expedition shocked the Union and was cause for concern amongst politicians and military strategists alike. In an effort to prevent further Confederate incursions, the Union sought to eliminate the Shenandoah Valley as a viable staging point by which southern raids could strike targets in the Union. In this sense, the Gettysburg Campaign indirectly resulted in a greater focus on the Shenandoah Valley.  

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11 Gallagher, The Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864, Page 48, 224-225
Chapter 1: The Lynchburg Campaign

By 1864, Ulysses S. Grant took supreme command of Union armies operating in Virginia and throughout the South. Grant hoped to fix and destroy the Army of Northern Virginia by forcing it to defend the approaches to Richmond. As a supporting effort, he dispatched Major General Franz Sigel to march south through the Shenandoah Valley and assault the Confederate depot at Lynchburg.\(^{12}\) It was Grant’s hope that the destruction of this railroad hub would severely inhibit or disrupt Confederate attempts to defend Richmond, as it would prevent the movement of men and material to the city.\(^{13}\)

Franz Sigel had previously been in command of the Department of West Virginia and had approximately 10,000 men at his disposal at the onset of this expedition. Upon hearing of Sigel’s movement, Confederate Major General John C. Breckinridge desperately began to marshal all available men and resources to repel Sigel’s advancing army.\(^{14}\) Breckinridge called upon John D. Imboden’s cavalry brigade to support his two infantry brigades commanded by Brigadier Generals Gabriel C. Wharton and John C. Echols. In addition, the Confederate commander was able to muster approximately 250 cadets from the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington to bolster his meager force.\(^{15}\) Both Breckinridge and Sigel began jockeying for position as the Federals raced down the Valley Pike. Breckinridge, realizing his numerical deficiencies, sought to buy himself


\(^{13}\) William C. Davis, *The Battle of New Market* (Baton Rouge: University of Louisiana Press, 1983), 46-68


\(^{15}\) Charles R. Knight, *Valley Thunder: The Battle of New Market and the Opening of the Shenandoah Valley Campaign, May 1864* (New York: Savas Beatie, 2010), 23-45
time and directed John Imboden’s cavalry to slow and disrupt Sigel’s progression south. The decision to dispatch Imboden’s cavalry to stall the Federals represents a superb tactical decision given the Confederate numerical inadequacies. By stalling Sigel, Breckinridge afforded himself enough time to muster the independent commands operating in the area and push his troop strength up to approximately 4,000 men.\textsuperscript{16}

Imboden’s harassing tactics worked impeccably and forced Sigel to dispatch elements of his cavalry reserves to address the Confederate disruption. In addition to buying Breckinridge crucial time to organize his force, Imboden’s actions sapped Sigel’s troop strength.\textsuperscript{17} By May 15, Imboden’s cavalry had rejoined Breckinridge’s main force approximately 10 miles south of the small town of New Market, which was situated along the Valley Pike and was surrounded by a series of rolling hills.\textsuperscript{18} Approximately a half-mile west of New Market is the North Fork of the Shenandoah River, which severely constrained the movements on the battlefield and the potential routes for a flanking maneuver.\textsuperscript{19} Nonetheless, Breckinridge hoped to engage Sigel’s force before they marched any further south and the Confederates raced down the Valley to meet the oncoming Federals.

Sigel’s army had just reached New Market when they began to make contact with elements of Breckinridge’s diminutive army. By 10:00 A.M. on May 15, heavy skirmishing had ensued and the Confederates began to shell the Union position with

\textsuperscript{16} Davis, \textit{The Battle of New Market}, Page 76-84

\textsuperscript{17} Charles H. Porter, \textit{Operations of Generals Sigel and Hunter}, Page 66

\textsuperscript{18} Correspondence between Breckinridge and Imboden, \textit{War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Series I. Volume. 37. Part I Correspondence} (Harrisburg: The National Historical Society, 1971), 73

\textsuperscript{19} Murdock, E. C. “The Battle of New Market.” \textit{American Historical Review} 81, no. 3 (June 1976): 668-69.
artillery. The decision to postpone a full-scale frontal infantry assault and instead rely on artillery to weaken the enemy position represented a sound tactical decision, as it limited the potential for heavy losses. Although the Union position was under direct Confederate artillery fire, the Federals elected to hold their line rather than assault the Confederate artillery. By simply maintaining consistent artillery fire, the Confederates may also have hoped to draw the Federals into assaulting their position. Although this tactic did not achieve the desired effect, it did represent another sound decision as it had the potential to force Sigel’s subordinates to assault the Confederate defensive position.  

By 11:00 A.M. Sigel had positioned the majority of his force in the middle of a series of undulating hills just west of town. These hills have relatively low slope and were not confined by overly steep ravines or other topographical constraints. To the west of Sigel’s line was the Shenandoah River, which prevented a Confederate flanking maneuver around the Federal right. Sigel’s decision to anchor his line along the river, thus removing any threat of a Confederate attack from that side, was sound as it would be quite difficult for any sizeable Confederate force to ford the Shenandoah at this location. Despite the security of the Federal right, Sigel failed to secure his left flank on any topographical feature. Furthermore, the Union commander did little to ensure the protection of his left by positioning any significant units there to prevent a flanking attempt. This grave error represents an important tactical mistake as it placed the Federal position at serious risk. 

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Breckinridge soon realized that the Confederate artillery bombardment had done little to dislodge the Federals; therefore, he devised a plan to pair a frontal assault with a daring flanking maneuver around the weak Federal left. Breckinridge ordered Imboden’s cavalry brigade to charge around the Federal left flank while the infantry brigades of Gabriel Wharton and John Echols were deployed against Sigel’s center. Breckinridge’s force was outnumbered but the Confederate commander hoped to disperse the Union troop concentration by forcing Sigel to thin his lines in order to protect his flank. This helped to weaken the Federal focus on the center just in time for Breckinridge’s infantry assault. This action demonstrated how Breckinridge had redesigned his tactics to equalize numerical disparities on the field.

The Confederate assault began smoothly and the Confederate infantry brigades were able to expel Union Colonel Augustus Moor’s troops from their forward positions in the middle of the field. Moor’s troops fell back toward the main body of Sigel’s force around a small knoll known as Bushong’s Hill. Captain Carl Heintz in a panicked correspondence to Major General Stahel stated that Moor’s force was too weak to hold his position long and desperately requested reinforcements. However, Moor’s poorly positioned force did not receive reinforcements before being swept from the field. Moor, in his official report, admitted that his force was severely outnumbered and only managed to get off one volley before being forced to retreat. Although the Confederates had

23 Knight, *Valley Thunder*, Page 45-53
expelled the Federals from their initial position, the southern lines were beginning to become disoriented and in need of realignment in order to effectively continue the assault. Breckinridge ordered a halt to his attack so as to re-form his units for the next assault on the Federal stronghold around the Bushong’s Farm. The decision to stop the Confederate advance was a necessary pause as it was essential for the southern commanders to ensure a cohesive battle line. In addition to the adjustment of the infantry, it was essential that the Confederates reposition their artillery as well. Up to this point, the advancing southern brigades enjoyed the added support of artillery, which the smaller Confederate units desperately relied upon. As they came closer to the Federal emplacement around the Bushong Farm, the gray troops began to outpace their cannons and they needed to move up their artillery to cover the remainder of their advance. This further delayed their attack giving Sigel valuable time to organize his defense.27

By mid afternoon, Breckinridge reinitiated his attack on Sigel, but the attack began to stall as his troops approached Bushong’s Hill. The Federals were able to stave off the Confederate advance and disrupt the cohesiveness of the southern battle lines.28 As the southerners attempted to take the hill, they began to suffer losses and units started to fall into retreat. Federal rifle fire was inflicting casualties in the southern ranks and attrition was beginning to significantly reduce the already outnumbered Confederate forces.29 It is unclear why Breckinridge did not elect to flank around the right of the Federal strongpoint with his infantry. The Confederate commander was already

27 Davis, The Battle of New Market, Page 20-31
28 Charles H. Porter, Operations of Generals Sigel and Hunter, Page 67
29 Knight, Valley Thunder, Page 66-76
outnumbered and desperately needed to preserve as much of his fighting force as possible. Given this scenario, it would have behooved the southern general to formulate a less dangerous assault rather than order a frontal attack over open ground.\textsuperscript{30}

With the prospect of defeat suddenly looming, the Confederate commander took desperate measures to strengthen his assault on Sigel’s position. Up to this point in the war, the cadets from VMI had seen little action and had not been in the hottest part of the battle. However, as the Confederates found themselves in an increasingly tenuous position, it became apparent that the young cadets would need to support the flailing southern line. Although the cadets only numbered around 250, their arrival on the field tipped the scales in the southerners’ favor, as it gave the Confederate center the necessary reinforcements they needed to overcome Sigel’s position around the hill. In his after action report, Confederate Lieutenant Colonel Scott Shipp Smith wrote that the cadets performed an essential duty by filling the gaps in the Confederate lines. He stated that the Confederate frontal assault was costly and without the reinforcements may have failed. Smith goes on to explain how the Confederates utilized the river to their left as a natural anchor point for their line. He expressed that this prevented the prospect of a flanking attack, thus allowing the Confederates to press their assault with confidence.\textsuperscript{31} Additionally, their lack of experience and general naiveté of the horrors of war also may have contributed to the confidence of their assault as they were not fully aware of the risks they were taking. This stands as strong evidence that the successfulness of the Confederate assault on Bushong’s Hill directly correlates to the numerical strength of the

\textsuperscript{30} Knight, \textit{Valley Thunder}, Page 121

units involved. Here the tactical decision to deploy the cadets combined with the
numerical advantage of their presence resulted in the successfulness of the attack. Union
Major Henry Peale commented in an after action report how the Confederates “in three
strong lines” overwhelmed the Federal position with superior numbers and great
Sigel, in turn, launched a series of uncoordinated counter attacks in an attempt to break the southern line. Union Colonel George D. Wells described the disorganization of these maneuvers in his battle report. He stated that the Union line was plagued with conflicting orders and many units did not know whether to retreat or advance. He even cites one instance where he grabbed a color bearer and ordered him to retreat while the

remainder of the regiment held their position.\textsuperscript{34} Given the evidence, it is clear that Sigel’s decision to counter attack diluted his force around Bushong’s Farm. Once Sigel had begun to disperse his force, the Confederates were able to concentrate their efforts on singular, smaller elements along the Federals’ position, thus creating a series of micro scenarios where the southerners possessed the numerical advantage. With the added pressure from the cadets and southern cavalry, Sigel’s line began to crumble into retreat. The southerners hurriedly pursued the withdrawing Federals as they moved north toward Mount Jackson. Severely pressed, Sigel’s troops were forced to abandon their artillery as they rushed to extricate themselves from the field and create distance from the now inspired Confederates.\textsuperscript{35}

By early evening, what was left of the Federal force under Sigel retreated north of the Shenandoah River with enough time to burn the bridge across it and thus limit the southern pursuit. Sigel’s decision to destroy the bridge bought the Federals necessary time to reorganize their force and prepare for another southern attack.\textsuperscript{36} However, it was late evening and both sides were exhausted from the day’s fighting. Rather than pursue the Federals into the night, Breckinridge elected to hold his position, thus concluding any major action at New Market.\textsuperscript{37} Breckinridge stated in his report on the battle that the destruction of the bridge prevented the Confederates from easily pursuing the Federals, as it would have required his force to find a ford and cross the river in the night.\textsuperscript{38}

\textsuperscript{34} Report of Henry Peale, War of the Rebellion, Series I. Volume. 37. Part 1, Page 83

\textsuperscript{35} Davis, The Battle of New Market, Page 56-67

\textsuperscript{36} Charles H. Porter, Operations of Generals Sigel and Hunter, Page 67

\textsuperscript{37} Murdock, E. C. “The Battle of New Market.” American Historical Review 81, no. 3

\textsuperscript{38} Report of Breckinridge, War of the Rebellion Series I. Volume. 37. Part 1, Page 87
What would become known, as the Battle of New Market is a superb example of the profound relationship between numerical disparities, partially caused by attrition and tactics. Although Breckinridge made a few mistakes, he avoided costly blunders and was able to preserve his fighting force for those critical moments on the battlefield. From the opening phases of the battle, the Confederate general did a superb job of deploying his troops where they would be the most effective. His decision to flank around the Federal left with cavalry, although not entirely successful, represented a sound tactical decision. Furthermore, his choice to deploy the VMI cadets at that pivotal moment during the battle demonstrated sound tactical reasoning, which helped equalize numerical deficiencies caused by attrition. Breckinridge did such a good job of employing tactics that would equalize numerical deficiencies that Sigel wrote after the battle, “A severe battle was fought today at New Market between our forces and those of Echols and Imboden, under Breckinridge. Our troops were overpowered by superior numbers.”

Here, Sigel admits that the Confederates utilized numbers to defeat him and how they played a pivotal role in the battle outcome.

Prior to the battle, the Federals had a numerical advantage that Sigel should have exploited to either envelope or overwhelm Breckinridge’s inferior force. However, Sigel squandered this opportunity with poor tactical decisions that placed his force in the center of a sweeping field with little protection. Furthermore, Sigel failed to recognize the importance of protecting his flanks, and performed half hearted counter attacks, which did not possess the troop strength to sufficiently overwhelm the Confederate line. It also stands to reason that Sigel may have placed too much faith in his position at Bushong’s Farm, which did not afford him the tactical supremacy he needed. This may have led to

him retaining his force there for too long, which allowed the Confederates to sufficiently reinforce their lines and overwhelm him.\textsuperscript{40}

At the onset of the battle, the Confederates only had approximately 4,000 men at their disposal while Sigel’s effective fighting force numbered closer to 6,500. By the evening of May 15, the Federals had moved north toward Strasburg suffering nearly 900 casualties. The departure of Sigel left the southern half of the Valley temporarily in Confederate control. The Confederates had suffered approximately 500 casualties, which briefly forced Breckinridge to remain in the region while troops were detailed to care for the wounded.\textsuperscript{41} The Confederate victory at New Market allowed the southern army to retain control of the crop production in the region, along with preserving the vitally important rail lines in central Virginia.\textsuperscript{42}

This crucial southern victory had profound effects amongst the Union command structure as well. Grant was not pleased with Sigel’s performance at New Market and swiftly replaced him with Major General David Hunter as commander of the Army of the Shenandoah. Grant, in his memoirs, stated, “Sigel’s record is almost equally brief. He moved out, it is true, according to program; but just when I was hoping to hear of good work being done in the valley I received instead the following announcement from Halleck: ‘Sigel is in full retreat on Strasburg. He will do nothing but run; never did anything else.’ The enemy had intercepted him about New Market and handled him


\textsuperscript{41} Charles H. Porter, \textit{Operations of Generals Sigel and Hunter}, Page 67

\textsuperscript{42} Knight, \textit{Valley Thunder}, Page 75-85
The Confederates also realigned their forces following New Market. Having suffered serious losses at Spotsylvania, General Lee ordered Breckinridge, along with the majority of his small force, to return to Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. This left the Shenandoah Valley essentially vacant with no significant Confederate force to confront a Union incursion. Only Imboden’s cavalry brigade was left to monitor Union troop movements in the now vulnerable region.

Hunter quickly mobilized his force of approximately 10,000 men and began a march toward Harrisonburg. During this time, Imboden resumed the tactics as practiced under Breckinridge and attempted to harass and slow Hunter’s movements. Imboden, however, did not possess nearly enough troops to significantly impede Hunter’s advance for an extended period. Even so, Imboden’s efforts did provide Lee with valuable intelligence and bought the Confederates in central Virginia the necessary time to organize a defensive plan.

Hard-pressed by Grant at Cold Harbor, Lee had no one besides Imboden’s meager force to confront Hunter’s army in the Shenandoah Valley. In an act of desperation, Lee called upon Brigadier General William “Grumble” Jones to organize a defense force to protect the region. Jones had previously been tasked with defending western Virginia along with portions of eastern Tennessee. Jones responded to Lee’s request with approximately 3,800 troops, which were hastily rushed to aid Imboden’s diminutive

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43 Grant, *The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, Page 424


force. Imboden’s efforts represent excellent tactical decisions based upon the numerical constraints of his force. Imboden avoided any costly battles with the larger Federal army and in turn preserved his force so as to buy time for Confederate reinforcements to arrive.

While Imboden awaited the arrival of Jones and his men, Hunter’s army neared Harrisonburg and by June 3 had arrived in the town. Imboden did an excellent job of holding the Federals in place by blocking their primary avenue south via the Valley Pike. By doing this, Imboden successfully stalled the entire Union force by simply blocking a natural bottleneck in their path. By June 4, Jones had arrived at Imboden’s position near Mount Crawford. Here, the two Confederate commanders devised a plan to lure the Federals out from their position around Port Republic and strike them with the bulk of the Confederate force. Imboden was instructed to move his contingent to Mount Meridian where he was instructed to draw Hunter’s force toward him but not to directly engage the Federals. This was a sound tactical decision that was once again predicated on numerical weaknesses. Here, Jones did a good job of directing his subordinates to avoid direct contact with the enemy so as to mitigate potential losses.

On June 6, Hunter’s force initiated their attack on Imboden’s position. Imboden did as he was instructed and attempted to slow the Federal advance, but avoided any direct clash with the enemy. Imboden slowly lured Hunter’s force closer to the main body of the Confederate army. This tactic worked quite well; by luring the Federals

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47 Duncan, *Lee's Endangered Left*, Page 218-230
48 Patchan, *The Forgotten Fury*, Page 76
toward the Confederate position, it allowed the southern commander to select the place of battle that would be most advantageous to his force. For his main effort, Jones had selected a defensive position near Piedmont, which offered the Confederates the maximum tactical advantage. Hastily constructed breastworks and the difficult terrain made this an adequate place to defend against Hunter’s assault.

Union Colonel Augustus Moor’s brigade initiated the assault on the Confederate strongpoint and almost immediately began to suffer heavy casualties. Here, the numerically inferior southerners used the benefits of a defensive position to help equalize their deficiencies in manpower. When Moor’s brigade began to fall back, Colonel Joseph Thoburn rushed his brigade forward to take some of the pressure off of Moor’s stammering assault. Even with Thoburn’s reinforcements in line, the Confederates were still able to direct sufficient artillery and rifle fire at the two Union brigades to force them into retreat.

The Federals regrouped and reinforced Moor’s brigade and attempted a second assault on the Confederate position, but the southerners enjoyed the cover of breastworks, which drastically improved their survivability rate under enemy fire, mitigating casualties. Union Colonel William G. Ely stated in his post battle report that the Confederate position was very well defended and that Federal efforts to expel the

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52 Patchan, *The Forgotten Fury*, Page 105
southerners proved unfruitful for the better part of the day.\textsuperscript{53} The second attack by Moor began to suffer heavy casualties and was repulsed like the attacks before it. Up to this point, the southerners had done a superb job of resisting a much larger force simply by not exposing themselves to unnecessary risks or performing casualty inducing maneuvers. Jones’ performance up until this point had been excellent as he tailored his tactics to suit his smaller army. The Federal Colonel Jacob M. Campbell commented on Jones’ defense by describing the southern trenches and stating “This appeared to be the key to their position, and they held it most obstinately for some time.”\textsuperscript{54} However, following the successful defense against two successive Federal attacks, Jones attempted to exploit the Union reverse and ordered a small counter assault on Moor’s retreating brigade.\textsuperscript{55}

Unfortunately for Jones, this counterattack did not possess the necessary troop strength to overcome Moor’s brigade and the southerners were quickly forced back to their breastworks. This Confederate maneuver ultimately failed because Jones neglected to commit enough troops at once and his halfhearted attack was easily repulsed. This decision represents the first major mistake made by Jones on June 5. Realizing his error, Jones realigned his force and committed Brigadier General John C. Vaughn’s brigade to assault Moor’s beleaguered unit. Although the addition of Vaughn’s brigade to the attack may have been what the Confederates needed to crush Moor, it had disastrous implications for the remainder of the southern battle line.\textsuperscript{56} Prior to this realignment,

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{War of the Rebellion, Series I. Volume. 37. Part 1}, Page 118-129
\textsuperscript{55} Phillips, \textit{The Lower Shenandoah Valley in the Civil War}, Page 56-71
\textsuperscript{56} Charles H. Porter, \textit{Operations of Generals Sigel and Hunter}, Page 73
Vaughn had occupied the center of the southern position. By shifting Vaughn’s troops to assist in the assault on Moor, it left the Confederate center in a dangerously precarious situation.  

The Federals immediately capitalized on this mistake as Thoburn and Moor rushed their brigades into the gap. Now Jones’ small force was disproportionately dispersed along the Confederate line and unable to effectively repel the Union spearhead. The two Federal brigades were able to slice the Confederate position in two and almost immediately the southern line began to crumble into retreat. Colonel Ely lauded the effectiveness of the Union advance in his report of the battle that this final charge on the Confederate stronghold shattered the southern position.  

As Jones frantically attempted to rally his troops, he was struck by enemy fire and killed. This loss shattered the Confederate command structure as it led to significant confusion among the ranks as to who was in command. Major General David Hunter articulated the effectiveness of the Union assault in his report stating that “Moor’s brigade rushed over the works in front, and a brigade of cavalry, under Colonel John Wynkoop, charged upon his right flank and rear. The enemy fled in confusion.” During the ensuing retreat, the southerners lacked organized and effective leadership, which led to a significant number of Confederates being captured.

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57 Patchan, *The Forgotten Fury*, Page 45-67  
Hunter used his greater numbers to exploit his success and pounced on the fleeing Confederates who were unable to organize a cohesive rear guard action. The southerners retreated back toward Lynchburg, leaving Harrisonburg and Staunton firmly in Union control. The sense of desperation following this costly Confederate defeat is indicated in Colonel E.G. Lee’s after action letter to Lee in which he pleaded for reinforcements. Colonel Lee’s statements were not unfounded, as the Confederate force had suffered severe casualties and, of the approximately 5,300 Confederate troops engaged at the battle, roughly 400 were killed or wounded. During the disorganized retreat, the pursuing Federals captured another 1,000 Confederates. What had started out as a successful day for the Confederates had rapidly spiraled into a disastrous defeat.61

Hunter’s force fared much better and of the approximately 8,500 men present, they suffered 900 casualties. Although Hunter’s force initially struggled to crack the southern position, they were eventually able to exploit weaknesses in Confederate command decisions.62 At the onset of the battle, Jones possessed a much smaller force, which he should have attempted to preserve by maintaining his defensive position at Piedmont. Jones should have never put his small force at such risk by attempting to leave his breastworks and attack Moor’s brigade. The southerners had been successfully repulsing Federal attacks with ease and there was no reason to forfeit the tactical advantages offered by the trenches. Furthermore, Jones committed a grave error when he opened a gap in his small force by realigning Vaughn’s troops. This fatal mistake, the

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62 Patchan, The Forgotten Fury, Page 151
culmination of both numerical deficiencies and tactical errors, ultimately cost Jones the day, and his life.  

Following the devastating defeat at what would become known as the Battle of Piedmont, Lee recognized that he needed to devote a force to operate consistently in the Valley to ensure the protection of his rail lines to the deep South, as they were essential to the survival of the capitol. Further, the continued presence of Hunter forced Lee to act quickly and he dispatched Jubal Anderson Early with approximately 15,000 troops to defend Lynchburg. The city had become an important hub in the supply structure that supported Richmond. It had a hospital along with other supply depots that made it an integral component to Lee’s defensive strategy. Rail lines that passed near the city were also vitally important, as they were utilized to rapidly shift troops to and from the Shenandoah Valley. With Lynchburg in peril, Imboden and Brigadier General John McCausland’s cavalry continued to harass and impede, if possible, Hunter’s movements in the Shenandoah. During this phase of the campaign, very little transpired other than minor skirmishes and occasional clashes between cavalry units. However, by June 11 Hunter’s force had reached Lexington and in the ensuing days burned VMI in retaliation for their participation in the battle of New Market.

By June 17, Early’s force had arrived outside of Lynchburg and sought to confront Hunter’s force there. Early, however, opted not to make the same mistake as Jones by forcing a needless and costly attack. Instead, Early examined the terrain and

63 Patchan, The Forgotten Fury, Page 167-68

64 George G. Morris, Lynchburg in the Civil War (Lynchburg: H.E. Howard, 1984), 42-45

65 Duncan, Lee’s Endangered Left, Page 186-201
sought to capitalize on existing fortifications and topography. Early elected to utilize a redoubt approximately 1.5 miles from Lynchburg as the anchor point for his line. On either side of this fortification, he extended his trenches so as to prevent the possibility of a Federal flanking attack. Early ordered Major General John B. Gordon’s division to defend the left flank of the redoubt while William Lewis situated his brigade to guard the Confederate right. Early’s decision to occupy this position, rather than attacking Hunter’s, was sound as it prevented unnecessary casualties while simultaneously protecting the rail lines near the city. Early’s arrival to Lynchburg, just before Hunter, gave him the opportunity to create an intricate defense that gave him a substantial advantage. Grant expressed this after the war when he wrote, “To meet this movement under General Hunter, General Lee sent Early with his corps, a part of which reached Lynchburg before Hunter.” Grant went on to lament how the arrival of the Confederates before Hunter precluded the Federals from taking and holding the city.

Hunter claimed in his after action report that he was unsure of the size of the Confederate force and that throughout the night before, had heard the movement and drums of what he claimed was a sizeable enemy force. Uncertain of the Confederate troop strength, he initiated a series of probing maneuvers to gauge the strength of Early’s force, which numbered about 14,000. Hunter, although possessing about 17,000 men, made a sound tactical decision by simply probing the southern line. This tactic only put a small segment of his force at risk and did not open Hunter up to sustain heavy casualties,

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67 Phillips, *The Lower Shenandoah Valley in the Civil War*, Page 128, 156
68 Grant, *The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, Page 521
thus preserving his numerical supremacy. Although this tactic was sound, it would not have been necessary if Hunter had acted more aggressively earlier in the day as the Confederate force was slow to get in position. Nonetheless, Hunter ordered Jeremiah Sullivan’s and George Crook’s divisions forward to test the strength of the Confederate center. This action proved unfruitful as the southerners had developed a well-defended series of battle lines that made an assault here a costly prospect. Meanwhile, Colonel Alfred Duffié was tasked with flanking around the Confederate right and exploiting any potential weaknesses there.\textsuperscript{70} This action availed little success for the attacking Federals as Confederate Brigadier John McCausland was able to repulse the Union flanking attempt. Furthermore, the Confederates worked to extend their lines in order to prevent Federal flanking endeavors.\textsuperscript{71} Hunter wrote after the action regarding the Confederate positions that they were seemingly impenetrable. He clarified his reasoning for not pressing the attack when he stated, “Their works consisted of strong redoubts on each of the main roads entering the town…flanked on either side by rifle pits.”\textsuperscript{72}  

Realizing the futility of an attack on the well-defended Confederate positions, Hunter opted to recall his deployed units and relinquished control of Lynchburg to the Confederates. The Battle of Lynchburg ultimately resulted in little more than elaborate troop movements with moments of heavy skirmishing. Although no dramatic clash transpired, this battle is a powerful example of how the prospect of attrition dictated Confederate tactics, thus resulting in a strategic victory with virtually no losses. It is also

\textsuperscript{70} Charles H. Porter, \textit{Operations of Generals Sigel and Hunter}, Page 82  
\textsuperscript{71} Morris, \textit{Lynchburg in the Civil War}, Page 78  
evidence that Hunter was keenly aware of the impact of attrition and how strong enemy
defensive emplacements could change the course of a battle. Early did an excellent job
of defending his flanks so as to prevent any attempt by the Federals to reach his rear.
Early’s choice to remain in his defenses rather than force an attack was excellent. By
doing this, Early sustained no casualties while achieving the desired effect of protecting
Lynchburg. Overall, this low casualty battle is a powerful demonstration of how attrition
can be controlled by tactics and in turn result in a strategic success. Following the action
at Lynchburg, Hunter retreated out of the Shenandoah Valley into West Virginia leaving
the region in Confederate hands. The lack of casualties at Lynchburg allowed Early to
immediately begin operations in the Valley without needing to reorganize or tend to the
wounded. By preserving his force of 14,000 men, Early was able to throw off Union
operations in the region and capitalize on new opportunities.73

The battles of New Market, Piedmont, and Lynchburg all stand as excellent
tables of the correlation between tactics and attrition. The relationship between these
two factors is obvious when analyzing the conditions that led to the Confederate victory
at New Market. The ability to consistently manage changes on the battlefield while
mitigating risks was essential to southern success at this battle. This relationship further
crystallizes when examining the blunder at Piedmont. What initially appeared as a
Confederate victory rapidly evolved into a complete failure as the southern commander
failed to account for the casualties he would receive by splitting his force. Furthermore,
the decision to divide his army was a severe tactical mistake that resulted in nearly 1,000
men being captured. Finally, the Confederate success at Lynchburg stands as fitting coda

73 Joseph Judge. Season of Fire: The Confederate Strike on Washington (Berryville: Rockbridge Publishing
Company, 1994), 12-17
for this phase of the campaigns in the Shenandoah Valley as it is a prime example of the interplay between tactics and attrition. Here, Early avoided costly maneuvers thus preserving his force by either forcing Hunter to attack or retreat. Together, these three battles, when juxtaposed, demonstrate a pattern that develops between battlefield tactics and the ever-loomng risk of attrition.
Chapter Two: Early’s Valley Campaign

By 1864, the Shenandoah Valley had become accustomed to the horrors of war. Since the early days of the conflict, both the Union and Confederacy had vied to assert their supremacy in the Valley. By the summer of 1864, the war was going progressively worse for the Confederates and by June, Robert E. Lee’s army was encircled while attempting to defend Petersburg from Ulysses S. Grant’s besieging force.

Many explanations for the outcome of various campaigns have been made and many emphasize an array of topics. This research, however, will examine the relationship between battlefield decisions and attrition and how together they altered the outcome of the campaign. For the purposes of this study, attrition will be defined as any time that troops are no longer capable or effective in combat roles. Attrition, in this sense, is quite often referring to casualties but also general fatigue. It can, however, refer to the detailing of troops to tend to wounded, or any other activity not a direct result of fighting. Furthermore, attrition may refer to the elimination of usable and effective troops due to the chaos and disorganization of battle.

As the Union stranglehold around Richmond tightened, the Confederate General Robert E. Lee devised a strategy to alleviate some of the pressure on the beleaguered city. He instructed General Jubal Anderson Early to clear the Shenandoah Valley of Union forces so as to retain Confederate control of the region and its resources. In addition to regaining control of the Valley, Lee tasked Early with striking at points north of the Valley and possibly threatening Washington D.C. The task of sweeping the Valley of Union troops was not easy, but the retreat of Union General David Hunter’s army into West Virginia made this temporarily possible. This left the Shenandoah clear of any
significant Union force to contest a Confederate advance. The vacated Shenandoah Valley provided an opportunity for Early’s southerners to pursue the second part of Lee’s order, which was to disrupt Union operations north of the Valley and possibly threaten the defenses around Washington. It was Lee’s hope that the presence of a strong Confederate force disrupting railroads and challenging Union supremacy in the region would cause concern and warrant a realignment of Union troops.74 Even Grant, in his memoirs, recognized the implications of leaving the Valley void of any Federal armies when he stated, “Meantime the valley was left open to Early’s troops, and others in that quarter; and Washington also was uncovered. Early took advantage of this condition of affairs and moved on Washington.”75 It is doubtful that Lee realistically expected Early to occupy Washington D.C.; however, it was plausible that the defenses around the municipality could be seriously harassed if Early effectively marshaled his resources and swiftly moved down the Valley toward Northern Virginia. If points north of the Potomac or Washington itself could be threatened, it might result in a dilution of the Federal army around Petersburg, thus alleviating pressure on the Confederate army defending the city.

Early made good use of the vacated Shenandoah Valley and rapidly moved north toward Winchester, Virginia. The Confederates decided against remaining in the Valley but rather employed a more aggressive strategy. Early opted to continue north and after passing through Harpers Ferry was soon situated just outside of Frederick, Maryland. He had successfully moved his entire army north and had prevented it from dispersing over the long march.76 By advancing beyond Winchester, the southerners were operating in

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74 L.W.V. Kennan, *The Valley Campaign of 1865*, Page 34-35
75 Grant, *The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, page 521
76 Bernstein, *The Confederacy’s Last Northern Offensive*, Page 34
enemy territory and needed to have all troops readily available so as to take advantage of time sensitive situations. He mitigated his deficiencies in manpower by maneuvering in such a manner that maximized the potential of his small army. Early’s efforts to prevent the dilution of his force are evidenced in various decisions from July 1-9. On July 5, Early decided to bypass the Federal garrison at Harpers Ferry rather than attempting to take the position with his whole army and subsequently need to leave a contingent of men to occupy the town and defend it. The decision to maneuver around Harpers Ferry represented a sound tactical move for the Confederates. By engaging the small Federal garrison defending the town, Early would have lost valuable time that would have given the Union forces closer to Washington the opportunity to improve their defenses. It is difficult to speculate how many casualties may have been incurred by an attempt to take Harpers Ferry, but it is certain that it would have consumed time and resulted in potential losses. Following his maneuvering around Harpers Ferry, Early quickly moved across the Potomac at Shepherdstown and advanced toward Frederick, Maryland. The Confederates met light resistance and skirmished with Federal cavalry until finally arriving on the outskirts of Frederick, Maryland on July 8. Here, Early was presented with an important decision that determined the nature of his operations for days to come. The Confederate army had the opportunity to occupy and raze the town, which certainly would have been a fulfillment of Lee’s order to draw Union attention away from Petersburg and Richmond, but rather than getting mired in a resource-consuming pseudo occupation, or spending the valuable time to burn the town, Early opted for a more expedient approach. Early held Frederick for ransom and urged the city officials to pay

77 L.W.V. Kennan, *The Valley Campaign of 1865*, Page 34-35
the Confederates a sum of $200,000 to prevent him from burning the city. The officials eagerly paid the ransom, which kept Early from delaying around the town longer than necessary.\textsuperscript{78} The ransom represented an important Confederate success, as it was a Union embarrassment and demonstrated to the public that the Confederates still exercised the ability to threaten the Northern population. Furthermore, Early’s decision to avoid an occupation and keep his army moving east was tactically sound, as it kept his force together and allowed his army to retain a numerical advantage over smaller Union forces operating east of Frederick.\textsuperscript{79}

The Union high command, aware of Early’s presence north of the Potomac, dispatched two infantry brigades from the Richmond and Petersburg area to address the new Confederate threat. However, until these reinforcements arrived, the Federals had only a small force of fewer than 3,000 men that could hope to delay the advance of Early’s army, which consisted of approximately 14,000 troops. Union Major General Lew Wallace positioned his small force at Monocacy Junction where he believed a bottleneck existed that the Confederates would need to pass through in order to attack Washington or Baltimore.\textsuperscript{80} By July 8, only a fraction of the troops dispatched from Petersburg had arrived to reinforce Wallace and the Federal troops were drastically outnumbered. Grant recognized that Wallace’s efforts would only at best delay the Confederates and wrote after the war “He (Wallace) could hardly have expected to defeat him (Early) badly, but he hoped to cripple and delay him until Washington could be put

\textsuperscript{78} Frank Vandiver, \textit{Jubal’s Raid: General Early’s Famous Attack on Washington in 1864} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992) 56-77, 89

\textsuperscript{79} Bernstein, \textit{The Confederacy’s Last Northern Offensive}, Page 55

into a state of preparation for his reception." With the addition of General James B. Rickett’s Division of approximately 3,500 men, Wallace’s force still had less than 7,000 troops at its disposal. Early’s efforts in the days prior gave the southerners a numerical advantage as the Confederate general had prevented the dispersion and dilution of his force. The Confederates severely outnumbered the Federals nearly two to one as the southerners numbered approximately 14,000. Early initiated a series of well-formulated probing maneuvers that were designed to give the Confederates a more complete appraisal of the size and positions of the Union army. Early’s actions indicate that he was aware of the potential for a large Union force to be operating in the area as he was moving in northern territory. Furthermore, Early marched among a population that was less likely to provide valuable intelligence of enemy positions and useful topographical reports. This lack of key intelligence forced Early to maneuver more cautiously as he recognized how his lack of intelligence prevented overly aggressive tactics. In addition to these shortcomings in intelligence and civilian support, Early was operating as an independent army far from any viable reinforcements. To this end, it was imperative that the Confederates move cautiously.

It is necessary to recognize how topography influenced Early’s decisions. The Union force under Lew Wallace had positioned itself overlooking the Monocacy River so as to impede the advance of any Confederate attack. The only viable bridge into

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81 Grant, The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant, Page 521

82 Leepson, Marc. "The ‘Great Rebel Raid.’" Civil War Times, August 2007 (Volume XLVI, number 6)

83 Vandiver, Jubal’s Raid, Page 76-79

Monocacy Junction was also well defended as the northerners had utilized a series of structures and trenches to create an imposing fortification. If Early were to attack Wallace’s troops, he would need to cross the river at some point. Rather than performing a frontal assault or crossing the well protected bridge, Early effectively employed a series of flanking maneuvers that allowed his army to cross the river approximately a half mile north and south of Monocacy Junction, thus keeping the Confederates out of range while they crossed the river. By doing this, Early almost entirely bypassed the Union stronghold at the bridge. Here, the prospect of casualties directly impacted Early’s tactics and demonstrates how the Confederate commander designed his attack in a fashion that would preserve his small fighting force while neutralizing his opponent.

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In his memoirs, Early articulates his decision-making process at Monocacy and explains how his desire to mitigate needless losses helped shape tactics. He explains how a frontal assault across the river would be quite costly and that he sought a way around

the Union center. The Confederates split their forces into three separate wings each responsible for pressing the attack in a different direction. Early dispatched Major General Robert E. Rodes’ division to strike Wallace’s position north of Monocacy Junction. Rodes’ Division outnumbered Erastus Tyler’s brigade and quickly overwhelmed the Federal contingent forcing them to retreat to the east. In addition to Rodes’ attack, the Confederates employed Major General Stephen Dodson Ramseur’s division to divert Union troops to the center of Wallace’s line by feinting a frontal assault, which subsequently weakened the Federal’s flanks. Early’s memoirs indicate that Ramseur’s Division was to act in a diversionary capacity rather than to attempt to drive the Union center from the field, which according to Early would be quite costly. Early’s superior numbers allowed him to envelop the Union position and overwhelm Wallace’s much smaller force. It is important to recognize the tactical and organizational difficulties inherent to this attack. Wallace’s defenders had positioned themselves in relatively static positions and initially did not need to concern themselves with complex maneuvers. Early, however, was forced to manage and coordinate a myriad of moving parts that were all mutually dependent on one another. The Confederate general needed to synchronize all of his attacks to achieve a victory that did not come with high southern casualties. In this regard, Early faced a much more complex tactical equation than that of Wallace as he attempted to push the Federals from their stronghold.


Once across the river, the Confederate commander encountered a new series of challenges. To the south of Monocacy Junction existed a series of undulating hills and obstacles that were just high enough to obscure the position of Wallace’s main force. Confederate Brigadier General John McCausland’s cavalry was the first to come across the 1,500 entrenched Federal troops lying in wait on the other side of the hills. After an initial assault on the Union position, Early realized McCausland’s cavalry did not possess the combat power to overcome the Union line. Early utilized his numerical superiority as he ordered John B. Gordon’s entire division to attack the Union strong point in hopes that overwhelming force would quickly dispatch the enemy and limit casualties. In John Gordon’s memoirs, he recalls the rough terrain that the Union used to their advantage. He elaborates on the various difficulties that existed in attempting to march a battle line through various obstructions such as fences and ravines. He explains these obstructions would immediately cause the Confederate line to become “tangled and confused.” Rather than attack the Union with various piecemeal maneuvers that would most likely result in high losses and be repulsed, Early committed Gordon’s entire division to rapidly address the problem and subsequently sustained relatively few casualties. Despite the rough terrain, Gordon’s division overwhelmed the Union position on the southern portion of the field and successfully drove them into retreat. Gordon reminisced on this moment in his memoir as he praised his troops and the enthusiasm, which resonated

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91 Bernstein, *The Confederacy’s Last Northern Offensive*, Page 130

92 Vandiver, *Jubal’s Raid*, Page 87


throughout his ranks as they charged and broke the Federal position. Gordon recalled, “I ordered ‘Forward!’ and forward they went. I recall no charge of the war, except that of the 12th of May against Hancock, in which my brave fellows seemed so swayed by an enthusiasm which amounted almost to a martial delirium; and the swell of the Southern yell rose high above the din of battle as they rushed upon the resolute Federals and hurled them back upon the second line.”

Early’s plan to outflank the Union troops on either side of Monocacy Junction directly resulted in fewer casualties and allowed the Confederates to take advantage of their numerical superiority. By the evening of July 9, the Union force under Wallace had vacated Monocacy Junction relinquishing control of the crossroads to the Confederates. The southern victory was the result of conservative, casualty mitigating maneuvers, as well as Early’s efforts to keep his army together and to preserve the numerical strength of his force in the days leading up to the battle. Simply from a numerical standpoint, it is clear that the Confederates reaped the benefit of having a larger force that had not been whittled down by attrition from extraneous clashes in days leading up to the battle. Estimates of the Monocacy engagement vary; however, most reports indicate that the defending Union units suffered approximately 1,300 casualties while the attacking Confederates suffered only 700.

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96 Vandiver, *Jubal’s Raid*, Page 43-47
Following the war, Early and John Gordon became fierce opponents, as they were quite critical of each other’s actions during the conflict. This contention did not prevent Early from applauding Gordon along with his other lieutenants in his memoirs as he describes the Confederate attack as “gallant” and uses dramatic phrases such as “threw the enemy into great confusion” and “forced him from his position.” Despite having to cross a river and attack a well-positioned enemy, Early was able to win the day and mitigate potential losses. His tactics evidence that he remained cautious during his advance and subsequently preserved his fighting force. If Early did not make a concerted effort to protect his fighting force, he could quickly find himself dramatically outnumbered far from any reinforcements. It should be noted, when considering the roles of tactics and attrition that Wallace’s diminutive force did not possess enough troops to defend all the fords along the Monocacy River near Monocacy Junction. If Wallace possessed the necessary troops to sufficiently extend his line, he may have prevented the Confederate flanking attack. However, this numerical deficiency permitted Early to perform his flanking maneuvers quite effectively, which resulted in a northern defeat. This clash is excellent evidence of how tactics were dictated by the prospect of casualties and the role that numerical disparities played in the conduct of battle.

The Federal defeat at Monocacy opened the route from Frederick, Maryland to Washington D.C. and Early’s Confederates seized the opportunity to move on the Union capital. Wallace’s troops represented the last remaining Union army between the Confederates and the capital. Although Early had achieved a victory, it only spurred the Union to bolster its defenses around Washington. Early had achieved limited success by winning a minor battle at Monocacy, but he still desired to divert more attention from

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Richmond and Petersburg. Hoping to create disruption and calls for reinforcements to the Army of the Potomac, he made few efforts to disguise his movements as he marched toward Washington D.C. and by July 11, the southerners had reached the city’s outer defenses.  

It is not entirely clear what Early’s intentions were with regards to his assault on Washington D.C. The city was well supplied, as it was not encircled or besieged in any way. The city retained unimpeded access to the Potomac and necessary supplies arrived daily to feed the garrison there. Furthermore, a ring of interconnected forts spanned the circumference of the capital protecting the city. It was obvious, given the situation around Richmond and Petersburg, that besieging a city required inordinately large armies and access to an exponentially larger force than Early’s command. Considering these factors, it stands to reason that Early had no real expectation of occupying or besieging the massive city.  

Despite Washington’s extensive defenses, it should be noted that the garrison had been significantly depleted as troops were pulled away from installations like Fort Stevens to support the Union siege at Petersburg. Reports indicate that approximately 13,000 Federals were present to defend the capital during the battle of Monocacy. This number, however, is not representative of the actual number of effective, usable troops available. Many of these were wounded or reserve units that were not in actuality capable of contributing to the Union defenses. The number of effective combat troops spread throughout various forts was closer to 9,000, as Grant had

100 Bernstein, The Confederacy’s Last Northern Offensive, Page 62

101 Vandiver, Jubal’s Raid, Page 102-116

previously pulled units from these fortifications to replace casualties his force suffered at Spotsylvania and Cold Harbor. This dilution of Federal troops garrisoned in Washington made the prospect of a successful Confederate attack at the very least plausible.

Although Early was able to keep his army together on the march from the southern Shenandoah Valley to Monocacy, he was not as successful in his traverse from Frederick to Washington. By the time lead elements of Early’s army had arrived around the outskirts of the city, his troops were significantly disorganized, dispersed and they were exhausted, being detailed to tend to the wounded and prisoners. Early even admits in his memoirs that a great many men were detailed to bury dead and escort the gravely wounded to the rear. The need to reorganize and address wounded and missing slowed the march to Washington for many units. Rather than slow the advance of his entire army so as to keep his force together, Early permitted elements of his army to outpace the slower fatigued units, which spread his army out. Here, fatigue and casualties played an important role in Confederate maneuvers as repercussions from the previous day’s battle hindered the Confederate advance. In his memoirs, Early admits to detailing specific units with time-consuming tasks that delayed their march to Washington. Early does exonerate himself of some blame as he expounds on the inordinately hot and dusty conditions, which slowed the march of the more fatigued units. The road to Washington is a superb example of the relationship between tactics and effects of

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103 Leepson, Marc. “The ‘Great Rebel Raid.’” Civil War Times, August 2007 (Volume XLVI, number 6)

104 Vandiver, Jubal’s Raid, Page 56-59

105 Jubal Anderson Early, Jubal Early’s Memoirs, Page 389-391

106 Jubal Anderson Early, Jubal Early’s Memoirs, Page 389
attrition. Early allowed attrition and disorganization to spread his army out and he lost the ability to rapidly engage his entire force against the enemy.

Early’s actions in Maryland spurred Grant to finally dispatch divisions from the VI and XIX corps to reinforce the positions around Washington. By July 11, vessels carrying Union troops from Virginia arrived in Washington, D.C. almost at the same time as lead elements of Early’s Army of the Valley approached the city’s protective ring.\textsuperscript{107} The initial phases of what would become known as the Battle of Fort Stevens are inextricably linked to the previous day’s march and ultimately the Battle of Monocacy. Although Early possessed a numerically superior force in total, he did not have the necessary troops on line to strike at the Union defense. Early was forced to delay his assault on the northern stronghold, which gave the Federals the advantage of time to organize a defensive strategy.\textsuperscript{108} In his memoirs, General John B. Gordon explains the grave implications of Early’s late arrival as he notes that lead elements of the Confederate column saw that Fort Stevens was undermanned and could be easily taken if whole army had been present. Gordon himself states that he saw entire breastworks left empty as the Union defenders awaited reinforcements. Following Gordon’s critique of Early’s late arrival at Washington, he goes into an analysis of Early’s character and hints that perhaps Early lacked the courage necessary to go through with an attack of this nature. Gordon’s estimation of Early’s tactical acumen would become progressively more negative as the campaign continued.\textsuperscript{109} Perhaps Gordon believed that Early’s thin columns and slow

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\textsuperscript{107} Bernstein, \textit{The Confederacy’s Last Northern Offensive}, Page 105-126
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\textsuperscript{108} Cox, William V. “General Early’s Advance on the Capital and the Battle of Fort Stevens, July 11 and 12, 1864.” Records of the Columbia Historical Society, Washington, D.C. Vol. 4 (1901), pp. 138-144
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march was not a mistake but in fact indicative of a deeper conservative timidity. Regardless of motivation, the results and implications of Early’s actions were the same. While the Confederates delayed, the Union enhanced their defenses at Fort Stevens and prepared for an enemy assault. Early does admit that when lead elements of his army arrived at Fort Stevens, the breastworks were “thinly manned”; however, this window of opportunity quickly closed with the arrival of Federal reinforcements. Grant stated after the war, “Early made his reconnaissance with a view of attacking on the following morning, the 12th; but the next morning he found our entrenchments, which were very strong, fully manned.” Early committed an error by allowing his army to arrive late and piecemeal, but he also made another tactical error by delaying his assault, which only made the prospect of a successful attack more precarious.

The Confederates were at a significant disadvantage as they prepared to assault the Federals in a well-fortified position. Fort Stevens was an imposing fortification that boasted nearly 20 heavy artillery pieces nestled behind extensive trenches and embankments. The Union had designed the position to act as a strong point that could dominate the northern approach to Washington. They cleared potential avenues of attack around the fort so as to prevent an enemy from having any cover from the fort’s artillery. Furthermore, the Confederates did not enjoy the numerical superiority, as

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110 Cox, William V. “General Early’s Advance on the Capital and the Battle of Fort Stevens, pp. 140-146
111 Jubal Anderson Early, Jubal Early’s Memoirs, Page 390-392
112 Grant, The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant, Page 500
113 Vandiver, Jubal’s Raid, Page 117-123
combat capable Confederates numbered approximately 10,000. Union forces, well positioned behind imposing fortifications, numbered almost 9,000.\footnote{Judge, \textit{Season of Fire}, Page 54}

Early could have opted for a full-blown assault, which would have required his troops to cross a large open field while exposed to fire, during which the Union batteries could easily cut large swaths in the Confederate battle line. The remaining troops that survived the charge and Federal barrage would then need to scale the steep embankment.\footnote{Bernstein, \textit{The Confederacy’s Last Northern Offensive}, Page 65} If the southerners reached the fort, they would face a significant number of Federals that would not easily relinquish control of the position. Compared to the minor casualties sustained by the Confederates at Monocacy, an assault on Fort Stevens could possibly cripple Early’s ability to continue operations north of the Potomac River.\footnote{John Henry Cramer, \textit{Lincoln Under Enemy Fire: The Complete Account of His Experiences during Early’s Attack on Washington} (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2009), 89-101}

Given the potential for significant Confederate losses, it behooved Early to implement a more conservative strategy. On the afternoon of July 11, Early initiated a series of probing measures that would allow him to gauge the strength of the Union position. Similar to his tactics at Monocacy, it was important for Early to gain necessary intelligence so as to avoid needless risk to his force. The Confederates deployed a series of skirmish lines that were to ascertain the location and troop strength of Federal units around the fort.\footnote{Cox, William V. “General Early’s Advance on the Capital and the Battle of Fort Stevens, pp. 140-146} However, any intelligence that the Confederates gathered could not be
immediately acted upon as Early was still waiting for the remainder of his spread-out force to arrive on the battlefield.

Because Early commenced his attack the evening of July 11, he allowed the Federals to confirm the exact location of the Confederate attack. Prior to the Confederate advance on Fort Stevens, Union leaders remained uncertain whether Fort Stevens, or one of the other defensive fortifications ringing Washington, would be the intended target. The Confederate skirmish line gave away Early’s intention to attack Fort Stevens, which spurred the Union to bolster the units defending the fort.\textsuperscript{118} By the evening of July 11, additional elements of the VI and XIX corps arrived to reinforce the existing defenders. Early’s decision to initiate skirmishing and demonstrate intent to attack Fort Stevens without his entire fighting force represents a tactical mistake, as it eliminated the prospect of a Confederate surprise attack once Early’s entire force had assembled.\textsuperscript{119} If Early had delayed his probing maneuvers until the remainder of his army had arrived, it may have increased the possibility of mounting a successful assault. Furthermore, the Confederates did not begin their attack until around 2:30 p.m. on July 11.\textsuperscript{120} Beginning operations this late in the day limited the opportunity to press any attack to its full potential as a Confederate advance could be derailed by nightfall. Engaging his troops late in the day combined with the lack of his entire force present represents two tactical errors that could have cost the Confederates dearly.\textsuperscript{121}

\begin{enumerate}
\item[120] Judge, \textit{Season of Fire}, Page 89-90
\item[121] Bernstein, \textit{The Confederacy’s Last Northern Offensive}, Page 78-102
\end{enumerate}
Despite the mistake of engaging the enemy without his entire army present, Early did avoid some important pitfalls. On July 11, the Confederates limited their offensive maneuvers to basic skirmishing, which kept the majority of Early’s troops out of any significant danger. Early’s probing tactics were relatively low risk maneuvers, as his skirmish lines were not concentrated enough to suffer heavy casualties. Part way through the evening, the clash became a duel of sorts between Confederate snipers and Union artillery. Finally, night fell and the skirmishing continued but did not lead to any significant action. Early’s decision not to press any large scale attack in this instance is to be applauded as it certainly may have resulted in significant Confederate losses. He resisted the opportunity to attack and in doing so, preserved his fighting force.\textsuperscript{122} By performing a full-scale attack on the Union position, the Confederates certainly may have made an already risky situation into a very costly one. Given the existing evidence it is plausible that Early never really intended to attack Washington, but simply lingered long enough to pull additional Union reinforcements from Petersburg. In this sense Early’s actions were quite successful as he managed to achieve an important goal at little cost.\textsuperscript{123}

On the morning of July 12 Early resumed his scattered skirmishing tactics with Federal units around Fort Stevens. The Confederates did not have any extensive or complex strategy at this point other than to test the Union strength and attempt to determine what, if any, potential weaknesses existed in the Federal line. The Confederates resumed their sniping tactics from nearby houses and buildings that were

\textsuperscript{122} Cox, William V. “General Early’s Advance on the Capital and the Battle of Fort Stevens, pp. 150-155

within rifle range of the Union line. Following a few hours of the oppressive Confederate sniping, the Federals reinitiated their artillery bombardment and significantly damaged many of the homes and buildings the Confederates had been using for cover. Despite the relatively effective artillery barrage, the Confederates were able to hold their position and maintain their fire on the Federals’ position. The major action of the day came around 4 p.m. when Brigadier General Daniel Bidwell was dispatched to quell the Confederate harassment with a frontal assault. Bidwell’s brigade stepped off under withering Confederate fire and immediately began to sustain significant casualties as their battle line was exposed to heavy Confederate rifle fire. As the Union brigade neared the Confederate position, they had also become the target of southern artillery and their casualties began to increase exponentially. Despite the highly effective Confederate fire the Federals were able to push the remaining southerners from their position in the rubble and drive them from the field.

The action at Fort Stevens did not produce significant casualties, but certainly had profound effects for both sides as the Confederates gained increased attention from the Union high command. By the end of the two-day battle, the Confederates had suffered approximately 550 casualties. The northerners sustained around 400 dead and wounded with the majority of casualties incurred during Bidwell’s assault on the Confederate

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125 Cox, William V. “General Early’s Advance on the Capital and the Battle of Fort Stevens, pp. 150-155

position. Early ordered his troops to pull out of their positions around Fort Stevens the night of July 12, thus concluding the battle.127

The late arrival of a percentage of Early’s force to the battlefield represents an important mistake that can be directly linked to the casualties the Confederates incurred.


at Monocacy. Furthermore, Early’s decision to begin his assault so late in the day on July 11 certainly limited the chances for the Confederates to exploit any weakness they discovered in the Union line. Despite these important errors, Early managed to mitigate casualties, preserve the effectiveness of his force, and continue his campaign. Rather than force an attack that would have yielded heavy casualties, Early opted to maintain a presence around Washington, which warranted a deeper Union commitment to the defenses around the capital by drawing troops away from the siege at Petersburg. Rather than risking his entire army to capture Fort Stevens and Washington, Early took a more conservative approach by prolonging a threat to the city. In doing this, Early fulfilled a portion of Lee’s initial order to threaten Washington and draw troops away from the area around Petersburg and Richmond.  

The clash around Fort Stevens is an excellent example of the role of attrition directly influenced Early’s tactics. It is also evident that his battle plan was designed so as to limit potential casualties and to preserve his fighting force. Many historians agree that Early could have taken Fort Stevens, but would have sustained heavy casualties in doing so. It is also questionable as to what extent Early’s operations would have benefitted from this costly attack. Given the size of Early’s force it is improbable that they could have occupied D.C. for very long as Grant would have likely rushed reinforcements from Petersburg that would require the Confederates to make a hasty retreat. Early’s tactics achieved the desired result of draining Union troops from Virginia while simultaneously limiting casualties.  

In this sense, the action around Washington

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130 Cox, William V. “General Early’s Advance on the Capital and the Battle of Fort Stevens, pp. 143
can be deemed a Confederate success as it fulfilled Lee’s order without the high cost of casualties and subsequent attrition.

By July 13, the Confederates returned across the Potomac River into Virginia and began to make their way back toward Winchester. Although the Confederates had withdrawn, the Federals defending Washington were not content with mere Confederate retreat. Major General Horatio G. Wright rapidly mounted a pursuit force to attack Early in his traverse back to the Shenandoah Valley. Wright organized elements of the VI and XIX Corps to pursue the Confederates in hopes that they could trap the southerners before they reached the relative safety of the Shenandoah Valley.\(^\text{131}\) Early’s army was attempting to reach a pass in the Blue Ridge Mountains known as Snickers Gap where he hoped to re-enter the Valley. The pursuing Federals realized this was Early’s intended route and hoped to reach the southerners before they crossed the mountains. The arrival of elements of the Army of West Virginia, which also sought to cut Early’s retreat off before he reached the pass, reinforced Wrights pursuing troops.\(^\text{132}\)

Early immediately implemented a series of screening maneuvers that were designed to protect his flanks and allow the bulk of his army to continue moving toward safety. Federal units, from the front and rear, slowly encircled the Confederates and it was imperative that the southerners kept moving to avoid being trapped.\(^\text{133}\) Early dispatched Brigadier General John B. McCausland’s cavalry to protect the retreating Confederate’s left flank, while Stephen Dodson Ramseur’s division operated to the rear of the retreating Confederate column to ensure that Union cavalry did not reach the

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\(^{132}\) Patchan, *Shenandoah Summer*, Page 91-102

vulnerable Confederates from behind. Lastly, Brigadier General Bradley Johnson was tasked with protecting the southerners’ right flank and ensured that no elements of Wright’s force could strike the northern portion of Early’s column. This elaborate screening maneuver represents a brilliant use of Early’s resources so as to ensure the forward movement of his army. With the encroachment of enemies from the rear and west of Early’s position, he demonstrated a high degree of competence as he orchestrated a myriad of elements so as to prevent a battle. It is evident that Early did not want to fight at what became known as Heaton’s Crossroads. His tactics indicate that he was continuously attempting to disengage from the enemy rather than form his troops for an assault. In his memoirs Early indicates that he did not wish to turn and fight during his withdrawal, but merely attempt to keep his army moving and to deny the Federals an opportunity to fully engage his force. Despite being in Virginia, the Confederates still operated in enemy held territory and were in a precarious position to stage a battle as elements of two Federal armies moved closer.

Early’s maneuvering at Heaton’s Crossroads demonstrates a superb effort to avoid a fight and further exhibits Early’s desire to operate in a fashion that did not put his army at risk of heavy casualties. As the day progressed, the Federals made multiple efforts to probe the Confederate screen, but were continuously repulsed. Although the Federals made multiple efforts to find a weakness and hinder the Confederate’s forward progression, they ultimately failed. By the end of the day Early had achieved his

135 Brice, Conquest of a Valley, Page 79-81
136 Jubal Anderson Early, Jubal Early’s Memoirs, Page 396-398
137 Bernstein, The Confederacy’s Last Northern Offensive, Page 83
intended goal of reaching the gap and crossing into the Shenandoah. Early’s casualty-preventing efforts limited what could have been a full-scale Federal attack into little more than general harassment.

The action around Heaton’s Crossroads demonstrates the direct correlation between conservative tactics and subsequent low casualties. The Confederates, in this instance, made a concerted effort to avoid a fight and it paid off as they avoided multiple attempts by Wright to trap Early up against the approaching Army of West Virginia. Rather than endeavoring to engage elements of the approaching Union force, Early mitigated potential attrition and once again preserved his force’s ability to fight at a later date.

Including the action at Heaton’s Crossroads, the Confederates clashed with Union pursuers three times from July 16 to July 20 At Snicker’s Ferry on July 18, the withdrawing Confederates once again repulsed a Union attack and allowed Early to continue his retreat into the Shenandoah. By July 20, elements of Early’s army had reached Winchester, Virginia and were ordered to remain within the city. Confederate intelligence alerted Major General Stephen Dodson Ramseur of a small Union contingent of approximately 2,500 troops. Seeing an opportunity to strike at this smaller unit, Ramseur enticed the Federals closer, baiting them with a thin skirmish line. Ramseur then moved out of the city’s defenses toward Rutherford’s Farm and sought to surprise the approaching Federals. Ramseur, however, was acting alone and outside the direction

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138 Brice, Conquest of a Valley, Page 79-81


140 Patchan, Shenandoah Summer, Page 89
of Early. The Confederates were promptly routed from the field when Ramseur initiated a poorly executed surprise attack that was flanked by the approaching Union troops. Ramseur had been acting independently from the remainder of the Confederate force and did not have the necessary troop strength to effectively extend his line and prevent a Union flanking maneuver. This insubordination cost the Confederates the battle and approximately 600 casualties. The action at Rutherford’s Farm is an excellent example of the direct correlation between poor tactics and resulting heavy casualties. Ramseur operated without support from the rest of Early’s force, which put his division at risk and resulted in eventual defeat. Although this clash had little effect on the overall conduct of the campaign, it stands as an excellent microanalysis of the relationship of tactics and subsequent casualties.142

Following this defeat, Early moved his army 15 miles south to Fisher’s Hill, Virginia in an effort to reorganize after days of pursuit from Union forces. The Confederate retreat left the northern portion of the Valley open to a Union incursion. The southerners’ withdrawal from Winchester suggested to Wright that the immediate Confederate threat to the capital had been eliminated and that it was safe for the Union VI and XIX Corps to return to the siege around Petersburg.143 One of Early’s primary tasks was to ensure that the Union maintained a presence in the Shenandoah Valley so as to deplete Federal resources encircling Petersburg. Early recognized that he needed to continue operations against the Federals to prevent their return to Ulysses S. Grant’s

141 Brice, *Conquest of a Valley*, Page 82-84


143 Patchan, *Shenandoah Summer*, Page 88-97
siege efforts. Wright had left the Army of West Virginia to act as a sentinel in the northern Shenandoah Valley, and Early saw the smaller Army of West Virginia under the command of General George Crook as a viable target and sought to engage Crook’s army encamped near Kernstown, Virginia.144

On July 24, Early rapidly marched his entire army down the Valley toward Crook’s force. Here Early demonstrated a high degree of competence and tactical acumen as he swiftly moved his large force approximately thirteen miles.145 He did not make the same mistake of allowing his army to become dispersed, as he had in his march from Monocacy to Washington. It should be noted that Early’s march from Fisher’s Hill to Kernstown was not constrained by the same variables as his traverse from Monocacy. Unlike the march to D.C., attrition in the form of casualties and general disorganization did not hamper the movement to Kernstown, and this allowed Early to arrive with his entire army on the battlefield rather than engaging the Union piecemeal as he had done at Fort Stevens.146

Once at Kernstown, Early utilized the local topography to his advantage. The Confederates formed a large battle line anchored by Major General John B. Gordon’s infantry division. The Confederate left was comprised of Stephen Dodson Ramseur’s division, which Early had wisely anchored on a series of rough hills that acted as a natural barrier to Union flanking attempts. In his memoir Early indicates the tactical


importance of anchoring his left on these topographical undulations so as to prevent a
Federal flanking maneuver. Early explains that this action may have saved the day and
ensured a southern victory as the Union was unable to compromise the Confederate left.
Brigadier General Gabriel Wharton’s division made up Early’s right flank. The size of
the Confederate force was still unknown to Crook and he was uncertain whether Early’s
entire army was in fact present on the battlefield. Early masterfully dispatched a
contingent of skirmishers to draw Crook’s force toward the Confederate line.
Miscommunication within the Federal chain of command resulted in a disorganized
attack and the well-positioned Confederate line repulsed various halfhearted Federal
assaults. Finally, during a Federal attack by Brigadier General James Mulligan’s
division, the Confederates discerned a weakness in the approaching Union line. John
Gordon’s division immediately exploited a gap in Mulligan’s battle line and charged
through the void. This action broke the advancing Union line and forced each Federal
unit into headlong retreat.

147 Jubal Anderson Early, *Jubal Early’s Memoirs*, Page 399-400
149 “Kernstown, Second,” CWSAC Battle Summaries: The American Battlefield Protection Program
Of the 13,000 Confederates present at Kernstown, Early suffered approximately 500 dead, wounded, or missing. The 9,000 troops under Crook had significantly heavier casualties of about 1,300. What would come to be known as the Second Battle of Kernstown is an excellent example of how Early implemented conservative offensive tactics that did not put his force at unnecessary risk. Rather than attack Crook’s position, Early raced his army up to Kernstown then enticed the enemy to attack the Confederate position on ground of Early’s choosing. The use of Confederate skirmishers to invite a Union advance worked splendidly and is an excellent example of a conservative assault.

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http://thomaslegion.net/second_battle_of_kernstown_virginia_civil_war_battlefield_map.html
that limited potential losses. Furthermore, it should be noted that Early’s decision to anchor his flank on a topographical feature saved his line from a Union flanking maneuver. In addition to these successful decisions, it must be reiterated how effectively Early was able to move his army thirteen miles so quickly and without the disbursement of his force.

Early took this Union defeat as an opportunity to press his advance north and operate as a raiding force in Union-held territory. Even as he began his retreat back into the Shenandoah Valley, Early dispatched two cavalry divisions under Brigadier General John McCausland to raid points north in Pennsylvania and Maryland. The Confederate cavalry made good use of the Federal retreat at Second Kernstown and capitalized on the unprotected town of Chambersburg. Following the town’s inability to pay a $500,000 ransom demand, the Confederates burned the city, which garnered the attention of northern newspapers and politicians. Following the razing of the Chambersburg town center, the Confederate raiding party continued to disrupt Union communication and transport lines until finally returning to the remainder of Early’s army in mid-August.

July to August 1864 was a dynamic and bloody time for both the Union and Confederate units operating in and around the Shenandoah Valley. Early had exploited numerous opportunities to strike at the Federals and succeeded both in disrupting Union

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151 Patchan, Shenandoah Summer, Page 97-99


153 Correspondence between Couch and Halleck, War of the Rebellion, Series I. Volume. 37. Part 1, Page 333

activity north of the Shenandoah Valley as well threatening Washington D.C. The result of Early’s action was exactly what Lee had desired and instructed in his orders. Early’s disruption north of the Potomac River garnered the attention of Grant and others so as to warrant that a contingent of the forces laying siege to Petersburg be dispatched to address the Confederate threat.

It is clear, given an analysis of the major clashes during this campaign that an inextricable interplay between tactics and numerical disparities as a result of attrition most certainly exists. It is necessary to acknowledge that in many instances the two are determinative factors in the outcome of battles during this campaign. The intent of this analysis is not to oversimplify but to elucidate the causal relationship between tactics and attrition. It is clear that divorcing the role of tactics or attrition from a comprehensive understanding of this campaign is impossible.
Chapter Three: Sheridan’s Valley Campaign

Feelings of desperation became increasingly prevalent as the noose tightened around the besieged Confederate Army of Northern Virginia in the region around Richmond. The southern army under Robert E. Lee had been defending the Confederate capital and was struggling to maintain control of the city. In June, Lee had hoped to alleviate the pressure on the Confederate defenses as he dispatched Jubal Early’s corps into the Shenandoah Valley. Despite some mistakes, Early had successfully disrupted Union operations in northwestern Virginia and had created quite a panic when his force threatened the defensive ring around Washington D.C. The victory at Monocacy and the burning of Chambersburg also garnered further attention from the Union high command, but they failed to relieve the pressure on Lee.  

The threat of a Confederate attack on Washington spurred Ulysses S. Grant to dispatch reinforcements from Petersburg to bolster defenses around the city. Although Washington was successfully defended, Early’s army was recognized as a serious threat and Grant wished to address northern concerns by swiftly neutralizing Early’s force. It is important to note that Grant’s decision to dispatch one of his most competent generals directly correlated to Early’s successes in the previous months. Early’s fulfillment of Lee’s directive to disrupt Union operations forced Grant to take the threat seriously and thus led to Early’s ultimate demise.  

Confederate victories and the burning of Chambersburg motivated a more concerted Federal response, which spurred a meeting between Ulysses S. Grant and Abraham Lincoln at Fort Monroe on July 31, 1864. They sought to shut down Confederate operations in the Shenandoah Valley and eliminate the

155 Wert, From Winchester to Cedar Creek, Page 13-17
156 Grant, The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant, Page 501
ability for Early to continue his raids.\textsuperscript{157} The \textit{New York Times} began to refer to the Shenandoah Valley as the “back door” by which the Confederacy had repeatedly struck the Union.\textsuperscript{158} In an effort to shut this “back door,” Lincoln and Grant agreed to dispatch Phillip Sheridan and a large army to destroy Early’s force. Lincoln remarked in a dispatch to Grant that he sincerely approved of Sheridan being given command of the region and stated, “I have seen your dispatch in which you say, ‘I want Sheridan put in command of all the troops in the field, with instructions to put himself south of the enemy, and follow him to the death. Wherever the enemy goes, let our troops go also.’ This, I think, is exactly right, as to how our forces should move.”\textsuperscript{159} By August 8 Sheridan had arrived in the Harpers Ferry along with his force of approximately 50,000 troops.\textsuperscript{160}

Sheridan’s large force was different from the Union armies that Early encountered in the previous months. For instance, the Union force under Lew Wallace at Monocacy was ill equipped to challenge Early’s larger army. Furthermore, many units that the Confederates encountered were much smaller than the southern force and therefore operated in a reactionary fashion as they attempted to defend against Early’s marauding contingent. Sheridan’s army, however, was specifically tasked with addressing the Confederate army operating in the Shenandoah Valley and preventing it from effectively continuing operations in the region. Although Early’s actions had resulted in a realignment of Union forces, it quickly became evident to Lee that he would be required


\textsuperscript{159} Grant, \textit{The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant}, Page 529

\textsuperscript{160} Gallagher, \textit{The Shenandoah Valley Campaign}, Page 78
to bolster Early so that the Army of the Valley could viably challenge Sheridan’s new
task force. Lee dispatched three brigades to reinforce Early’s army, thus setting the stage
for the first clash of what would become known as Sheridan’s Valley Campaign.\(^{161}\)

By August 16, 1864, elements of the reinforcements that Lee had sent from
Petersburg had spread out in their march to join Early. As Confederate Brigadier General
William Wofford’s brigade made its way through the small river town of Front Royal
Virginia, it encountered a much larger Union contingent comprised of three brigades.
Two of these brigades consisted of infantry units while one was Federal cavalry.\(^{162}\)
Wofford’s brigade had become detached from the remainder of the Confederate force
sent from Petersburg and was subsequently operating independently without the ability to
rely on reinforcements if a precarious situation arose. This dispersion of troops was a
serious mistake as it limited the potential for the Confederates to gain numerical
superiority over an opposing force.

Upon encountering a Union picket line directly north of Front Royal, the
Confederates immediately gave chase rather than attempting to gauge the size of the
Union force. Furthermore, the Confederates avidly pursued the Federal sentries instead
of attempting to determine the exact position of the main Federal force.\(^{163}\) The failure of
the Confederates to successfully acquire vitally important intelligence represents a
tactical error as it set the southerners up for a surprise counter assault. As the southerners
pursued the fleeing Union pickets, they became dispersed and their lines progressively

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\(^{161}\) Wert, *From Winchester to Cedar Creek*, Page 33-45

\(^{162}\) Kennedy, *The Civil War Battlefield Guide*, Page 139

thinned as they crossed various topographic obstacles. The terrain north of Front Royal possesses many natural obstacles such as hills, ravines, and water crossings that made the maneuvering of troops quite difficult. Further, there existed few bridges or fords where the Shenandoah River and various tributaries could be crossed. This made the movements of the advancing Confederates quite predictable to the Federals and they quickly prepared to repulse the southern threat.

Despite the adverse terrain, the Confederates continued their pursuit and were quickly situated at the base of a steep prominent feature known as Guard Hill. Union Brigadier General Thomas C. Devin’s cavalry had positioned themselves along the base of the strong point and the Confederates did not possess the numerical strength to perform a frontal assault on the Union position. The Confederate commanders erred when they permitted their assault to become diluted due to the chaos of battle and the rough terrain. Rather than regrouping, the Confederates attempted a flanking maneuver that required wading across Crooked Run, a chest high stream that runs along the base of Guard Hill. Here the Confederates made yet another tactical error, as they did not gain enough intelligence before committing their force to a flanking maneuver over unknown territory.

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165 Urwin, *Custer Victorious*, Page 34


Wofford ordered his troops through the stream but upon reaching the other side, they were immediately counterattacked by two brigades of Federal infantry. At this point the Confederates were outnumbered nearly three to one and did not possess the combat power to challenge the Union brigades. The Confederates were now trapped between the advancing Federals and Crooked Run as they attempted to funnel back across the creek. Had the Confederates probed the Union position more extensively they may have realized the presence of the two additional infantry brigades.\(^\text{169}\) The failure to perform necessary reconnaissance put the Confederates at a greater disadvantage, as they were unprepared for the Federal assault.\(^\text{170}\) There is no excuse for Wofford’s mistake, as he should have known the tactical implications of trapping himself on the enemy side of a waterway. As the Federal infantry brigades advanced many southern units were enveloped and captured. As the remainder of Wofford’s force attempted to escape, Union Brigadier General George Custer arrived on the field with reinforcements further accentuating the numerical disparity between the two armies. The Confederates were forced into headlong retreat as they were now severely outnumbered.\(^\text{171}\)

Although the majority of Wofford’s force escaped the Union counterattack, approximately 500 were captured or killed. Confederate losses were in fact quite high when compared to roughly 100 Union casualties. This clash is an excellent example of how numerical disparities, as a result of dilution and attrition, combined with tactical


\(^{171}\) Urwin, *Custer Victorious*, Page 76
errors resulted in a disastrous situation for the Confederates.\textsuperscript{172} The dispersing of troops on the way to the Shenandoah Valley from Petersburg set Wofford’s brigade up for a scenario where they would not be able to capitalize on an opportunity due to the lack of manpower. The engagement at Guard Hill is a superb example of the relationship between the effects of attrition and battlefield tactics as the southerners committed a series of grave errors that prevented them from accurately ascertaining the enemy’s strength and position, thus resulting in heavy losses.\textsuperscript{173}

Despite the heavy southern casualties, this engagement had little effect on the overall campaign as the Confederates resumed their march toward the remainder of Jubal Early’s army. Five days after the battle at Guard Hill, the two armies once again clashed at what is now Summit Point, West Virginia. On August 21, 1864, Early devised a plan to strike at Sheridan’s army encamped around Charles Town, West Virginia. Early ordered an elaborate flanking attack and split his force into two wings. Early would command one wing while he ceded control of the other to Major General Richard H. Anderson.\textsuperscript{174} Early hoped to flank either side of the Union position outside of Charles Town and converge with the two segments of his force simultaneously on either side of the Federals.\textsuperscript{175}

Early’s tactic relied on a well-synchronized movement of units to maximize the number of available troops for combat. The Confederate maneuvering targeted a small


\textsuperscript{173} Kennedy, \textit{The Civil War Battlefield Guide}, Page 67


\textsuperscript{175} Wert, \textit{From Winchester to Cedar Creek}, Page 22-41
portion of Sheridan’s force to ensure that the southerners would have a numerical advantage. This flanking endeavor represents a sound tactical decision as it mitigated the Confederate deficiencies in manpower. Furthermore, Early was tasked with orchestrating an array of moving parts that made his tactical equation quite complex. The Federals, however, enjoyed the benefit of a defensive position that did not require them to coordinate elaborate troop movements.

The initial Confederate attack was relatively successful as it surprised a segment of Sheridan’s force; however, after initial contact, the Confederate onslaught stalled as the Federals quickly countered the southern attack with a series of controlled retreats that were designed to delay the southern advance. Major General James Wilson’s cavalry division quickly repulsed Anderson’s column. Wilson’s division effectively screened the Federal withdrawal rendering Anderson’s assault ineffective. Early’s wing met resistance from elements of the VI Corps that replicated Wilson’s screening maneuvers. Together the Federals progressively disengaged with the Confederate attackers in an attempt to prematurely conclude the engagement. Rather than pressing the advance, Early opted for a cautious approach that would limit potential losses. While the Federals continued their delaying actions, Early was wise not to commit the majority of his troops and by the evening of August 21, neither of the armies had suffered significant casualties. By the following morning, the engagement was concluded when Sheridan’s force moved approximately three miles east to the small hamlet of Halltown, West Virginia.¹⁷⁶

Despite the inconclusive result of this clash, Early did avoid heavy casualties by operating in a fashion that avoided putting his army at undue risk. The Confederate’s

initial plan relied on isolating a smaller portion of Sheridan’s larger force thus balancing the numerical scale in the favor of the southerners. Although this maneuvering did not yield the results that Early had initially desired he did not make a poor situation into a disastrous one. Early could have pressed his attack on the evening of August 21 as the Federals drew the southerners closer to the main body of Sheridan’s army. This would have placed Early’s force in a precarious position, as the Confederates would be in danger of being enveloped by the numerically superior Union army. In this regard, Early demonstrated sound tactical decision-making as he limited the potential for defeat and attrition. By the end of the day, the Confederates suffered only 500 casualties, while the Federals sustained approximately 700 losses. These low casualties are further evidence that both armies sought to avoid the pernicious effects of attrition and preserve their fighting forces.

On August 28, Early’s force encountered a cavalry division at Smithfield Crossing under the command of Brigadier General Wesley Merritt. The Confederates promptly pushed the Union troopers north until Federal reinforcements arrived which inhibited the Confederate assault. Here again, Early broke off the attack when Union reinforcements deprived the southerners of the numerical advantage. Following the action at Smithfield Crossing, Early moved the remainder of his force south to Winchester, Virginia. Sheridan promptly followed Early south and positioned his

178 Wert, From Winchester to Cedar Creek, Page 54
179 Wert, From Winchester to Cedar Creek, Page 22-41
180 Wert, From Winchester to Cedar Creek, Page 33-42
army approximately 3 miles west of the Confederates. Seeing an opportunity to strike at Sheridan’s force, Early dispatched Major General Joseph Kershaw’s division to test the Federal position and determine the strength and location of Sheridan’s units. Rather than committing his entire force to an uncertain situation, the Confederate commander opted for a more cautious approach that only risked one of his divisions. This lowered the potential for heavy casualties as it kept the majority of Early’s army out of the fight.\textsuperscript{181}

On the evening of September 3 at around 4:30 P.M. Kershaw assaulted Joseph Thoburn’s division of the VIII Corps situated directly west of the Federal force. The decision to initiate the attack so late in the day was problematic as it limited the opportunity for the Confederates to exploit any weaknesses in the Union line before nightfall. Nonetheless, Kershaw’s Division moved forward and engaged in heavy skirmishing for the next few hours.\textsuperscript{182} Here, Kershaw exhibited sound tactical reasoning, as he simply maintained sporadic contact with the enemy but did not initiate a full-scale assault, as he did not possess the troop strength to break the Union line without incurring heavy casualties of his own. Once again, numerical strength and the prospect of casualties were dictating the tactics of Early’s army. Realizing the need to achieve numerical supremacy both sides quickly rushed in reinforcements; however, this achieved very little as nightfall forced a premature end to the fighting. Early’s decision to bolster Kershaw’s division was instrumental in avoiding a Confederate defeat as Kershaw’s unit had suffered over 300 casualties and was in danger of being severely outnumbered when further Union reinforcements arrived. It is clear that Early’s decision,


\textsuperscript{182} Reports of Thoburn, War of the Rebellion, Series I. Volume. 43. Part 1, Page 367-369
motivated by an aversion to attrition, leveled the playing field and prevented a potentially disastrous situation.\(^{183}\)

On the morning of September 4, both sides had heavily reinforced their lines and the Federals occupied a well-fortified defensive position with extensive earthworks. The topography in this region is wrought with steep undulations and interconnected ravines, which limited the avenues of approach for a Confederate attack.\(^{184}\) These topographical constraints along with the numerical superiority of Sheridan’s force made the prospect of a southern assault quite precarious.\(^{185}\) Maps produced by Early’s chief cartographer Jedediah Hotchkiss indicate that any Confederate advance would be funneled into narrow avenues of attack, which would make the approaching southern lines easy targets for Union artillery. Early avoided this costly endeavor and withdrew his army thus concluding what would become known as the Battle of Berryville.

The relationship between tactics and the prospect of casualties and other forms of attrition is readily apparent in the opening stages of Sheridan’s Valley Campaign. The cautious sparring of both armies directly resulted in relatively insignificant overall casualties. The clash at Berryville is a superb example of the correlation between cautious well-implemented tactics and low rates of attrition as neither side suffered over 400 casualties in this engagement.\(^{186}\)


\(^{184}\) Wert, From Winchester to Cedar Creek, Page 55-62

\(^{185}\) Reports of Hayes, War of the Rebellion, Series I. Volume. 43. Part 1, Page 401-405

The inconclusive results of the previous week’s battles did not deter Early from capitalizing on a new opportunity. Following Early’s retreat from Washington and his subsequent return to the northern Shenandoah Valley, he had done little to fulfill Lee’s

directive of disrupting Union operations. Aside from the razing of Chambersburg, little had been done to warrant the presence of Sheridan’s army of 50,000 men. Early’s relatively unobtrusive movements can, to some extent, be attributed to the increased Union presence in the region as Sheridan’s powerful force severely inhibited Confederate operations. Following the Battle of Berryville, Early wished to replicate his successful raiding missions from earlier in the year and sought to take an expeditionary force north and strike at the Union railroad network. Despite the proximity of Sheridan’s force, the Confederate commander sought to strike at the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad hub located in what is now Martinsburg, West Virginia. In order to do this, Early would need to move elements of his army north from Winchester in order to stage a successful raid against the Union depot. This would require Early to discreetly maneuver his army north without alerting Sheridan of his intent to raid West Virginia. Although Early wished to covertly reach Martinsburg, his movements were hindered in several important ways. The primary route that a large army could use from Winchester to the B&O was the Valley Pike, which was adequate for the movement of artillery and ancillary wagons. Although this road was ideal for rapidly moving an army, it was the only viable route that a force of Early’s size could use to travel up and down the Valley. This meant that movement was relatively predictable and Sheridan’s pickets could rapidly discern Early’s intent to strike north.

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188 Reports of Hayes, War of the Rebellion, Series I. Volume. 43. Part 1, Page 401-405
189 Gallagher, The Shenandoah Valley Campaign, Page 5-27
Despite the predictability of Early’s movements, he opted to move approximately 19,000 men up the Valley Pike on September 19, 1864. In their journey to reach the B&O, the Confederate column began to spread out along the road. It is unclear exactly why this was permitted to happen, but it proved to be a fatal mistake. It is difficult to ascertain if Early intended for the dispersing of his troops in order to protect his supply lines and avenue of retreat. The proximity of Sheridan’s much larger force of 50,000 men may have spurred Early to protect his supply lines by leaving units to act as pickets in the event of a Federal advance. The second explanation for the dispersing of Early’s corps is a simple inability to keep his force together over the long march. Perhaps Early did not emphasize the importance of concentrating his units to his lieutenants, which subsequently resulted in the thinning of his force. This was Early’s first tactical error of what would become known as the Third Battle of Winchester. The dilution of Early’s force reduced the combat effectiveness of his army as no single unit was adequately supported to exploit opportunities or defend against attacks. This mistake is quite similar to Early’s error during his march from Monocacy Junction to Washington D.C. where he also permitted the thinning of his army.\textsuperscript{191} Grant, in his memoirs, “Early had invited this attack himself by his bad generalship and made the victory easy.” Grant went on to state, “But his forces were separated and, as I have said, he was very badly defeated. He fell back to Fisher’s Hill, Sheridan following.”\textsuperscript{192} Even Grant, years later, recognized Early’s error of permitting his force to thin out in their raiding mission.

\textsuperscript{191} Scott C. Patchan, \textit{The Last Battle of Winchester: Phil Sheridan, Jubal Early, and the Shenandoah Valley Campaign} (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie, 2013), 65

\textsuperscript{192} Grant, \textit{The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant}, Page 366
Early’s significantly smaller and diluted contingent was an easy target for Sheridan, and the Federals quickly mobilized to strike at the vulnerable Confederate column. Sheridan’s army camped around Berryville raced toward the rear portion of Early’s force just north of Winchester at Stephenson’s Depot. Sheridan indicated in his memoirs, “he promptly proceeded to withdraw so as to get the two divisions within supporting distance of Ramseur’s, which lay across the Berryville pike about two miles east of Winchester, between Abraham's Creek and Red Bud Run.” This is clear evidence that Sheridan recognized the implications of Early spreading out his army and demonstrates Sheridan’s ability to discern weaknesses in his opponent. Despite Sheridan’s intent of surprising the Confederates, the topography between Berryville and Winchester was not conducive to the rapid movement of Sheridan’s force and the Federals quickly became clogged in the steep ravines, which acted as bottlenecks. Sheridan should have realized the topographical constraints of his intended route, which severely inhibited his approach. This tactical error gave Early the necessary time to reconnoiter and move the remainder of his raiding force south to meet the Federal assault.

Early, however, made a fatal error almost as soon as elements of Sheridan’s force made contact with his column. Early opted to fight at Winchester, however, prior to the clash the majority of Early’s army was on the Valley Pike and enjoyed relative ease of movement. Early should have retained his force and continued to move south, disengaging from Sheridan’s surprise attack all together and allowing Early to select


194 Wert, *From Winchester to Cedar Creek*, Page 34
better ground further south. If Early had retreated south he may have been able to defend positions around Fisher’s Hill or Front Royal where the topography was more favorable. However, it is plausible that after weeks of sparring both commanders desired an opportunity to crush their opponents in a full-fledged encounter. It is also possible that Early did not realize Sheridan had over 40,000 men at his disposal and the Confederate commander simply underestimated the severity of the Federal threat. Prior to this engagement Early had only encountered smaller elements of Sheridan’s force and he may have erroneously assumed he was once again engaging only a segment of the Sheridan’s army.\footnote{Richard O’Conner, \textit{Sheridan the Inevitable} (New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1953), 204-205}

The Confederates were, however, able to marshal a substantial number of their troops to meet the oncoming Federal attack, but many Confederate units were still spread out in their march back toward Winchester. Early highlighted the dilution of his force in his memoirs by pointing out that Gordon did not arrive on the field until approximately 10:00 A.M. and his late arrival contributed to the overall chaos of trying to organize a cohesive Confederate defense. Here Early’s late decision to consolidate his force began to cause problems as the Confederates were severely outnumbered and desperately needed reinforcements.\footnote{Delauter, \textit{Winchester in the Civil War}, Page 23} If Early had concentrated his force to begin with, he would have had all available troops to quell Sheridan’s frontal assault. Gordon pointed out Early’s mistake in his memoirs by stating, “The reports of the Federal approach, however, did not seem to impress General Early, and he delayed the order for concentration until Sheridan was upon him, ready to devour him piecemeal, a division at
a time.” In his memoir, Early lamented the Confederate numerical inferiority when he stated, “It was a moment of imminent and thrilling danger, as it was impossible for Ramseur’s division, which numbered only about 1,700 muskets, to withstand the immense force advancing against it.” Here a combination of Early’s piecemeal tactics and Sheridan’s overwhelming force began to create conditions for a potential Confederate defeat.

Despite this crisis, the Confederates hurriedly constructed breastworks and utilized the terrain to their benefit. Early anchored his right flank atop a series of hills, which presented an imposing obstacle for the Federals. Early’s effective use of topography helped mitigate the Confederate deficiencies in manpower and offered his troops increased protection from enemy fire. His decision to hold these hills was a superb tactical maneuver as it severely inhibited Sheridan’s routes of advance.

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199 O’Conner, *Sheridan the Inevitable*, Page 200-205

200 Patchan, *The Last Battle of Winchester*, Page 89
Although the Confederate right was well positioned, their center was left in a vulnerable state. The southern center consisted of one infantry division under Major General John B. Gordon. Gordon’s division benefitted from little protection such as breastworks and trenches. Behind Gordon’s battle line was a small patch of woods that made it difficult for Confederate artillery on the other side to observe and cover Gordon’s position. Although Gordon’s men could readily engage an approaching Federal attack, they were unable to benefit from artillery support.\textsuperscript{202} Subsequently, Gordon’s infantry


\textsuperscript{202} Wert, \textit{From Winchester to Cedar Creek}, Page
enjoyed no tactical supremacy by occupying this position. This disorganization was a costly tactical mistake as it left Gordon’s infantry unsupported. Following a frontal assault by Major General William Emory’s XIX Corps, Gordon’s line began to crumble into retreat.  

This blunder resulted in heavy casualties as the numerically superior Federals overran the Confederate center. The Union advance was only blunted when it reached the Confederate artillery on the other side of the woods, which forced a temporary Federal withdrawal. If Gordon had positioned his infantry alongside the artillery, they may have benefitted from the southern cannons and subsequently suffered fewer casualties, as it is doubtful the Federal assault would have been within rifle range of Gordon’s troops.

The failed attempt to break the Confederate center spurred Sheridan to flank the southern line and he quickly dispatched VI and XIX Corps to assault opposing ends of Early’s position. As the Union battle line separated into two isolated contingents, forming a gap, Early ordered a counterassault into the void. Although this tactic may have worked in other circumstances, the Confederates suffered from heavy casualties and the counter attack quickly stalled. This attempt represented yet another costly tactical error by Early as the Confederates did not possess the numerical strength to take full advantage of such a maneuver and subsequently sustained heavy casualties.

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204 Wert, From Winchester to Cedar Creek, Page 89-94
alludes to his mistake of allowing his force to join the battle in piecemeal fashion in his
memoirs when he remarks, “Had I then had a fresh body of troops to push our victory,
the day would have been ours, but in this action, in the early part of the day, I had present
only about 7,000 muskets, about 2,000 cavalry and two battalions of artillery with about
30 guns; and they had all been engaged.”

Gordon commented in his memoir, “This left practically only Rodes's division and mine, with parts of Ramseur's bleeding
brigades, not more than 6000 men in all, to contend with Sheridan's whole army of about
30,000 men, reaching in both directions far beyond our exposed right and left.”

Gordon’s comments indicate a tone of despair at the severe numerical discrepancies.
Attrition among high-ranking Confederate officers also contributed to the general
confusion and compromised the effectiveness of Early’s force. Early went on to recount
“But on our side, Major General Rodes had been killed, in the very moment of triumph,
while conducting the attack of his division with great gallantry and skill, and this was a
heavy blow to me. Brigadier General Godwin of Ramseur's division had been killed, and
Brigadier General York of Gordon's division had lost an arm. Other brave men and
officers had fallen, and we could illy bear the loss of any of them.”

Earlier in the day, the southern right had held against Federal assaults but
Sheridan devised a plan to outflank the southern stronghold rendering the breastworks
and emplacements useless. Brigadier General James Wilson took a brigade of cavalry

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Sons, 1904), 321

around the far left of the Confederate position in an attempt to get behind Early’s line.\textsuperscript{210}

In this moment, the effects of casualties and numerical deficiencies manifested themselves and inhibited Confederate attempts to extend their line. The southerners were unable to marshal enough troops to sufficiently lengthen their flanks and the Union cavalry forced a collapse of the entire Confederate position. Lemuel Abijah Abbott of Sheridan’s army indicated in his account of the battle the numerical deficiencies of Early’s force. He explained that despite the chaos and confusion of the fight he noticed that the Confederate battle line was very sparse. He articulated how the Confederate line was visibly thin and could not hold out against a Federal assault.\textsuperscript{211} Early stated “The enemy’s cavalry force, however, was too large for us, and having the advantage of open ground, it again succeeded in getting around our left, producing great confusion, for which there was no remedy. Nothing now was left for us but to retire through Winchester.”\textsuperscript{212}

Although Sheridan initiated the attack, Early had chosen the exact location of the battle as he deployed his troops along the heights to the east of Winchester. Early’s selection of ground was problematic as it ultimately inhibited his path of retreat. Early relied on a series of bottlenecks through which his army would need to pass if a withdrawal was necessary. This mistake had costly consequences as the retreating Confederates funneled into the steep ravines between the battlefield and Winchester. The Confederates were attempting to reach the Valley Pike, but the topography hampered

\textsuperscript{210} Wert, \textit{From Winchester to Cedar Creek}, Page 143

\textsuperscript{211} Diary of Lemuel Abijah Abbott, Personal Recollections and Civil War Diary, 1864, Free Press, Burlington, VT.

\textsuperscript{212} Wert, \textit{From Winchester to Cedar Creek}, Page 142-143
their egress and gave the pursuing Federals an opportunity to continue their assault.\textsuperscript{213} This action inflicted further casualties on the battered Confederates as they attempted to flee the Union pursuers. Here Early’s failure to adequately assess the ground and viable routes of escape directly affected rates of attrition. Finally, elements of Early’s Corps reached the Valley Pike where they began their exodus south. Although evening was beginning to set in, the pursuing Federals did not call off their pursuit and cavalry units continued to harass the retreating southern column. The Confederates made little effort to screen their retreat, which made them vulnerable to sporadic fire as the Federals paralleled the Pike.\textsuperscript{214} Finally, the Confederates enjoyed a break in the action when night fell, making it increasingly difficult for the Federals to continue their harassing attacks. Gordon recounted Sheridan’s chase, “The pursuit was pressed far into the twilight, and only ended when night came and dropped her protecting curtains around us.”\textsuperscript{215}

The fighting concluded the night of September 19 and after hours of combat, the Confederates finally broke contact with the enemy. In what would become known as the Third Battle of Winchester the Confederates mobilized approximately 11,500 troops and suffered nearly 3,800 casualties. Sheridan’s force was substantially larger and consisted of over 42,000 men with no more than 5,000 dead, wounded, or missing.\textsuperscript{216} Given these statistics, the southerners suffered substantially higher casualty rates than their opponents, which would profoundly affect the remainder of the campaign. However, Sheridan’s

\textsuperscript{213} Gallagher, \textit{The Shenandoah Valley Campaign}, Page 154

\textsuperscript{214} Patchan, \textit{The Last Battle of Winchester}, Page 56-62

\textsuperscript{215} John B. Gordon. \textit{General Gordon’s Reminiscences of the Civil War} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 323

force did suffer relatively high losses the majority of which came from the bloody frontal
assaults on the Confederate left. Despite these casualties this brazen and direct tactic
achieved the intended result, but at a costly price. Despite Federal losses Lincoln was
well pleased with Sheridan’s results and in a dispatch to him stated, “Have just heard of
your great victory. God bless you all, officers and men. Strongly inclined to come up and
see you.”

In addition to casualties, the Confederates suffered from other forms of attrition as
the shattered army was now disorganized and units were spread out along the Valley
Pike. This disorganization led to further confusion, which dramatically worsened the
Confederate situation. By September 21, the Confederate retreat was halted and Early
found what he perceived to be a defensible position approximately one mile south of
Strasburg, Virginia. Early deployed his army into defensive positions and attempted to
reorganize his depleted force. The arduous march from Winchester severely dispersed
his army at a time when he desperately needed every available man. The tactical
implications of a disorganized fighting force became increasingly evident as Early
attempted to orchestrate a defense of Fisher’s Hill.

Sheridan’s victory did not preclude his force from suffering from disorganization
and general attrition either. Following the Third Battle of Winchester, the Federals were
plagued with similar resource-draining operations such as tending to the injured and
reorganizing after a large-scale battle. Of the roughly 42,000 Federals that fought at

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Winchester, only about 30,000 made their way south to meet Early’s army. The Confederates were in a much more precarious position as they were able to muster no more than 10,000 troops for their defense. In many respects the action that was to take place near Fisher’s Hill was inextricably linked to the engagement at Winchester as casualties suffered there directly affected the following day’s tactics.219

To adequately understand how casualties affected the Battle of Fisher’s Hill, it is imperative to grasp the topographical constraints of the region. The Shenandoah Valley is bracketed by steep mountains on either side and these separate ranges taper progressively closer at the northernmost part of the region. The Blue Ridge Mountains spanned the length of the Valley to the east and terminate at Strasburg. To the west, the Allegheny Mountains define the Shenandoah and a series of knurled foothills around Fisher’s Hill flank the east side. Massanutten Mountain, an offshoot of the Blue Ridge, runs down the center of the Valley, further constricting movement. Here the Shenandoah Valley is no more than 3 miles wide and is wrought with dynamic topographical undulations, which made the maneuvering of troops quite complex. In addition to the steep mountain ranges, the Shenandoah River also weaves through the Valley at this point, further inhibiting the placement of troops.220

If travelling south along the Valley Pike, there are a series of protruding bluffs at Fisher’s Hill that would present an imposing obstacle if adequately manned. These bluffs stretch from Massanutten Mountain west for approximately 2.5 miles and taper off just short of the Allegheny Mountain range. Given the height and length of these bluffs,

219 Wert, From Winchester to Cedar Creek, Page 163-168

Early perceived them to be an adequate defensive position and deployed his troops along the low ridge. Early reasoned to Lee that Fisher’s Hill “was the only place where a stand could be made.”\textsuperscript{221} The Confederates were severely outnumbered, but sought to mitigate their numerical deficiencies with a strong defensive position.

Early deployed Brigadier General Gabriel Wharton’s division on the Confederate right flank and anchored Wharton’s troops tightly up against the steep base of Massanutten Mountain. This prevented a Federal flanking maneuver around the Confederate right, as the steep slope of the mountain did not lend itself to the movement of troops. This was a sound tactical decision that drastically limited the avenues of attack on the Confederate position. This preventative measure further limited the potential for southern casualties as it made a Federal assault from that direction almost impossible.\textsuperscript{222}

The Confederate center was occupied by Major General John Gordon’s division, which formed a small salient atop the bluffs. Gordon’s center was a formidable emplacement as it sat atop the highest portion of bluffs and had a good field of fire as a long field sloped down toward the base of these hills. This made the prospect of a frontal assault by Sheridan’s force quite daunting, as any attacking battle line would be exposed to heavy rifle and artillery fire. To the west of Gordon’s position was Major General Stephen Dodson Ramseur’s division, which comprised the left flank of Early’s entire force.\textsuperscript{223} Ramseur’s unit was the weakest point of the Confederate defense for two primary reasons. First, Ramseur’s portion of the line did not benefit from the landscape

\textsuperscript{221} Various Reports, \textit{War of the Rebellion, Series I. Volume. 43. Part 1}, Page 242-253

\textsuperscript{222} Kim A. O’Connell “Fortifying Fisher’s Hill,” \textit{America’s Civil War} 19, no. 1 (March 2006).

\textsuperscript{223} Wert, \textit{From Winchester to Cedar Creek}, Page 71-117
as the bluffs flattened out into a low point in the center of Ramseur’s position. This meant that the Confederates had no tactical benefits such as cover or hills to repulse a Federal assault there. Second, the left flank was not anchored on any geographic strongpoint such as a mountain or a body of water. Ramseur’s force was simply left floating a half-mile short of Little North Mountain, a segment of the Allegheny range. Early admitted to this tactical deficiency in his memoirs and explained that Ramseur’s portion of the defense “could not then be fully occupied.”

Ramseur’s poor position was the manifestation of a tactical error due to numerical deficiencies caused by casualties and other forms of attrition from previous battles. The Confederates were outnumbered nearly 3 to 1 and simply did not possess the manpower to span the critical half mile gap to the base of Little North Mountain. This left the entire line in a precarious position as a Federal flanking attempt around the Confederate left could succeed thus compromising the entire southern line. Early committed a grave tactical error when he failed to recognize the profound implications of his numerical inferiority, and did not adjust his tactics to accommodate for his now smaller force. It stands to reason that if Early had not accumulated such heavy casualties at Third Winchester, he may have had the troop strength to span the entire three miles, thus eliminating the probability of a successful Union flanking maneuver.

Sheridan quickly discerned the weakness in the Confederate position and capitalized on Early’s tactical error. The Union commander ordered a frontal assault on

224 Jubal Anderson Early, Jubal Early’s Memoirs, Page 423


the Confederate center, which required the Federals to cross the deadly open field opposite of Gordon’s division. This frontal assault was quite risky, as it may have resulted in heavy Federal casualties; however, Sheridan’s superior numbers gave him a degree of flexibility so that he was not limited to the use of conservative maneuvers. Furthermore, Sheridan’s frontal assault was designed to hold Early’s center in place and prevent the Confederates from realigning their troops to support their weak left flank.\textsuperscript{227}

Even Sheridan recognized that a frontal assault by itself would not expel the Confederates from their position as he states in his memoirs, “A reconnaissance made pending these movements convinced me that the enemy's position at Fisher's Hill was so strong that a direct assault would entail unnecessary destruction of life, and, besides, be of doubtful result.”\textsuperscript{228} However Sheridan did not rely solely on his frontal attack as this movement would be accompanied by the main thrust of the Federal attack, which consisted of an elaborate flanking maneuver designed to envelope the vulnerable Confederate left. By late afternoon, Sheridan initiated his bold assault on Early’s beleaguered force. At approximately 4:30 P.M. on September 22, Major General Horatio Wright’s VI Corps stepped off across the long sloping field to reach the Confederate center. An eruption of heavy artillery and rifle fire ensued as the Confederates hoped to blunt the Federal charge.\textsuperscript{229} Simultaneously, Major General George Crook’s VIII Corps wheeled around the Confederate left and successfully reached the end of the southern line. Either one of these Federal assaults may have individually been repulsed but in

\textsuperscript{227} Report of Wright, War of the Rebellion, Series I. Volume. 43. Part 1, Page 152-154

\textsuperscript{228} Memoir of Phillip Henry Sheridan, Personal Memoirs of P.H. Sheridan. General United States Army. vol 2. C.L. (Webster, New York, NY.), 35

\textsuperscript{229} Roy Morris Jr., “Last Stand in the Shenandoah,” America’s Civil War 14, No. 1 (March 2001).
conjunction with one another, they began to overwhelm the outnumbered southerners. Fierce fighting ensued at the Confederate center and Gordon’s division began to give ground. However, it was not until Crook’s Corps made contact with Ramseur’s division that the entire southern line began to collapse. Randolph Harrison Mckim, an enlisted soldier in the Confederate army, articulated in his memoir, the importance of Early’s numerical deficiencies at Fisher’s Hill. He indicated that the sparsely manned Confederate position was readily shattered and pushed from their trenches. Higher level reports echo these sentiments. Gordon commented somewhat sharply on the events: “Our stay was short, however, and our leaving was hurried, without ceremony or concert. It is the old story of failure to protect flanks.”

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Ramseur attempted to extend his line, but lacked the manpower to sufficiently prevent the Federals from out flanking his position. Once the Federals reached the rear of Ramseur’s force, the entire Confederate army began to fall into confusion and began to frantically retreat once again down the Valley Pike. Early did well not to repeat his mistake from Third Winchester when he failed to account for an easy route of escape. At Fisher’s Hill, Early preserved his avenue of retreat and, despite the chaos of defeat, was able to funnel the majority of his troops to the Valley Pike and out of danger. Although


235 Wert, From Winchester to Cedar Creek, Page
Early saved many of his troops, he was unable to extricate much of his equipment and artillery, which Sheridan’s army captured.\textsuperscript{236}

Sheridan erred by initiating his attack so late in the day as the setting sun spelled the end of the battle and a lost opportunity to thoroughly destroy Early’s force. Despite this error, Sheridan’s plan had worked masterfully and the Confederates suffered a second devastating defeat in four days. Gordon summed up the day’s events quite succinctly when he stated in his memoirs, “The battle, or, to speak more accurately, the bout at Fisher’s Hill, was so quickly ended that it may be described in a few words. Indeed, to all experienced soldiers, the whole story is told in one word—‘flanked.’”\textsuperscript{237} Grant, in his memoirs, recognized the feasibility of Early’s defense at Fisher’s Hill states that Sheridan readily flanked the Confederates. Grant indicates a sense of pride in his description of the battle when he comments, “The valley is narrow at that point, and Early made another stand there, behind works which extended across. But Sheridan turned both his flanks and again sent him speeding up the valley, following in hot pursuit.”\textsuperscript{238} Of the 30,000 Federals engaged at Fisher’s Hill, they suffered insignificant casualties of less than 700. The Confederates, however, experienced a much higher casualty rate of nearly 1,100. This is over 10 percent of the troops Early had available at the onset of the battle.\textsuperscript{239} Fisher’s Hill stands as a powerful example of the relationship

\textsuperscript{236} Gallagher, \textit{The Shenandoah Valley Campaign}, Page

\textsuperscript{237} John B. Gordon. \textit{General Gordon’s Reminiscences of the Civil War} (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 326

\textsuperscript{238} Grant, \textit{The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant}, Page 366

\textsuperscript{239} “Fisher’s Hill” CWSAC Battle Summaries: The American Battlefield Protection Program National Park Service, accessed January 3, 2015, \url{http://www.nps.gov/abpp/battles/va120.htm}
between tactical errors and attrition. It is also clear given the analysis that the combination of these two errors directly contributed to Confederate defeat.

Early’s Confederates retreated up the Valley 75 miles towards Staunton and then headed east eventually stopping at Waynesboro, Virginia. By retreating so far south, Early left the entire northern valley vacant and open to Sheridan’s triumphant army. Although Early had temporarily abandoned the northern portions of the Shenandoah Valley, it was a sound strategic decision as his force had been worn down over the preceding days and rendered relatively ineffective. If Early had attempted to engage Sheridan again it could have been disastrous, as the Confederates had lost almost 8,000 men in the previous seven days to various forms of attrition. With these factors in mind, Early’s conservative approach was appropriate so as to avoid further losses. Given the relative security of Waynesboro it is apparent that Early may have been better off directing his army there directly following the defeat at Winchester thus avoiding the potential for a devastating defeat at Fisher’s Hill altogether.

The Confederate retreat was not without consequence as Sheridan’s army slowly followed the southerners eventually stopping on September 26 at Harrisonburg, Virginia. This repositioning marked the beginning of a new phase of Sheridan’s campaign. The crop production of the Shenandoah Valley had always been recognized as an important strategic target for both sides during the conflict. Sheridan, in an effort to deprive the Confederates of these important natural resources, devised a plan to permanently cripple

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241 Wert, *From Winchester to Cedar Creek*, Page 112
the ability of the Shenandoah to supply the Confederate army. Grant had always intended Sheridan’s force to perform such action as evidenced in his July 14, 1864 letter to headquarters in Washington that an army should be created to “to eat out Virginia clear and clean … so that crows flying over it for the balance of the season will have to carry their provender with them.”243 For approximately two weeks, Sheridan dispatched cavalry units on a series of raids to raze and otherwise destroy the farmlands, mills, and barns in the southern portion of the Valley. In this period, Federal cavalry systematically burned large swaths of farmland and anything that could be of use to the enemy.244

The duration of Sheridan’s occupation in the southern Shenandoah Valley was short lived as he soon directed his army north on the Valley Pike towards Winchester, Virginia. During Early’s stay in Waynesboro, his force received desperately needed reinforcements when Lee dispatched approximately three brigades to replenish some of the losses Early received during the earlier portion of his campaign. Lee had reinforced Early’s force so that he could resume his efforts to fulfill Lee’s directive of disrupting Union operations along with protecting the resources in the Valley from Sheridan’s marauding force. The Confederates slowly worked their way north cautiously following Sheridan’s army. On October 9, Union Brigadier Generals Alfred Torbert and George Custer halted their retreat up the valley and attempted to slow the advance of Early’s pursuing force at Tom’s Brook.245 They clashed with Major General Thomas L. Rosser’s cavalry and the superior numbers of the Federals allowed them to quickly route the

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244 Wert, From Winchester to Cedar Creek, Page 88-97

245 Jubal Anderson Early, Jubal Early’s Memoirs, Page 435-436
southerners. To Early’s credit he avoided making this action into a full scale clash as he desperately needed to preserve his fighting force for a more productive opportunity.

Following this relatively small clash, the Confederates resumed their pursuit of Sheridan’s army and by October 12 reached their old positions around Fisher’s Hill. Although Fisher’s Hill was not a wise position to hold during the engagement there weeks before, Early now possessed the troop strength to span the full 3 miles between Massanutten Mountain and the Allegheny Mountains. This was a sound decision as he could sufficiently anchor his line at the base of each mountain, thus eliminating the probability of a flanking attack. Gordon, in his memoirs, referred to the position as “unassailable” and that it could not be flanked as it was a month earlier. It should be noted that occupying this position was only possible with sufficient numbers as Early now had approximately 20,000 men at his disposal.

Aside from the action at Tom’s Brook, Sheridan had little indication that the Confederates were capable of mustering the necessary troops to strike at his larger army. Following the extensive fighting in the previous month and the stunning victories at Winchester and Fisher’s Hill, it is likely that Sheridan assumed Early’s army had been neutralized, at least for the time being. Sheridan certainly suggested as much as he ordered Major General Horatio G. Wright’s VI Corps back to the siege at Petersburg. This realignment of troops would have further balanced the numerical scales by draining Sheridan’s troop strength. However, the VI Corps’ return to Petersburg was halted when

246 Gallagher, The Shenandoah Valley Campaign, Page 89-93


248 Jubal Anderson Early, Jubal Early’s Memoirs, Page 437-438
Early moved his army north from Fisher’s Hill.\textsuperscript{249} The Confederates marched three miles north to the heights around Strasburg and rapidly moved their artillery into position atop Hupp’s Hill. From here they began to shell the Union encampment around Cedar Creek and Belle Grove, a prominent plantation.\textsuperscript{250} Early did a superb job of discretely moving his army to the heights without alerting the Federals of his presence. This sound tactical maneuver gave the southerners an opportunity to strike the Federals and inflict casualties while not placing their own troops at significant risk.\textsuperscript{251} However, this initial success was double edged as it alerted the Federals of the Confederates presence, which spurred Sheridan to recall Wright’s Corps to reinforce the Union position. It is not clear why Early decided to assault the Federals here, as he knew Sheridan had intended to send a portion of his force back to Grant. In his memoirs, Early admits to knowing of Sheridan’s decision to send a portion of his force back to Grant, but opts to assault the Federal position anyway.\textsuperscript{252}

Colonel Joseph Thoburn’s division formed up and assaulted the Confederate artillery atop Hupp’s Hill and a fierce but abbreviated fight ensued. Neither side suffered significant casualties, and the action was relatively inconclusive as night fell, ending the day’s action. Early’s decision to attack before Wright’s Corps had left the vicinity was most definitely a mistake. If Early had paused to gain more intelligence as to the Federals’ precise movements, he would have realized that Wright’s departure would dramatically benefit his prospects in the Valley. Early was operating in a region that had

\textsuperscript{249} Wert, \textit{From Winchester to Cedar Creek}, Page 88

\textsuperscript{250} Whitehorne, \textit{The Battle of Cedar Creek}, Page 46-53

\textsuperscript{251} Hazlett, \textit{Field Artillery Weapons of the Civil War}, Page 243

\textsuperscript{252} Jubal Anderson Early, \textit{Jubal Early’s Memoirs}, Page 437-439
many Confederate sympathizers, which he certainly should have drawn upon to obtain better intelligence.253

Despite the presence of Early’s army on October 16, Sheridan departed for Washington leaving his force camped just south of Middletown, Virginia. Early, unaware of Sheridan’s departure, engaged in a series of counterintelligence operations with the intent of confusing the Federals. Early hoped that a show of overwhelming force would prompt Sheridan to move his army north or out of the Valley completely. The Confederates intentionally provided the Federals with misinformation when they conspicuously signaled, by semaphore, that Early was expecting James Longstreet’s Corps to reinforce him in the Shenandoah Valley.254 When news of this reached Sheridan, he cancelled his journey to Washington and returned to his troops255 Grant, in his memoirs, commented on Early’s blunder stating, “The next morning while at Front Royal, Sheridan received a dispatch from Wright, saying that a dispatch from Longstreet to Early had been intercepted. It directed the latter to be ready to move and to crush Sheridan as soon as he, Longstreet, arrived. On the receipt of this news Sheridan ordered the cavalry up the valley to join Wright.”256 Here again Early’s endeavors backfired as his attempt to intimidate the Federals with the prospect of Confederate reinforcements merely solidified Sheridan’s resolve to remain in the Shenandoah. Given the tenacity and effort that Sheridan had exhibited in the Valley, it is curious that Early would expect a

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253 Noyalas, *The Battle of Cedar Creek*, Page 76


256 Grant, *The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant*, Page 539
tactic of this nature to scare Sheridan into leaving. Previous attempts by Early to make his force appear larger than it actually was resulted in reinforcements being rushed to Fort Stevens and ultimately Sheridan’s arrival in the Valley with 50,000 men. This past evidence should have suggested to Early that his tactic would not achieve the desired effect but rather the opposite. Previously, any show of Confederate force was swiftly answered with Union reinforcements and a concerted effort to neutralize Early’s threat. Early’s endeavor to trick his enemy proved to be yet another mistake that would have profound consequences over the next few days.257

Although the Federals were now aware of Early’s presence, the Confederate commander hatched a daring plan to surprise the encampments around Cedar Creek. The Federals had, in their estimation, made good use of the local topography when they organized their camps around the open fields directly south of Middletown. To the Union right, a series of steep undulating slopes followed Cedar Creek northwest, which made a southern attack from that direction impossible.258 The Shenandoah River, which meandered along a series of steep banks, flanked the Federal left making a Confederate incursion from that side quite unlikely.259

The Union position, however, was not entirely impenetrable, as a little known route around the Federal’s left flank did in fact exist.260 With the help of some locals and chief cartographer Jedediah Hotchkiss, Early was made aware of two shallow fords.

257 Hamlin, *The Battle of Cedar Creek and the Recaptured Guns*, Page 23


259 Whitehorne, *The Battle of Cedar Creek*, Page 107

approximately one mile east of Strasburg along the North Fork of the Shenandoah. Early sought to utilize the fords by covertly moving a segment of his army across the Shenandoah River to strike at the unsuspecting northerners on the other side. Gordon commented on the daring maneuver in his memoirs stating, “It was unmistakably evident that General Sheridan concurred in the universally accepted opinion that it was impracticable for the Confederates to pass or march along the rugged and almost perpendicular face of Massanutten Mountain and assail his left.”261 On the night of October 18, Major General John B. Gordon’s division set out to utilize the fords along the Union left and by the morning of October 19 was in position to strike. In addition to Gordon’s elaborate flanking attempt, Early dispatched Major General Kershaw’s division to cross Cedar Creek and strike Brigadier General George Crook’s Army of West Virginia.262 Directly to the west of Kershaw’s attack Brigadier General Wharton was instructed to move up the Valley Pike and engage the Union right. This formed a three pronged attack that was designed to both surprise and envelope the Union camps.263

261 John B. Gordon. General Gordon’s Reminiscences of the Civil War (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 337

262 Wert, From Winchester to Cedar Creek, Page 259

Although Early’s plan of attack was tactically sound, he had already made his first major mistake by failing to recognize a basic need present amongst his troops. The condition of Early’s Confederates had become increasingly poor as they lacked many basic necessities such as shoes, adequate clothing, and various foodstuffs. Early’s plan depended on his troops surprising the Federals in their camps and pushing them from their position. This tactic would place the Confederate troops in close proximity to many of the goods they desperately needed and would be a tempting opportunity for them to

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slow or even halt their advance. Despite these circumstances, there is no evidence that Early emphasized the importance of keeping his ranks together to his lieutenants and various subordinates. This mistake would have reverberating effects throughout the rest of the day.\textsuperscript{266}

At 5 A.M. Early initiated his three-pronged attack with Gordon’s division slamming into the unsuspecting camps of Crook’s Army of West Virginia. The presence of Gordon’s troops on their side of the Shenandoah River shocked the Federals. Crook’s troops immediately gave way to the charging southern line, which spurred Brigadier General William Emory to reposition his XIX Corps to blunt Gordon’s assault.\textsuperscript{267} Early remarked, “Gordon, however, pushed his attack with great energy, and the 19th and Crook's corps were in complete rout, and their camps, with a number of pieces of artillery and a considerable quantity of small arms, abandoned.”\textsuperscript{268} This realignment opened the path for Gabriel Wharton’s division to march unimpeded up the Valley Pike and strike at the fleeing Federals. By 6 A.M., the entire Union line was in disarray and collapsing as the Confederate pincer movement worked entirely as planned.\textsuperscript{269} Even Grant admits to the effectiveness of the Confederate attack when he said “On the 18th of October Early was ready to move, and during the night succeeded in getting his troops in the rear of our left flank, which fled precipitately and in great confusion down the valley, losing


\textsuperscript{267} Whitehorne, \textit{The Battle of Cedar Creek}, Page

\textsuperscript{268} Jubal Anderson Early, \textit{Jubal Early’s Memoirs}, Page 444

\textsuperscript{269} Wert, \textit{From Winchester to Cedar Creek}, Page 119
eighteen pieces of artillery and a thousand or more prisoners.”

Sheridan also articulates the ferocity of the Confederate assault when he stated, “Kershaw opening the fight by a furious attack on Thoburn's division, while at dawn and in a dense fog Gordon struck Crook's extreme left, surprising his pickets, and bursting into his camp with such suddenness as to stampede Crook's men.”

The Federals were in full retreat and giving up ground at an alarming rate as the Confederate onslaught pushed Sheridan’s battered force toward Middletown. However, initial Confederate success was soon eclipsed by the Confederate commander's inability to keep his force concentrated and on the attack. Early’s failure to prepare for his troops looting the Federal camps resulted in a dilution of his divisions as they made their way through the Union position, ripe with a bounty of clothing and food. Early recounted, “As I passed across Cedar Creek after the enemy was driven from it, I had discovered a number of men in the enemy's camps plundering, and one of Wharton's battalions was ordered to clear the camps, and drive the men to their commands.” He went on to say, “It was reported to me, subsequently, that a great number were at the same work, and I sent all my staff officers who could be spared, to stop it if possible, and orders were sent to the division commanders to send for their men.” This clearly evidences that the Confederates lost exponentially more troops as units were dispatched to retrieve those

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270 Grant, The Complete Personal Memoirs of Ulysses S. Grant, Page 540

Report of Custer, War of the Rebellion, Series I. Volume. 43. Part 1, Page 528


273 Jubal Anderson Early, Jubal Early’s Memoirs, Page 447
that had been broken ranks. Ultimately, the responsibility to manage the troops fell to the commanding general and a strong argument can be made that Early failed by not asserting the necessary control functions to manage his army.  

In addition to this grave tactical error, the attrition from the previous month’s combat began to manifest itself as Confederate numerical deficiencies inhibited Early’s ability to maintain his assault. The troops lost in the fighting from the previous two months were sorely missed as the Confederate columns began to thin out over the mile and a half since the attack began. The Federals continued to flee, but the effective number of troops Early had on the front lines exponentially diminished as he pursued the withdrawing northerners. Here the correlation between tactics and attrition became evident, as Early perceived that he did not possess the necessary manpower to continue his attack.

By noon Early had reached the north end of town where he would make his next and most critical mistake. Early feared his army had become overextended and ordered a halt to his attack. In his memoirs, Early blamed attrition: “It was now apparent that it would not do to press my troops further. They had been up all night and were much jaded. In passing over rough ground to attack the enemy in the early morning, their own ranks had become disordered, the men scattered, and it had required time to re-form them. Their ranks, moreover, were much thinned by the advance of the men engaged in plundering the enemy's camps.” Gordon commented on Early’s halt saying, “We

274 Gallagher, *The Shenandoah Valley Campaign*, Page 143


halted, we hesitated, we dallied, firing a few shots here, attacking with a brigade or a division there, and before such feeble assaults the superb Union corps retired at intervals. 278 This fatal error gave the Federals an invaluable opportunity to salvage what had been a disastrous day. Prior to the battle, Sheridan had been approximately twenty miles away in Winchester, Virginia. Upon hearing of the Confederate surprise attack, he mounted his horse and raced toward Cedar Creek. He arrived to see his army disoriented and fleeing the field. Although the Federals were in full retreat, Early’s army had halted their pursuit giving Sheridan the necessary time to rally his shattered troops and organize a counter attack. 279 Sheridan’s presence on the battlefield had a resounding effect on his men and by 4:00 P.M., they began to push Early’s diluted force south. Early had lost the momentum and Sheridan capitalized on the results of Confederate attrition and tactical mistakes by ordering a full-scale frontal assault on Early’s force. 280

The Confederates, lacking the necessary concentration of troops to repulse the attack, began to crumble under Sheridan’s assault and soon fell into a scattered retreat back down the Valley Pike. The southerners fled to their old positions around Fisher’s Hill and awaited a continuation of the Federal counterattack. Despite this expectation, Sheridan halted his advance at Cedar Creek allowing Early to disengage and regroup what was left of his shattered force. The following day the Confederates fled south

278 John B. Gordon. General Gordon’s Reminiscences of the Civil War (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1904), 338


280 Whitehorne, The Battle of Cedar Creek, Page 50
“Phil Sheridan Riding to The Front”, Harpers Weekly, November 5, 1864.
toward New Market, and within the next week returned to Waynesboro.\textsuperscript{281}

Following the devastating defeat at Cedar Creek, the majority of Early’s troops returned to Petersburg to support Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. The Confederate defeat at Cedar Creek marked the end of Early’s operations in the Shenandoah Valley as his force had been demolished and Union dominance firmly established in the region.\textsuperscript{282} The defeat at Cedar Creek was the culmination of gradually accumulating attrition and faulty tactics that eventually caught up with Early’s force. Of the some 20,000 Confederates present at the battle, they suffered 3,000 casualties. The numerical value of these Confederate losses is somewhat deceiving, as Early’s army had experienced a defeat that severely scattered his force. The southern route dispersed the Confederate army to the extent that Early was unable to reorganize what was left his force into a cohesive fighting unit. In this sense the casualties represented the complete destruction of the Confederate army in the Shenandoah. The Union, on the other hand, fielded over 31,000 troops and suffered no less than 5,500 killed, wounded and missing. Despite Sheridan’s seemingly heavy losses, he managed to effectively marshal his resources so as to ensure the permanent destruction of Early’s army.\textsuperscript{283}

Lee ordered what remained of Early’s army to return to Petersburg leaving the Shenandoah open to the Federals. For the remainder of October and throughout the winter of 1864, Sheridan’s army operated with impunity throughout the region destroying

\textsuperscript{281} Noyalas, \textit{The Battle of Cedar Creek}, Page 45

\textsuperscript{282} “Address by General Jubal Early,” \textit{Winchester Times Extra}, Winchester, Virginia June 7, 1889.

\textsuperscript{283} “Cedar Creek,” CWSAC Battle Summaries: The American Battlefield Protection Program National Park Service, accessed January 5, 2015, \url{http://www.nps.gov/abpp/battles/va122.htm}
whatever they deemed necessary. Even with the return of the troops Lee had sent to the Shenandoah Valley, he was ultimately unable to protect Petersburg and Richmond. By April 1865, Lee capitulated and formally surrendered his army to Ulysses S. Grant, thus concluding major military action in the region. Despite initial success in the Shenandoah Valley, Early ultimately failed in his attempt to disrupt Union operations and permanently tie up the Federal’s resources there. He was also unsuccessful in his bid to protect the resources of the Shenandoah and, following his retreat south, the region remained under Union control for the remainder of the war.

Sheridan’s 1864 campaign in the Shenandoah Valley started off slow yielding little progress against Early’s army. Clashes such as the Battle of Berryville left both Union and Confederate commanders unsatisfied as they both sought a decisive battle with definitive results. Early’s raid north gave Sheridan the opportunity he needed to strike the Confederate force and gain a decisive victory. Early attempted to defend his columns, but was eventually overrun and routed. The Confederate retreat was halted when Early selected a few bluffs at Fisher’s Hill as his best opportunity to turn and fight the Federal pursuers. Despite Early’s attempt to defend this position Confederate losses from previous days and tactical mistakes resulted in yet another Confederate defeat.

Following the stunning Federal victory at Fisher’s Hill, Early retreated south to Waynesboro where he sought to reorganize his defeated army. After a few weeks in the southern Shenandoah Valley, the Confederates once again moved north to engage and defeat Sheridan’s numerically superior force. Early maneuvered his army to Strasburg, Virginia where he staged a daring surprise attack on the Federal army encamped near Cedar Creek. The Confederate surprise attack started off quite well and shocked the
Federals but tactical errors and attrition began to inhibit the southern advance. Eventually the Confederate advance stalled and Sheridan was able to mount a successful counter attack, which shattered Early’s army. Following the action at Cedar Creek, Early’s army in the Shenandoah Valley ceased to exist, thus concluding the Sheridan’s 1864 Valley Campaign. Following Early’s absolute failure in the Shenandoah Valley Lee was forced to relieve Early of his command as both the military and civilian population had lost faith in his ability to command an independent army. The ever tactful Lee wrote to Early “While my own confidence in your ability, zeal, and devotion to the cause is unimpaired, I have nevertheless felt that I could not oppose what seems to be the current of opinion, without injustice to your reputation and injury to the service. I therefore felt constrained to endeavor to find a commander who would be more likely to develop the strength and resources of the country, and inspire the soldiers with confidence.”

This marked the end of Early’s military career and the beginning of his role as an iconic unreconstructed analyst of the war and other’s mistakes.

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Conclusion

The Shenandoah Valley was the backdrop for a tremendous military action throughout the course of the war. The region saw elaborate military campaigns along with a multitude of smaller clashes and partisan activity. Starting as early as 1862 the Valley was the site of full scale military operations where figures like Thomas “Stonewall” Jackson gained worldwide recognition for their exploits and tactical acumen. Both the Union and the Confederacy quickly recognized that the Valley represented an important military objective and devoted significant resources to the region for the remainder of the war.

By mid-1864 Ulysses S. Grant held supreme control of the Union military and rapidly implemented a grand strategy that would devote specific attention to the Shenandoah Valley. The region had been used to orchestrate Confederate forays into the North along with being a source of food production for Lee’s army defending Richmond. Additionally, the Shenandoah provided an excellent avenue of advance toward the vitally important railroad hubs around Lynchburg, which were essential to the Confederate defense of Richmond. These factors, made the region an even greater military target for the Union. Furthermore, the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia quickly found themselves in an increasingly desperate siege around Richmond and Lee sought to dilute Grant’s besieging force by opening a new front in the Shenandoah, thus necessitating a realignment of Federal armies.

The first 1864 campaign in the Valley went relatively well for the Confederates as they won a stunning victory at New Market by marshaling all available resources and limiting casualties. Furthermore, they employed sound tactics which resulted in an
embarrassing Union defeat. The subsequent battles at Piedmont and Lynchburg further accentuated the distinct correlation between attrition and tactics as is evidenced by their outcomes. Early’s campaign in the northern portion of the Shenandoah and his victory at Monocacy stand as excellent examples of how tactics can be utilized to prevent casualties. Additionally, they expose how low attrition paired with sound battlefield judgment is a winning combination. The action at Washington D.C. and the following Confederate withdrawal are all excellent examples of what can be accomplished when tactics are focused to prevent attrition. Sheridan’s Valley Campaign further demonstrates the relationship between battlefield decisions and attrition as he mobilized his force to shatter Early’s army at Winchester and then exploited Confederate attrition for a second victory at Fisher’s Hill. The culminating battle in the Shenandoah Valley at Cedar Creek is an excellent example of the profound relationship between attrition and tactics as it is clear that initial Confederate success was due to the relatively low losses they suffered. Furthermore, the following fatal halt and eventual Confederate route was a direct result of poor tactics paired with heavy losses.

Given the evidence provided within this research, there most certainly exists an inextricable correlation between tactics and attrition. It is also clear that attrition affected the 1864 Valley Campaigns as casualties and troops unavailable for combat dramatically altered the tactics utilized. The relationship between these two factors consistently effected results on the battlefield and the eventual fate of the Valley. The outcome of such a sweeping campaign cannot be linked exclusively to these two factors; however, they do contribute to the overall understanding of the conflict.
It is the hope of this research to redirect the analysis of these Valley Campaigns to incorporate a serious appraisal of tactics and attrition. Any understanding of the outcome of these campaigns cannot be derived without a firm grasp of the relationship between these two factors. In many regards, attrition and casualties dominated the decisions of both sides and it is clear that whoever could best manage these variables drastically increased their chances of success. However, by the summer of 1865, the war was over and the inhabitants of the Shenandoah Valley enjoyed a return to normalcy. The damage from Sheridan’s raids and the bloody battles of the previous years gradually healed and gave way to a new chapter in American history. The hallowed ground that was the site of so much bloodshed returned to farmland, and there was once again peace in the Valley.
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