

# The Battle of the Wilderness, 1864



Battle of the Wilderness

The **Battle of the Wilderness**, fought May 5–7, 1864, was the first battle of Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's 1864 Virginia Overland Campaign against Gen. Robert E. Lee and the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. Both armies suffered heavy casualties, a harbinger of a bloody war of attrition by Grant against Lee's army and, eventually, the Confederate capital, Richmond, Virginia. The battle was tactically inconclusive, as Grant disengaged and continued his offensive.

Grant attempted to move quickly through the dense underbrush of the Wilderness of Spotsylvania, but Lee launched two of his corps on parallel roads to intercept him. On the morning of May 5, the Union V Corps under Maj. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren attacked the Confederate Second Corps, commanded by Lt. Gen. Richard S. Ewell, on the Orange Turnpike. That afternoon the Third Corps, commanded by Lt. Gen. A.P. Hill, encountered Brig. Gen. George W. Getty's division (VI Corps) and Maj. Gen. Winfield S. Hancock's II Corps on the Orange Plank Road. Fighting until dark was fierce but inconclusive as both sides attempted to maneuver in the dense woods.

At dawn on May 6, Hancock attacked along the Plank Road, driving Hill's Corps back in confusion, but the First Corps of Lt. Gen. James Longstreet arrived in time to prevent the collapse of the Confederate right flank. Longstreet followed up with a surprise flanking attack from an unfinished railroad bed that drove Hancock's men back to the Brock Road, but the momentum was lost when Longstreet was wounded by his own men. An evening attack by Maj. Gen. John B. Gordon against the Union right flank caused consternation at Union headquarters, but the lines stabilized and fighting ceased. On May 7, Grant disengaged and moved to the southeast, intending to leave the Wilderness to interpose his army between Lee and Richmond, leading to the bloody Battle of Spotsylvania Court House.