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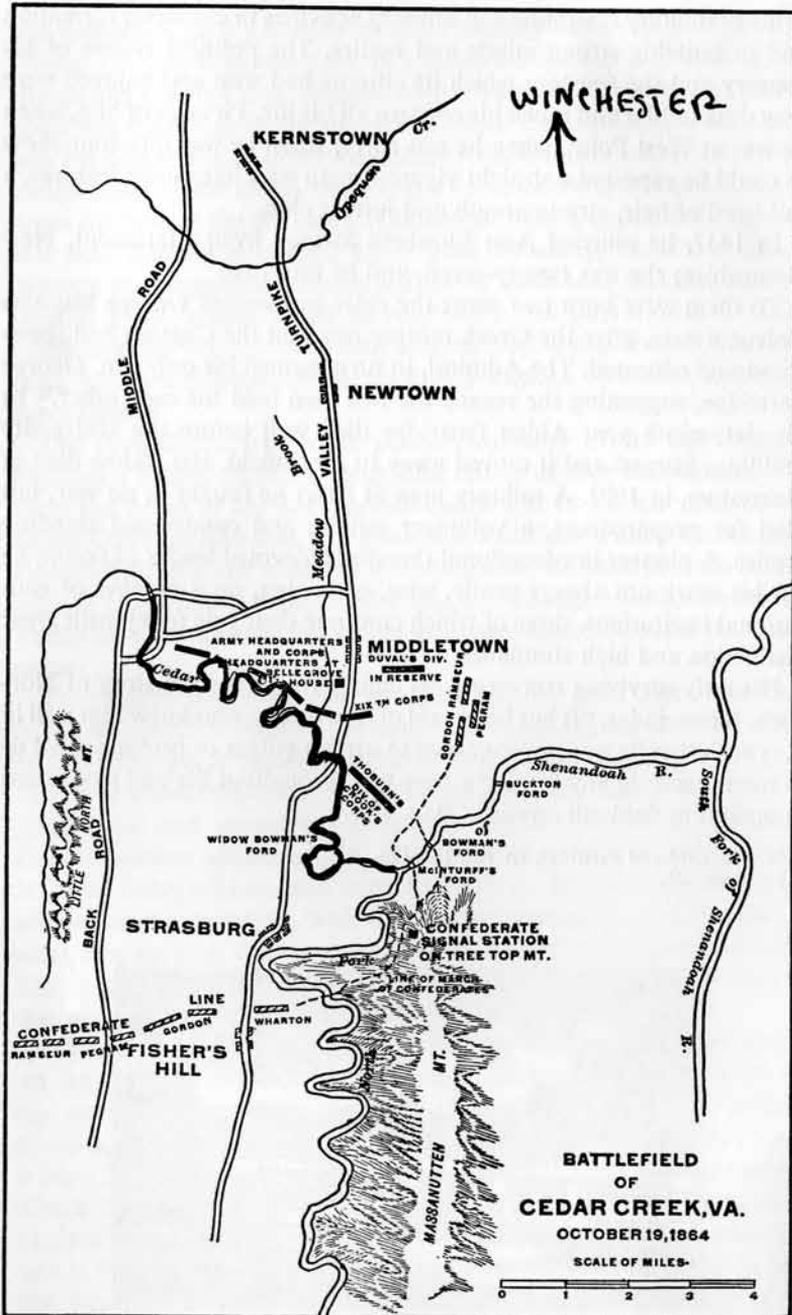
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Vermonters at Cedar Creek

By LOUIS MORTON

OCTOBER 19, the date of the surrender of Yorktown, is not counted one of the decisive dates of the Civil War, nor is Cedar Creek remembered as one of its glorious battles, comparable with Shiloh, Antietam, Chicamauga, or Gettysburg. Yet the date and the event are noteworthy, not only because of the gallant action of Vermont troops but also because the battle itself may be viewed as an important element in the final stages of the drama then unfolding before Petersburg and Richmond, not so many miles away.

To understand why this was so and why the stand of the Vermonters proved so decisive that day, we must turn our attention to the scene of the action, the Shenandoah Valley, and to the events that led to the battle. Nestled in the western part of Virginia, between the Blue Ridge and the Allegheny, the Valley forms an open corridor leading from Harper's Ferry southwest toward the Tennessee. It is a beautiful region, lush and fertile, with an excellent network of roads cutting across its rolling hills and valleys to the mountain passes on each side. Stretching its length from north to south is the Valley Turnpike, a wide, well surfaced road along which an army could march in all weathers and seasons at great speed and in many parallel columns. This was the chosen route for the rebel armies that had invaded Pennsylvania and Maryland earlier in the war.

Both sides thought the Valley vital. It was the breadbasket of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia and the source of many of its supplies. Lynchburg at its southern end was an important communications and production center. Its road and rail net were ideal for the swift movement of troops, and its open fields and sparse woods provided excellent terrain for fighting at close quarters. Since it extended in a southwest-northeast direction, it furnished the Confederacy a natural route to the strategic center of the Union, concealed and protected on the east and west by high mountains. A rebel army moving down the Valley, from south to north, came within striking distance of Baltimore and Washington and the rich farm country of western Maryland and Pennsylvania.

But a Union army marching south would find itself moving farther and farther from Richmond, the strategic center of the eastern theater. Lee, therefore, could use the Valley to threaten the enemy's capital and thus divert forces from other areas to its defense, Grant could not.

General Grant knew this and sought to prevent the use of the Valley for this purpose. So long as Lee held it, the Valley posed a threat to the rear of his Army of the Potomac. It was a threat that he had to counter or neutralize before he could defeat the Confederates. The solution was obvious, though the execution was difficult. It was to gain possession of the road and rail net of the Valley. Not only would this blunt the Confederate threat to his rear, but it would also deprive Lee of an important source of supplies and open the way to a Union assault from the west.

Despite its importance, the Valley had hardly been touched by the war. It had been the scene of brilliant maneuver and hard fighting in 1862, when Stonewall Jackson had taken his men down the Pike. But in the summer of 1864, it bore few scars and was still a land of rich farms with golden fields of ripening grain and rolling pasture land.

Distances in the Valley were not great. From Martinsburg, where the Pike met the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, south to Lexington was almost 150 miles. Harper's Ferry, a short distance from Martinsburg, was about twenty-five miles by road from Winchester. Staunton, the southern terminus of the Pike, lay about 90 miles to the south of Winchester. There and at Strasburg, about twenty miles south of Winchester, railroads passed through gaps in the Blue Ridge into Eastern Virginia. Just north of Strasburg was Cedar Creek, flowing across the Valley Pike to empty into the North Fork of the Shenandoah River.

This was the scene of the battle. The events that led to it had their beginning early in May 1864 when General Grant opened his campaign before Richmond. To cut Lee off from his supplies and to prevent his reinforcement, Grant sent General Franz Sigel, Commander of the Department of West Virginia, into the Valley. Establishing his base at Winchester, Sigel advanced first to Cedar Creek and from there to New Market, where he met the Confederate forces under General Breckenridge. Decisively defeated in the brief engagement that ensued, Sigel withdrew in haste to the hills overlooking Cedar Creek. There he remained, doing nothing. Breckenridge thereupon hastened toward Richmond, arriving in time to join Lee in fighting off the Union forces at Cold Harbor.

The task Sigel had failed to accomplish Grant next assigned to General David Hunter. On June 6, after defeating about 5,000 Confederate

troops, Hunter occupied Staunton, where he was joined by General George Crook from West Virginia. At the same time, General Sheridan headed for Charlottesville for a junction with Hunter. Lee sensed the danger, and sent Wade Hampton and Fitzhugh Lee to stop Sheridan.

This danger averted, Lee sent the irascible and picturesque Jubal Early, now commanding Stonewall Jackson's old Second Corps, into the Valley to stop Hunter, who by this time had reached Lexington and was threatening Lynchburg. Early wasted no time. With his 13,000 men, he hastened to Lynchburg, but Hunter had no taste for battle and beat a hasty retreat. That was bad enough, but for some strange reason he decided to retire west across the mountains instead of north down the Valley. The corridor to the north now lay open and inviting. Only the incompetent Sigel at Harper's Ferry guarded the gate to Washington. It was too good an opportunity to miss, and Jubal Early was too shrewd and bold a commander to let it slip by. Quickly he moved down the Pike and Sigel hastened to get out of the way, moving away from rather than toward Washington. On July 6, Early crossed the Potomac and moved into Maryland. Destroying railroad bridges, capturing supplies, and collecting tribute as he went, Early swept aside Lew Wallace's small force at Frederick and on the morning of July 11 entered the capital. Marching past Silver Spring down Seventh Street, he halted finally before Fort Stevens, one of the forts McClellan had built around the city for its defense. There Early paused to consider his situation and decide what to do.

The defenses of Washington were manned that hot sultry day in July by as rag-tag and bob-tail a force as was ever assembled—government clerks, militia, invalided soldiers, and anyone else the War Department could put its hands on. Fortunately, Grant had dispatched the VI and XIX Corps to Washington, and just as Early was debating what to do, the ships carrying the reinforcements were sailing up the Potomac toward the docks at the foot of Seventh Street.

Jubal Early was unaware of these troop movements, but he had enough to worry about anyhow. He had never expected to get this far, and his orders from Lee did not require him to attack Washington. Sooner or later, he knew, the Union forces he had left behind would unite to close his path of escape. Still, the target was a tempting one, and even if his victory was temporary the effect would be electrifying. On balance, Early decided the gains justified the risks.

But already it was too late. The tanned and hardened veterans of the VI Corps, led by Major General Horatio G. Wright, were ashore and marching up Seventh Street amid loud shouts of joy from the populace.

In the Corps was the Vermont Brigade of the Second Division, one of the very best in the Army of the Potomac. These Vermonters were a tough lot, cool and combat-wise, and as they marched through town they kept a weather eye cocked for the bars and saloons at which they hoped to quench their thirst after they had driven off the rebels.

Quickly the VI Corps took over the line, and that was the end of the road for Early. He tried several times to get through, but finally gave up. It was, wrote one of the Vermonters, "as pretty and well-conducted a little fight as was seen during the whole war."

Never one to argue with fate, Early decided the time had come to get back to safety. After all, he hadn't done so badly. So he collected his wagons and his booty and made off through Rockville toward the Valley, with the VI Corps, now joined by the XIX, in pursuit. For the men of the Vermont Brigade, this chase was remembered as one of the most uncomfortable periods of the war. The weather was steamy, the road dusty and full of obstacles left by the thoughtful Confederates. And then, when they reached the Shenandoah, they were ordered back to Petersburg. They had just completed the journey to Washington and were boarding the transports when orders were changed. Head back to Harper's Ferry, they were told, and start up the Valley again. What had prompted the change was the burning of Chambersburg in Pennsylvania by Early's men. Washington was worried about its safety and the War Department wanted an army between it and Jubal Early.

By now Grant was convinced that he must clear the Valley of Confederate troops, then strip it bare so that Lee could get no more food from it. Quietly he came up from the Petersburg front, avoiding Washington, to arrange matters himself. First he ordered all the troops defending Washington to the vicinity of Harper's Ferry. Then he created a single command called the Army of the Shenandoah, and put General Phil Sheridan in charge. His orders were simple: Destroy Early and the resources of the Valley—". . . eat out Virginia clean and clear . . . so that crows flying over it . . . will have to carry their own provender." Then he left as quickly and as quietly as he had come.

It was August 7 when Sheridan assumed command of the new Army of the Shenandoah. So far it was an army in name only; much had to be done before it would be ready to meet the Confederate regulars. And the job was tougher than it appeared, for he would have to contend also with the guerrillas that infested the Valley, ready to cut his lines, feed off his supply train, pick off stragglers, and report his movements to the enemy. Thus, for the next month, while his cavalry hunted down the guerrillas, Sheridan shook down his little army.

The Army of the Shenandoah numbered about 30,000 combat troops, three infantry corps and three divisions of cavalry, with varying traditions and experience, but all tired and dispirited from chasing Early. First, there was the VIII Corps, remnants of Hunter's old army—two divisions under the command of Brigadier General George B. Crook. Then there was General Emory's XIX Corps, two divisions, veterans of the campaign in Louisiana. It was about twice the size of Crook's corps. But the nucleus of Sheridan's army was General Wright's three-division VI Corps, up from the Army of the Potomac. By now it was worn and tired and badly in need of a rest. In the Vermont brigade, where "the regiments were organized somewhat on the town meeting plan, and the men were rather deferred to on occasion by the officers," discipline was relaxed, "and camp life on the whole," wrote the brigade historian, "was of the easiest possible description." Of the three cavalry divisions of the new army, two—the First under General Wesley Merritt and the Third under General George Custer—were out of the Army of the Potomac.

Against this array, General Early could pit about 20,000 men—his own II Corps, plus Breckenridge's men already in the Valley. Lee had sent reinforcements in August, a division of infantry and a division of cavalry, but had called them back when his troubles increased. Other troops had come in and by October Early had five divisions of infantry, about 15,000 men, two divisions of cavalry, and artillery for a total combat strength of something over 21,000.

It was the middle of September before Sheridan and Early tangled, after Grant had made another secret trip to the Valley. A Vermonter, watching him and Sheridan walking back and forth in deep conversation, accurately observed, "I hate to see that old cuss [Grant] around." When he is, "there's sure to be a big fight on hand." The big fight came on September 19 at Opequon Creek near Winchester. The Union troops won it but by a narrow margin. During the battle, the Eighth Vermont, under Colonel Stephen Thomas, distinguished itself by retaking lost ground. Thomas had been a leading Democratic politician in the State, opposed to coercion of the South. On a recent visit home he had been rebuked by his former associates for abandoning his earlier views. "Thomas," they said, "you've changed." To which he replied, "Only fools never change." But there was no question about his bravery as he led his men across an open meadow at Opequon, encouraging them with the cry, "Remember Ethan Allen and Old Vermont and we'll drive 'em to hell."

Sheridan followed up his victory and pushed Early back up the Valley to Staunton, and then east about a dozen miles to Waynesboro. Then he

withdrew slowly, systematically destroying everything in his path and leaving behind a blackened and burning moor. War has a logic of its own and the drums and flags and parades of 1861 had given way by 1864 to the torch and the grim business of destruction. This was total war with a vengeance.

By mid October the Army of the Shenandoah had settled down on Cedar Creek. Then Sheridan rode off to confer with his superiors about the future of his Army, leaving General Wright, the VI Corps commander, in charge. Grant wanted Sheridan to return up the Valley, cut across through Charlottesville and come in behind Lee. The War Department wanted to use the Army of the Shenandoah in quite a different manner, and Sheridan liked neither plan. But everyone pretty much agreed that the Confederate Army, twice beaten and without food or supplies, was incapable of further action.

So the Army of the Shenandoah settled down to a pleasant rest on the banks of Cedar Creek. The Valley at this point is about four miles wide and the Creek winds unevenly from the northwest across the Valley to empty into the North Fork of the Shenandoah. It was fordable everywhere, but flowed in a narrow channel with steep banks which rose abruptly all along the front. Three-quarters of a mile west of the bridge where it crossed the Pike, a small stream called Meadow Brook flowed into Cedar Creek. This brook paralleled the Pike to the north, passed Middletown about two miles north of the bridge. East of the Pike, where Cedar Creek joined the North Fork, flowed the Shenandoah, along whose eastern side, extending almost to the river's edge, was the Massanutten Mountain, a steep, rugged and isolated range twenty miles in length. On its northern end, close to the mouth of Cedar Creek, were three tops, hence the name Three Top Mountain. On it the rebels had an observation post and signal station overlooking the entire valley to the north.

On the chain of hills north of Cedar Creek was the Army of the Shenandoah. On the right of the line, west of Meadow Brook, was the VI Corps with cavalry guarding its flank. Next to it, between Meadow Brook and the Pike, was the XIX Corps. Holding the left of the line, east of the Pike, was Crook's corps. Thus the Pike was well covered and any attempt to cross the creek there or at any other point would be met by fire from high ground. But on the far end of Crook's corps, originally covered by cavalry which was later withdrawn, was a stretch of open ground extending as far as the junction of the Creek and the North Fork. No troops were posted there, only pickets, since the banks were so steep as to form what appeared to be an impassable gorge. And

directly east of the river loomed the heights of the Massanutten Mountain. It seemed doubtful that even if the Confederates did attack, a most unlikely contingency, they would come from this direction.

But that was just what happened. Jubal Early, his army posted on Fisher's Hill, south of Strasburg and about four miles from Cedar Creek, had few choices open to him. Without food and supplies he could not remain long where he was. He could either leave the Valley to the Yankees, probably permanently, or else attack. Withdrawal seemed the reasonable course, attack impossible. But was it? Except for the VI Corps, the Union troops were not, in Early's judgment, first class. Also, a large part of the Union strength, about one-fourth, was in cavalry, which would not ordinarily be decisive in an infantry engagement. There was the advantage to be gained by surprise, too. And finally there was the position of the Army of the Shenandoah, inviting attack on its left flank. From his observation post on Three Top Mountain, Early had discovered there were two fords across the North Fork of the Shenandoah, and that there was enough level land for his infantry between Massanutten Mountain and the east bank of the river. The impassable gorge was apparently not so impassable.

On the basis of this information, Early conceived a bold scheme that in conception and execution was brilliant. He would send three of his divisions, under cover of darkness, along the base of Three Top, along the narrow stretch of flat land on the east bank of the Shenandoah, only 400 yards from the Union pickets, then across the fords to the left rear of the Union line. The crossing, followed by the assault, would come at dawn.

This was to be the major effort. But to make sure that the Federals did not divine his plan and to divert their attention, Early sent one of his cavalry divisions and a small infantry force to the west, to strike the Union right flank. And he organized a force, placed where the Federals could see it, in position for an advance straight down the Pike. One division and artillery he kept in reserve, to be sent in if the main attack succeeded.

The men began moving into position on the night of October 18, and by three o'clock on the morning of the next day the lead elements were making their way silently, in single file, along the base of the mountain. They crossed Cedar Creek shortly before dawn with slight opposition, for most of the pickets had been removed. As the first light of day glowed murkily through the heavy fog that had settled over the Valley, the Confederate troops took positions for the attack. So far everything had been in their favor—the darkness had been complete, the morning was

chilly and raw, and now a heavy fog hid their presence. At 4:00 A. M. the signal came to attack. With a loud rebel yell, the Confederates fell upon Crook's VIII Corps, while their artillery, massed for the attack, opened fire on the Union line.

The Union troops were taken completely by surprise. The men were wrapped in sleep when the attack came and scarcely realized what was happening. In the face of withering fire and the fierce rebel charge, the dazed Yankees fled in disorder into the smoke and fog. Chaos fell on the camp that only a few minutes before had been so quiet and peaceful. The simultaneous assault on the two divisions occupying Crook's right was an instant success and the entire VIII Corps began to stampede. The Confederates captured the Union artillery and quickly turned it against the Union line. They then wheeled left and driving Crook's corps before them, moved toward the Pike and the left of the XIX Corps.

While General Emory's left units were trying vainly to hold off the rebels, scarcely able to distinguish friend from foe in the heavy fog and confusion, the elements on the right were being rallied to repel the assault, or, if that proved impossible, to hold long enough to permit the Corps to withdraw to safety. The key unit in this operation, largely responsible for preventing complete demoralization of the XIX Corps, was the Second Brigade under Colonel Thomas of the Eighth Vermont, which formed one of the regiments of the brigade. As the gray line swept on the Corps from the flank and rear, Thomas was ordered forward across the Pike to stem the rout. He was without support, the rest of the division having failed to get into the line, and the brigade tried to check the Confederates alone. It was an impossible task. "He made several successive stands," wrote the official Vermont historian, "holding the crest until his brigade was flanked on the right and left by overwhelming numbers." Then he fell back to the Pike, where he repeated the same operation. Finally he rejoined the division. So savage was the struggle as the blue and gray met head on that one of the Vermonters recalled: ". . . men seemed more like demons than human beings as they struck fiercely at each other with clubbed muskets and bayonets."

Much of the fighting concentrated around the regimental battle flags, the colors falling to the dust only to be raised again to the cheers of the troops. The flag of the Eighth Vermont fell more than once. Three color bearers of the regiment were wounded during the battle; but each time one of his fellows dashed forward to take his place, and the flags were saved. Out of 164 men of the regiment engaged that day, 110 were killed or wounded.

But the sacrifice of the Vermonters could not stop the Confederate

tide. The XIX Corps continued to fall back across Meadow Brook and finally gave way. It was still early morning and the scene was one of utmost confusion.

Fugitives, wagons, and ambulances, [wrote General Stevens] were rushing past in ever-increasing numbers. The dense fog and smoke rendered it impossible to distinguish friend from foe at any distance. Unable to see the ground for over a hundred yards, unable to fix the position of other troops, each command was in a measure isolated, while the heavy and continuous firing, the rebel yells, the swarms of fugitives, the whizzing musket balls, the roar of the enemy's guns . . . and the shriek and burst of their shells told only of disaster.

It was at this point that the VI Corps and the Vermont Brigade entered the action.

The VI was the bulwark of the Army of the Shenandoah. Prized for its offensive and defensive skill, it had played a key role in almost every battle it had fought and Cedar Creek was no exception. On its withdrawal to its present position in mid October, General Grant had indicated he would request the return of the VI to Petersburg, and Sheridan, on October 12, sent the Corps to Front Royal, a day's march on the road to Washington. Next day came a change of orders from Grant, and then an intercepted Confederate message to General Early: "Be ready to move as soon as my forces join you, and we will crush Sheridan. [Signed] Longstreet." Confederate troops were beginning to make threatening moves and Sheridan brought the VI Corps back to Cedar Creek, where it went into position on the right, beyond Meadow Brook, from where it could presumably furnish assistance to any threat down the Pike. The Third Division was on the right, the First Division on the left, the Second Division to the rear.

Perhaps the steadiest element of the VI Corps was the Second Division under Brigadier General George W. Getty. Wherever the action was heaviest, there one could always be sure to find the tough veterans of Getty's division. And foremost among these were the men of the Vermont Brigade, composed entirely of Vermont men and including in its number many men of future prominence in the State: governors, judges, congressmen, and state senators. The only brigade in the Army of the Potomac distinctively and permanently known by the name of its state, the Vermont Brigade, was led at this time by Brigadier General Lewis A. Grant. It consisted of the Second Vermont, Colonel A. S. Tracy commanding; the Third Vermont, Major Horace Floyd; the understrength Fourth, attached to the Third; the Fifth led by Major Enoch Johnson; the Sixth, down to battalion strength, commanded by Captain E. R.

Kinney; and the Eleventh under Lieutenant Colonel Charles Hinsdon. Time and again the Brigade had provided the base around which the division had stiffened and emerged victorious. October 19 was to be one of its glorious days.

The VI Corps on the morning of the battle occupied a wooded knoll on the west bank of Meadow Brook. As the attack progressed, it held long enough to allow the disorganized XIX Corps to pass through into positions to its rear. The brunt of the Confederate assault fell first on the Third Division, which was defending the artillery. Attacked on the front and left, the division gave way and the enemy was immediately on the artillery, capturing one of the batteries and threatening the others. With the First Brigade of the Third Division was the Tenth Vermont, Colonel W. W. Henry commanding. At the sound of the first volley, the Tenth had fallen into line, and now, seeing the guns in danger, moved in quickly to head off the rebels. The Confederates recoiled before the fire of the Vermonters, and the Vermonters brought off the guns by hand. For this action Colonel Henry received the Medal of Honor, but the entire regiment performed admirably, losing nearly one-third of the 300 men who had stood in the line that day.

Despite this and other notable actions, General Getty, who had temporarily assumed command of the corps since Wright had taken Sheridan's place, realized that he could not withstand the Confederate assault. He decided, therefore, to move his men back to more advantageous ground where he might make a stand with the XIX Corps, if it could be formed in time. He therefore ordered the First and Third Divisions to the rear to form a line, and placed his Second Division, now under the Vermont Brigade commander, Lewis Grant, on a wooded ridge overlooking Meadow Brook and the Pike from the west.

The stand of the Vermont Brigade on this knoll was one of the decisive actions of the day, if not the decisive one. At approximately 8:30 A. M. the Confederates began to feel out the Union line, where the Vermonters, as one observer noted, "showed their customary aptness in skirmish duty." The Vermont Brigade, commanded by Colonel Tracy, was in the center of the line, behind the crest of the hill, flanked by the Third Brigade on the left and the First on the right. The rebel attack came at 9 o'clock and the Fifth Vermont and a battalion of the Eleventh led by Major Enoch Johnson dashed down the hill and across the brook to drive back the rebel skirmishers there, capturing many prisoners. Driven back in their first attempt, the Confederates tried again. This time they were met by a well timed volley at thirty yards, followed by a sudden

and spontaneous rush from the Union line. The winded rebels fell back in great confusion, pursued half way down the slope by the cheering Vermonters and the Third Brigade.

The Second Division then reformed to await the next assault. It was not long in coming, and this time the fighting raged more fiercely. Again the Vermonters did yeomen's work. When the Third Brigade on the left began to give way, the two left regiments of the Vermont Brigade swung back without confusion to maintain the line while keeping up a steady fire. This was a difficult maneuver in the heat of battle and there was great danger of disorganization and panic as the Third Brigade troops began to give way. But the perilous moment passed, and one of the Third Brigade officers sprang to the front, shouting: "Don't run, men, until the Vermonters do." But the Vermonters never did and the men of the Third Brigade rallied and stood firm.

The Confederate commander, twice repulsed, now withdrew to report to General Early. Deceived by the ferocity of the defense and the counter attack of the Second Division, he believed that the entire VI Corps was opposing him, and so reported to Early. Many of the Confederate troops were busily engaged in looting the Union camp, and Early, fearing attack by the VI Corps while his own army was disorganized and out of control, called off the attack, giving the Union Army time to set up a new position. This delay of several hours was the turning point of the battle, for it gave the Union forces the time needed to reform shattered lines.

The new line was to be about a mile north of Middletown. Already the XIX Corps was taking up its positions there, across the Pike. The VI Corps would take its place on the left. The VIII Corps if it could be re-assembled would be to its left, east of the Pike. The cavalry was to take its place on the flanks, General Custer on the right and General Merritt on the left. It was eleven o'clock when the line was finally formed above Middletown. Union troops were still streaming to the rear in disorder. Wagons and horses clogged the Pike for miles, and the fields on each side were crowded with men seeking to escape. The Confederates held Middletown and it seemed likely that they would soon make a final push. There was no doubt about it—the Army of the Shenandoah had taken an awful licking, and it looked as though it was about to be wiped out altogether. But Early had lost a few precious hours rounding up his starved troops as they descended on the food and supplies left by the fleeing Federals. Still, Early did not expect further difficulty. The enemy was routed and he had only to push hard to crumble the line he could

see forming to the north. But General Gordon warned him: "That is the VI Corps, General. It will not go unless we drive it from the field." And stay it did.

Meanwhile, about fifteen miles to the north, General Sheridan was having an early breakfast on his way back from Washington. He could hear the sound of gunfire faintly, but thought little of it; he knew there was to be a reconnaissance in force that morning. At about 9 o'clock, when he met his escorting cavalry, the firing had become louder and steadier. Puzzled, Sheridan pushed his horse a little harder, and soon came upon the first contingent of retreating troops. When he heard the news of the disaster, he set off up the Pike, his face black with anger, bellowing to the beaten men to turn and follow him. A surge went through the hordes of fugitives as they watched him go by. Spirits revived, cheers sounded out, and the beaten men became an army again. It was an incident that captured the imagination of the country and found expression in Thomas Read's celebrated poem, *Sheridan's Ride*—

With foam and with dust, the black charger was gray;
By the flash of his eye, and the red nostril's play,
He seemed to the whole great army to say,
"I have brought you Sheridan all the way
From Winchester, down to save the day."

The Union line had just about taken its position when Sheridan arrived on the scene. "We were astounded," wrote one of the Vermonters. "There we stood, driven four miles already, quietly waiting for what might be further and immediate disaster, and far in the rear we heard the stragglers and hospital bummers and the gunless artillerymen actually cheering as though a victory had been won. We could hardly believe our ears." And then Sheridan rode into sight. "Jumping my horse over the line of rails," Sheridan recalled, "I rode to the crest of the elevation, and there taking off my hat, the men rose from their barricades with cheers of recognition." And first to ride out to greet him was Colonel Tracy of the Vermont Brigade. After a hurried conference, Sheridan rode down the line shouting in a voice charged with passion: "Men, by God, we'll whip them yet. We'll sleep in our old camps tonight."

Sheridan was going to drive Early out of the Valley; every man in the line was sure of it. But Sheridan was too good a general to go chasing up the Pike helter-skelter. Systematically he reformed his troops, got them squared away, wagons loaded, weapons ready, and then made his plans. He strung his men across the Pike, Crook's corps on the left, the VI Corps and the XIX Corps on the right. Getty's division was on the left of the corps, flanking the Pike. The plan called for a simple wheeling

movement based on Getty's division. The XIX Corp and Custer's cavalry on the right were to strike the enemy left and drive it in while the rest of the line was to hold firm. The whole effort was to overwhelm Early's left flank and then wheel left in a turning movement. For this purpose, the VI Corps was formed in one line, greatly extended, and the XIX in two lines.

It was almost 4:00 in the afternoon when all was ready and the Union forces finally opened the attack, after repulsing a half hearted effort by the Confederates. Heaviest fire was directed at the center to convey the impression that the attack would come from that direction. But Early's men were strongly entrenched and a withering fire met the advancing troops. The battle surged back and forth as other elements engaged from right to left, and Getty's division in the pivot position buckled. Only the center, the staunch Vermont Brigade, stood firm. With the utmost coolness, it kept up a sustained and well directed fire against the gray clad men crouched behind the stone fence in the field before them. The stubborn stand of the Vermonters gave the units on the right and left time to rally and reform.

Then the advance began once again. After several hours of hard fighting, the division on the Confederate left was finally enveloped, and the entire gray line began to fall back, then gave in altogether. Everywhere it began to break, and the rebels sought safety in flight, forming confused masses making their way to the rear, back through Middletown and toward the bridge across Cedar Creek to safety. On their way through Middletown, the Vermonters were stopped by a woman who stepped out from one of the houses nearby. She was holding firmly by the arm a tall young Vermont soldier, fully equipped, with his roll of blankets and musket in hand. The soldier was unharmed and in fine physical shape and seemed overjoyed to see his comrades. But he was somewhat shamefaced, too, as he stood by while the woman, in a state of high excitement, laughing and crying in turn, explained: "This is my house-guard! I wouldn't let them take him. See—here he is, all safe, musket and all." What had happened was that the soldier had been posted as a guard to protect her from molestation before the battle, and had been caught there by the Confederates. But the woman had refused to let them take him prisoner and made such an outcry that they finally left, not even bothering to disarm him.

The infantry had broken the Confederate line, but it was the cavalry that turned the rebel defeat into a complete rout. It rode back and forth through the line of retreating troops, wagons, and guns, sometimes so rapidly that troopers took the same prisoners several times. In the van

was General Custer's cavalry division coming from the far right and driving the Confederates back in utmost confusion. And leading the charge was Colonel J. W. Bennett's First Vermont Cavalry. The critical point was the bridge at the junction of Cedar Creek and the Pike, and it was Bennett's task to drive the enemy from the bridge and cut off his escape route. It was almost dark as the Vermont troopers came charging down the road at the terrified Confederates, who dropped their muskets and fled. Bennett continued south past Strasburg, far ahead of the infantry and supporting troops and never slackened his pace until he reached Fisher's Hill. When he returned to the north bank of Cedar Creek late that night, he had with him twenty-five captured Confederate guns, fourteen caissons, seventeen supply wagons, 98 horses, and much more besides.

The Confederate troops, all conquering early in the day, were by nightfall a totally defeated, struggling rabble of men and horses. That night the Army of the Shenandoah camped at its former positions on Cedar Creek, as Sheridan had promised, and Early's army was back on Fisher's Hill. But the situation was altogether different and the following day Early pulled back to New Market. Though he remained in the Valley for some months, he was never again able to threaten the Union cause.

The victory was complete, but the cost had been high. The Confederates lost 3,500 men—2,250 killed and wounded, 1,250 captured—as well as twenty-five valuable artillery pieces, countless wagons, and all sorts of supplies they could ill spare. Sheridan's losses were larger—over 4,000 killed and wounded and 1,500 captured. Casualties suffered by Getty's division numbered 738, of a total of 2,126 for the entire Corps. Most of Getty's losses had been incurred at Middletown, during the afternoon counterattack, with the heaviest casualties, two-fifths of the total, coming from the Vermont Brigade. Added to the casualties of the Eighth and Tenth Vermont Infantry and the First Vermont Cavalry, the loss to Vermont that day was heavy indeed.

It had been a close call. Had Jubal Early exploited his early success on the morning of October 19, he might have overcome the VI Corps and destroyed completely the Army of the Shenandoah. That he failed to do so was a reflection on his generalship and the discipline of his troops. But this is too easy an explanation, for there was still time to attack the thin Union line on the ridge north of Middletown that morning, and not all of Early's men were busy looting the Union camp. The fact is that the VI Corps, and especially Getty's Second Division, with the Vermont Brigade, had held firm, repelling every assault of the

Confederates. "It was Getty," wrote one observer, "whose prompt, sound judgment in seizing the ridge, and steadfast courage in holding it, arrested the enemy's victorious onslaught and paralyzed the judgment and energy of the Confederate command." And, one must add, the anchor of Getty's line was the Vermont Brigade. To it, and the other Vermont units in the Army of the Shenandoah, must go much of the credit for the Union victory at Cedar Creek, and for the final conquest of the rich Valley of Virginia.

As to the larger meaning of Cedar Creek and its contribution to the Union cause, there is sharp disagreement. It can be argued that the battle had no strategic importance and that Sheridan might just as well have remained at Harper's Ferry for all that his Army of the Shenandoah contributed toward the defeat of the Confederacy. One can make a case also for the importance of the victories in the Valley, culminating in Cedar Creek. Probably no final judgment can be made, even now after 100 years, but perhaps we can agree with General Sheridan. "This battle," he wrote, "practically ended the campaign in the Shenandoah Valley. . . . The very best troops of the Confederacy had not only been defeated, but had been routed in successive engagements until their spirit and esprit were destroyed."

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