

Chapter 14

Enduring a Wet, Freezing Night

February 6, 8:00 p.m. - February 7, 10:00 a.m.

Darkness descended over the battlefield; the day's brutal fighting ceased. The cold and wet weather became more extreme, as driving sleet and snow lashed onto a freezing landscape. Exhausted and hungry, both armies began setting up camps. The combatants' moods contrasted markedly. The joyous Rebels basked in routing the Yankees and controlling the battlefield. The Federals, meanwhile, felt despondent and humiliated following their comprehensive defeat.

Overnight with the Confederates

Confederate Second Corps commander Gordon ordered most of his men back to Dabney's Mill, where they set about strengthening their entrenchments. Finegan's troops occupied the Rebel left all the way to Hatcher's Run, while much of Pegram's division, now commanded by Brig. Gen. Lewis, covered the right flank. Evans's division remained in reserve. Lea received orders to hold the defensive line near the Crow house, cover the position with videttes, and dig in.

As usual, all brigades put out pickets for the night. Gordon left a strong picket line close to their advanced position (over a mile from their main line) stretching from just south of Armstrong's Mill down to near Vaughan Road. The advanced pickets mostly came from Harris's and Sorrel's brigades. Captain Buck, 13th Virginia, in Hoffman's brigade (now commanded by Lt. Col. Kasey, following Hoffman's wounding), received orders to deploy the brigade's pickets. He met his close friend and brigade comrade, Maj. "Kyd" Douglas, who had experienced the thickest of the day's fighting. Buck said, "Major I am glad to see you alive, you bear a charmed life." Douglas replied, asking how the captain had also survived all day under such an intense fire.

Some veteran Rebel foot soldiers questioned the decision to pull back instead of holding the ground they had so bravely won. One Tar Heel, Pvt. Matthew C. Clayton, 21st North Carolina, wrote home, "We drove the yankeys back a mile or two and I don't know what caused our generals to fall back. We were not forced back." In truth, if the bulk of the

Confederates had remained at their advanced position, they would have found themselves terribly exposed when the sun rose.¹

In Weisiger's brigade, Lt. Col. Stewart, 61st Virginia, recalled the terrible weather and marching and fighting all day without food. His regiment pulled back to straighten and adjust their line; they expected a Federal attack the next day. The soldiers hastily threw up breastworks that were scarcely high enough to lie down behind. His men made brush shelters to protect themselves as much as possible from the rain, snow, hail, and sleet. No fires were allowed in such proximity to the enemy. Between their main line and advanced pickets, Confederate work details scoured the freezing battlefield for discarded Yankee guns and other valuable equipment and food. Medical teams searched for the wounded and sent them to hospitals in the rear. Those not found quickly probably froze to death. Other detachments escorted Union prisoners to Petersburg.²

Some Rebels began stripping dead Yankees for sorely needed clothing and equipment. Lieutenant James E. Phillips, 12th Virginia, tried in vain to stop them and remembered how "their manly form stretched out on the cold, icy ground without a stitch of garment to hide their nakedness." He added sorrowfully that "they were sometime or other some dear womans darling who thought the world of them yet this was their end."³

As the tired but victorious Rebels moved back through the woods, the rain turned to sleet; ice covered everything. Lieutenant Phillips recalled their fear of tree limbs now weighed down with ice falling upon their heads. Ordered to the rear, the regiment reached near Boydton Plank Road and tried to settle for the night. They spread what blankets they had on the frozen ground and tried to sleep. This far in the rear, they could have built fires, but they lacked axes to fell timber. As they saw the fires of the nearby Alabama Brigade, they went over and found them all fast asleep. They picked up their axes and firewood and returned to their camps. The Virginians built fires, constructed rudimentary brush shelters, and eventually went to sleep. Phillips added that the Alabamians "lay there asleep until they became cold, fire had gone out, all dark, no axe and no nothing." Along with many other

¹ ORS 7:717, 807; Sherrill, *The 21st North Carolina*, 415; Buck, *With the Old Confeds*, 133; Sorrel, *Recollections*, 179. At Buck's meeting with Douglas, the latter strangely didn't discuss his role in Pegram's death.

² Stewart, *A Pair of Blankets*, 191; Sherrill *The 21st North Carolina*, 415; Sorrel, *Recollections*, 179. Building fires at night revealed one's position to a nearby enemy. Troops far in the rear were permitted to build fires. Quite how far back was deemed safe depended upon the discretion of the commanding officer.

³ Horn, *The Petersburg Regiment*, 361.

regiments, the 12th Virginia hadn't eaten in more than 24 hours. At about 2:00 a.m., food arrived; their three days' rations consisted of "a small piece of corn bread about half as large as an ordinary hand and about four tablespoons of so called corned beef (nothing but corned mule)."

The sleet continued to pour down as the sun rose, around 6:50 a.m. "One could scarcely walk without falling," Sgt. James E. Whitehorne, 12th Virginia, recalled. Those who hadn't already eaten their rations cooked them up, although the driving wind proved problematic, "it seemed to make no difference on which side of the fire one might be the smoke went straight to them" Whitehorne noted. After breakfast, the regiment received orders to build fortifications. As morning broke, long icicles hung from tree limbs, which bent under the weight. The cold north wind was chilling and terrible to endure. With the arrival of daylight, all the soldiers could now cut down sapling trees and build log fires, bringing some relief to the shivering troops.⁴

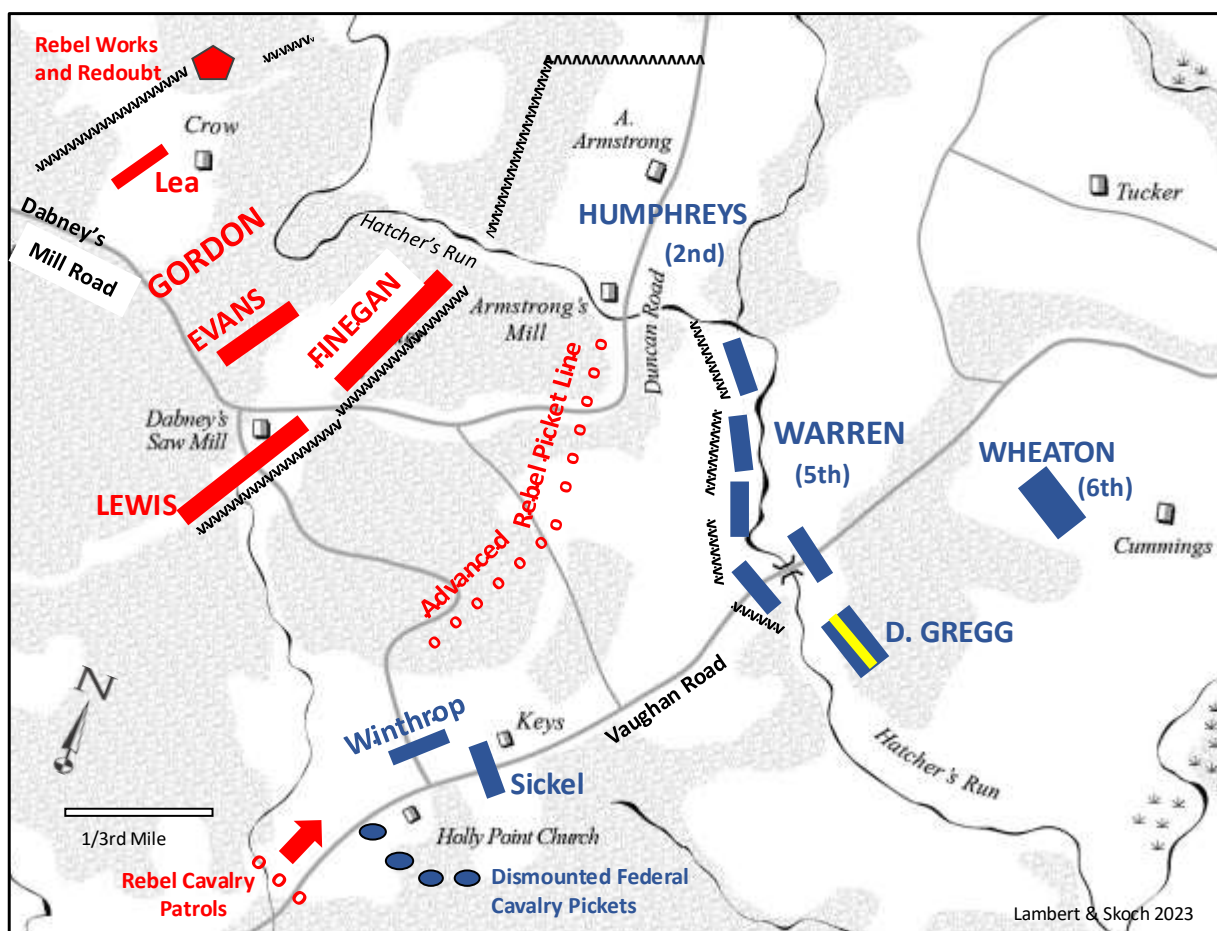
During the evening, cooks brought the 61st Virginia men in line of battle "a small pone of bread each, the first morsel since early morning." The soldiers wrapped their shivering frames in wet blankets and tried to sleep as best they could under the brush shelters on the frozen ground while pickets paced in front, watching for the enemy. Brigade commander Forney proudly wrote to his wife about the fighting spirit of his Alabama troops despite their plight. Many, without decent clothing, wore rags and shoes with great holes in the soles - but still, they fight. He added that they were up all night building breastworks with not a minute's sleep.⁵

Other Rebel troops were less motivated. Demoralized by the brutal fighting, lack of food and provisions, the freezing weather, and the hopelessness of the Confederate situation, groups of Rebels, particularly from Terry's Virginia Brigade, aware of an easing of sanctions against deserters, took the risk to escape their ranks and walked across into the Federal lines.⁶

⁴ Horn, *The Petersburg Regiment*, 361-62; Boatner, *Cassell's Biographical Dictionary*, 819-21; Stewart, *A Pair of Blankets*, 191.

⁵ Stewart, *A Pair of Blankets*, 191; Letter, William Forney to Mrs. Forney.

⁶ Reidenbaugh, *27th Virginia Infantry*, 117; Reidenbaugh, *33rd Virginia Infantry*, 106.



Map 14.1: Basic Army Positions Overnight February 6.

Overnight with the Federals

Once secure within their entrenchments, the dispersed and disorganized Yankees started to reunite with their company, regiment, and brigade fellows. Some soldiers didn't find their way back until the following day. The cold and wet weather took a turn for the worse as sleet, snow, and a driving wind further challenged the soldiers. To compound the situation, when they vacated their winter camps on the morning of February 5, they left behind tents and camp equipment. Some soldiers had even traveled without blankets. For those who had blankets, they soon became soaked. The more fortunate had carried rubber sheets that offered some protection from the wet. As with the Confederates, units deemed close to the enemy were prohibited from building fires. Even when allowed, many companies had no axes to fell trees. And what trees were in reach were mostly green saplings, which, with the driving rain and sleet, proved challenging to ignite. For any fires successfully made, the strong wind blew all the heat and smoke away from the windward side, and the smoke choked and blinded those on the leeward side.

Union soldiers remembered the torturous night well, and memoirs captured many graphic stories. Sergeant Marshall, 155th Pennsylvania, Pearson's brigade, noted that as night began, his company commander had only reunited with two men from the company. But as soldiers drifted back, by 9:00 p.m., only three remained unaccounted for. These didn't appear until the following day. He added, "We lay on the frozen ground as the rain and sleet poured. It was terrible bad without shelter." A memoir from the same regiment noted that "In fifteen minutes after laying down the part of the body in contact with the frozen earth would become numb . . . compelling the weary soldier to turn continually."⁷

Captain Daniel Wilkins, 142nd Pennsylvania, Morrow's brigade, recalled how the cold and rain made a night's rest almost impossible. With tents and blankets left behind in their winter camps, the soldiers only had their overcoats. He added, "I remember I lay on my back with the cape of my overcoat drawn up over my head, with my hands run into my overcoat sleeves to protect my wrists and my cloth covered canteen partly filled with water, for a pillow."

Private Vautier, 88th Pennsylvania, Baxter's brigade, remembered how the 5th Corps bivouacked for the night amid the mud and the rain – "a most cheerless and miserable one, the men being scarcely able to keep from freezing to death. They were up all night for to have laid down and slept would have resulted in death."

Perhaps due to his surgeon status, Dr. James Kimball with Hubbard's brigade fared slightly better. "I spread my rubber blanket on the ground, put my case of instruments under my head for a pillow, had another blanket thrown over me, and I went to sleep with cap, overcoat, boots and spurs on." At 5:00 a.m., he crawled out from under his blanket, now covered by nearly an inch of frozen rain and snow. The sun rose around 6:50 a.m. as the Federals breakfasted on coffee, hardtack, and hog fat; a better provision than their Confederate counterparts. Several noted that the weather, far from abating, worsened around daybreak.⁸

⁷ Marshall, *Company "K,"* 224; McKenna, *Under the Maltese Cross,* 337.

⁸ Downey, "A Lethal Tour of Duty," 56-57; Vautier, *History of the 88th Pennsylvania,* 205; James P. Kimball, *A Soldier Doctor of our Army* (Boston, 1917), 17-18.

Overnight along Vaughan Road

Those soldiers involved in the fighting around Dabney's Mill were not the only troops on the broader battlefield. Further south, those who had fought along Vaughan Road also endured the bitter night.

Once relieved by Sickel's troops at dusk, the regiments of Winthrop's brigade took turns at picket duty covering Dabney's Mill Road. Parties cautiously moved forward to collect the wounded and dead. Food rations and whiskey were issued. Sergeant Booth, 140th New York, recalled, "it must have been near midnight before the boys were ready to lie down, small fires being allowed of roots, barks, stumps, such things as the boys could pick up. The ground was frozen, and it was pretty cold to lie on." Some of Winthrop's men built breastworks and slashed the timber before them. Booth noted that at 5:00 a.m., it began to rain, snow, and sleet, accompanied by a fierce wind, with nothing but hardtack and coffee for breakfast.⁹

After earlier routing Pegram's infantry along Vaughan Road, Sickel's brigade, commanded at that time by Col. Jenney, under cover of darkness, fell back to the main Union line, where they entrenched to the left of Winthrop's troops. Jenney sent a group under Maj. Bush to reconnoiter their right flank and station pickets. However, scarcely out of speaking distance and concealed from the brigade by dense underbrush, Rebels (presumably a cavalry patrol) captured Maj. Bush and some of his men.

Meanwhile, other soldiers from Sickel's brigade went out to recover wounded and dead soldiers. Private Augustus M. Rice, 185th New York, recalled, "We were without blankets or tents, and not being allowed a fire even to cook coffee, we passed a very uncomfortable night. Many of our wounded doubtless died from exposure, as some were found in the morning with their clothing frozen to the ground."

During the night, the 21st Pennsylvania Cavalry (dismounted) joined Sickel's troops and occupied positions on their left. At some point, Winthrop's men and the cavalry moved elsewhere, leaving Sickel's men alone and without orders. Jenney moved them to a more favorable position. He extended his picket line to join David Gregg's cavalry on the left and Ayres's infantry on the right. Here, they remained under arms for the rest of the night.

As the sun rose, Sickel, presumably now back in command after his minor wound, reported that Rebel cavalry "appeared on our left in considerable force followed by a

⁹ Schlosser & Robortella. *Writing Home*, 63-64.

skirmish line of infantry, which for a while seemed to threaten an attack. Sharp firing was kept up between the two lines of skirmishers for $\frac{3}{4}$ hour in which two of my men were severely wounded.” Sickel reported this to Maj. Gen. Griffin, who sent some artillery and cavalry to support him. With the Rebels keeping their distance at around 7:00 a.m., a severe storm of rain and hail added to the misery for both sides.¹⁰

Overnight with the Cavalry

By 5:00 p.m. David Gregg’s Union cavalry had cleared all the Rebels along Vaughan Road beyond Gravelly Run. The troopers had been marching or fighting since 3:00 a.m. the previous day. The awful weather, no blankets, and no wood for fires meant they gained little rest overnight. They retreated along Vaughan Road to Hatcher’s Run while leaving pickets around the Keys house to secure the road. A cavalryman with Davies’s brigade noted, “At dusk, the Tenth [New York Cavalry] fell back a short distance with the brigade and bivouacked. A cold night, with rain, freezing as it fell, offered little opportunity for comfort or rest to the weary and hungry men.” The account continued, “About midnight the horses were brought up and the regiment mounted and moved back about a mile and a half and bivouacked, but the boys were compelled to keep moving to avoid freezing.” Hypothermia wasn’t the only hazard. Amid the darkness and ice, Capt. Forbes, the division’s commissary of subsistence, fell from his horse and died from the injuries on February 9.¹¹

Those assigned to picket duty passed an anxious and miserable night. Major Robbins (1st New Jersey Cavalry), commanding the pickets, heard firing on the line around 10:00 p.m. He investigated, but the firing died away. Upon returning to his wet blankets, he heard firing from another direction. He rode to a picket post and found Rebels (probably some of Beale’s cavalrymen) trying to attack an unguarded point. The sporadic harassment fizzled out, and he wasn’t disturbed again.¹²

Sergeant Major Tobie, 1st Maine Cavalry, Knowles’s brigade, detailed his experiences that night. Orders arrived for the men’s horses carrying their overcoats, blankets, rations, axes, and rubber ponchos to go back across Hatcher’s Run. In contrast, officers

¹⁰ Clayton, *History of Onondaga County*, 129; Augustus M. Rice, “185th New York at Petersburg,” *Baldwinsville [NY] Messenger*, Nov 29, 1945; Wood, *Under Chamberlain’s Flag*, 175-77. Whether the wounded Sickel was actually with his brigade at this point is unclear.

¹¹ Preston, *History of the 10th Regiment of Cavalry*, 241-42; Mohr, *The Corman Diaries*, 518; Pyne, *The History of the First New Jersey Cavalry*, 302-03; *New York [NY] Sun*, Feb 13, 1865, page 1.

¹² Rea, *War Record and Personal Experiences*, 103.

marched the men to some woods by the roadside and ordered them to stay there for the night. A great deal of swearing occurred at this separation. They borrowed axes from nearby infantry (Winthrop's or Sickel's men) to chop saplings for fires. The men wandered between small fires. The majority "piled themselves up cob-house fashion, at times three or four deep" to get snatches of poor-quality sleep. Morning arrived without a picket having fired a shot. Soon after daylight, the Maine regiment was "ordered on the picket line in a cold rain storm without much energy or strength for fighting, but ugly enough to fight like tigers." After an hour, the regiment withdrew and finally reunited with their horses and equipment. Despite the rain, they enjoyed a hearty breakfast.¹³



Sgt. Maj. Edward P. Tobie
Boston Press, 1887



Maj. Walter R. Robbins
beyondthecrater.com

Major Robbins, Davies's brigade, recalled being relieved from picket duty around 6:00 a.m. and having difficulty waking his men asleep in the brush. Everyone was in bad humor. Some Rebels menaced them, but they got across the Run without any serious fighting. Once in camp, they managed to eat something, their first sustenance since noon the previous day.¹⁴

Further to the west across Gravelly Run, a Confederate officer with the 13th Virginia Cavalry recalled the cold night. Tired and hungry, they occupied former infantry camps. The

¹³ Tobie, *History of the First Maine Cavalry*, 379-81. "Cob-House fashion" means sleeping together to preserve body heat.

¹⁴ Rea, *War Record and Personal Experiences*, 104.

weather grew even colder, and during the night, snow fell, covering the sleeping men under a white mantle. “Early the next morning the bugle call roused them from their resting places on the ground, where, like occupants of so many graves in the snow, they threw it aside and came forth as in a resurrection.” Very soon, the order to mount sounded, and they set off to seek the enemy. The snow, mingled with hail, continued falling, and the air was glacial.¹⁵

Plans from the Commanders

Little communication occurred overnight between the Union senior commanders. At 8:15 a.m. Meade asked Warren for an update on his command's condition and to promptly provide a casualty estimate. Meade directed Warren to send out skirmishers to locate the Rebels and to use his judgment in whether to attack or not. Warren immediately replied that all had been quiet overnight and remained so. His pickets reported enemy troop movements, relieving or reinforcing their advanced rifle pits. They heard the Rebels felling wood throughout the night.

Meade relayed Warren's information to Grant. He added that, given the awful weather, the unknown state of the 5th Corps' morale, and their losses from stragglers, he had refrained from giving Warren “positive orders to attack.” Instead, he had directed Warren to “push out [a] strong reconnaissance” and left it to him as to how to proceed.¹⁶

At 8:30 a.m., Warren alerted Maj. Gen. Wheaton to send a brigade to counter Rebel demonstrations along Vaughan Road. An hour later, Warren informed division commander Griffin that his first brigade (Sickel's) would return to him once relieved by Maj. Gen. Gregg. Around the same time, Ayres contacted 5th Corps headquarters, asking when Winthrop's exhausted brigade would be relieved. He added that the Rebels were felling trees and throwing up breastworks in front of Winthrop.

At 9:20 a.m., Meade told Warren to withdraw Gregg's cavalry division as soon as possible. Twenty minutes later, Warren replied that he continued to prepare his divisions. He shared that a Rebel demonstration up Vaughan Road, initially reported as alarming, had in reality been slight and added that “we have picked up some men from Mahone's division that came out to gather up arms.” Warren relayed his belief that the Rebels would not make a

¹⁵ Beale, *A Lieutenant of Cavalry*, 198.

¹⁶OR 46/2:447, 453. Meade communicated to Warren through his chief-of-staff.

stand east of Dabney's Mill, and he could drive them back that far. This would require one of Gregg's brigades; hence, his other two brigades could be relieved immediately.¹⁷

Only at 10:00 a.m. did substantial Union orders appear, when Warren issued a five-point circular stating: 1) Crawford's division will move out of the breastworks and capture the Rebels' advanced rifle pits. Having done so, he will push out a skirmish line towards Dabney's Mill. 2) Sickel's brigade will return to Griffin in the defenses, and the troops it relieves will relieve Winthrop's brigade. 3) An officer will go to Griffin to guide the brigade relieving Winthrop, who will return to the breastworks. 4) David Gregg will use one brigade to hold Vaughan Road and keep his other two brigades in reserve if needed. 5) Wheaton will have his division ready to move at short notice.

Given the awful weather and the recent mauling suffered by the Union forces, Warren's orders understandably avoided any major attacks. They did, however, require Crawford's division to advance over the previous day's battlefield and engage with the Rebel pickets. After their poor performance during the previous evening, this feels like a bold step. Was this a chance for Crawford and Warren to salvage some honor, perhaps? Or would their soldiers face a similar humiliation?¹⁸

Little information exists regarding the plans of the Confederate high command. One can safely surmise they did not contemplate a frontal assault on the strong Federal breastworks along Hatcher's Run. They appeared content to augment their defensive line around Dabney's Mill while maintaining a solid advanced picket line. They strengthened their works across from Gravelly Run and sent small cavalry probes down Vaughan Road.

With a new day underway, despite the harsh weather, the combatants probably expected the casualty toll to increase in the coming hours.

¹⁷ OR 46/2:451, 454-55, 460, 462.

¹⁸ OR 46/2:458-59.