

Chapter 1

Grant and Meade Evolve a Plan

February 4, Noon - Midnight

The Hampton Roads peace conference, held on February 3, 1865, ended without a resolution. But even as the Confederate delegates trudged back to Richmond to brief President Davis, Grant's mind already turned to a new Union offensive. Grant feared waking one morning to discover that Lee and his army had slipped away, abandoning Petersburg and Richmond to fight in the Carolinas with other Confederate forces. He wanted to keep Lee busy. Encouraged by a lull in the awful winter weather, Grant searched for an opportunity to strike.¹

By February 1865, the only railroad supplying Petersburg, entirely in Confederate hands, was the Southside Railroad. In December 1864, the Federals' Applejack Raid had seriously disrupted the Weldon Railroad, which went south from Petersburg into the Confederate heartland. The nearest point on this supply artery still under Confederate control was Belfield/Hicksford, straddling the Meherrin River some 40 miles south of Petersburg. Intelligence reached Grant that the Confederates unloaded trains laden with supplies at Belfield. The Rebels put the precious cargo into wagons and floated them up the Meherrin River to Boydton Plank Road before making the long trip to Petersburg. With this intelligence in mind, Grant developed his plan; Belfield would be the target.²

¹ Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of General U. S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York, 1885), 439-40.

² Trudeau, *The Last Citadel*, 266-285; Andrew A. Humphreys, *Campaigns of the Civil War: The Virginia Campaign of '64 and '65* (New York, 1883), 311-12. It is unclear how or when Grant received the intelligence. Whether the Rebels floated the wagons down to Lawrenceville and took the road there to join Boydton Plank Road is unknown. The towns of Belfield and Hicksford merged in 1887 to form Emporia, its present-day name. Many sources at the time, both North and South, claimed that this Union offensive aimed to capture the Southside Railroad, vital to the Confederacy. Many later accounts repeated this false view, the Southside Railroad was never mentioned by either Grant or Meade in planning the operation.

Grant's Plan

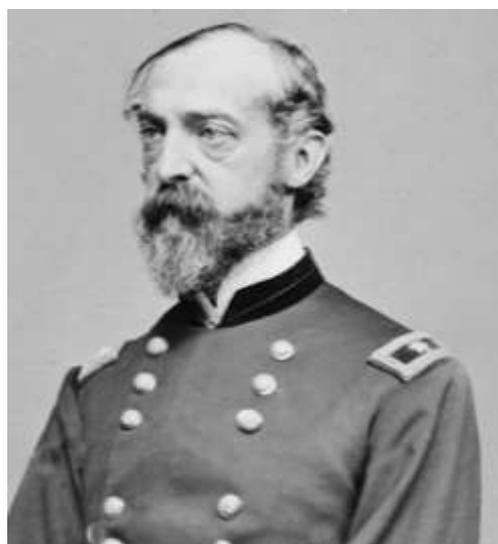
Grant wrote to Meade around noon on Saturday, February 4, describing his desired offensive. Grant visualized sending a cavalry force supported by infantry on a raid to Belfield to capture a bountiful haul of Confederate wagons, thereby exacerbating Robert E. Lee's already dire supply situation. He began:

I would like to take advantage of the present good weather to destroy or capture as much as possible of the enemy's wagon train, which it is understood is being used in connection with the Weldon railroad to partially supply the troops about Petersburg. You may get the cavalry ready to do this as soon as possible. I think the cavalry should start at 3 a.m. either tomorrow or the day following.

The cavalry in question was Maj. Gen. Gregg's 2nd Cavalry Division. To maximize their speed, they should take no wagons and few ambulances. Grant also stipulated that they carry only one and a half days' forage and three days' rations. Grant wanted Humphreys's 2nd Corps to move simultaneously (but remain independent of the cavalry) as far south as Stony Creek Station to support the cavalry. This would create a haven for the cavalry to return to after they had destroyed the enemy's wagon train.



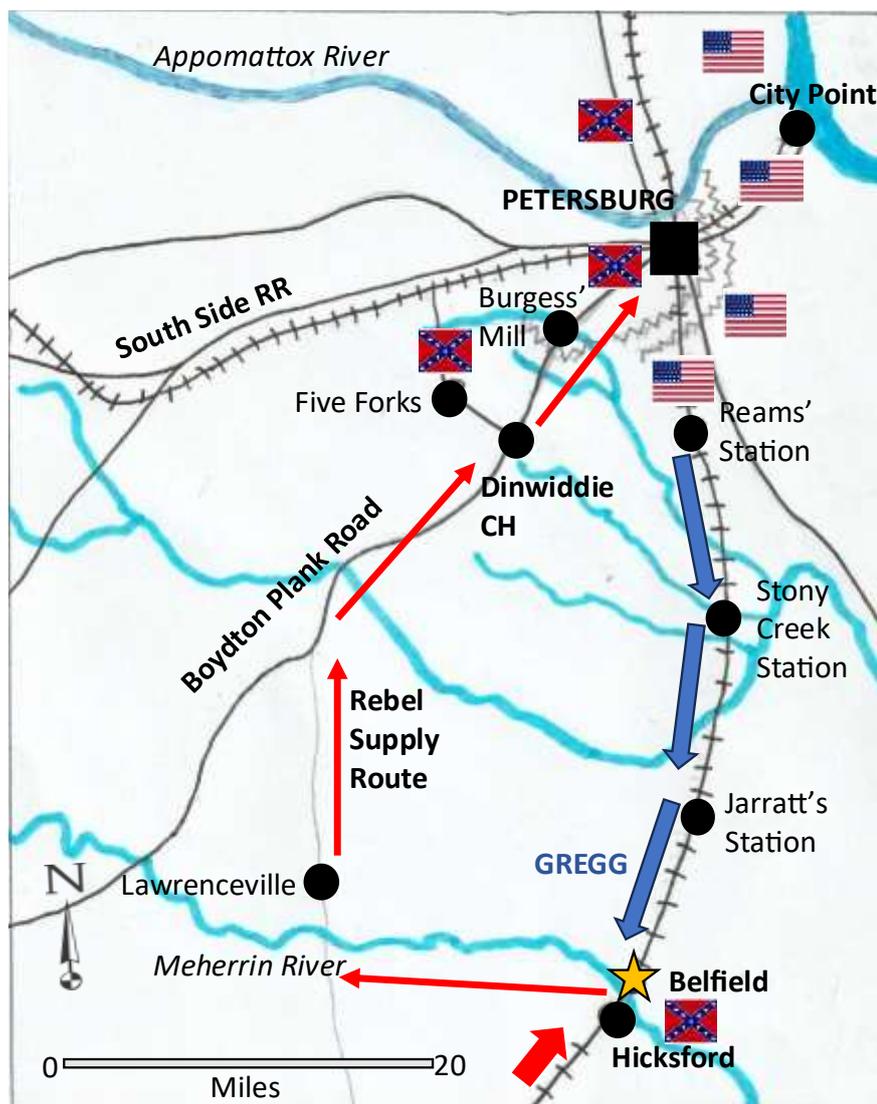
Lt. Gen. Ulysses S. Grant
Library of Congress



Maj. Gen. George G. Meade
Library of Congress

The infantry should take four days' rations in haversacks and one and a half days' forage for the cavalry in wagons. Again, with speed in mind, Humphreys should keep the accompanying artillery to a minimum, with no more than one battery per division. Warren should prepare his 5th Corps to support the 2nd Corps if the Confederates move out to attack.

They should travel about halfway toward Stony Creek with resources to remain for four days.³



Map 1.1: Grant's Plan to Strike at Belfield

At 2:10 p.m., Meade replied to Grant, suggesting that he'd rather not send the 2nd Corps because one of its divisions, that of Maj. Gen. Nelson Miles currently held frontline forts facing the fortified Confederate positions at Petersburg. To remove this division would attract Confederate attention and alert them to the coming operation. Meade instead proposed sending Warren's 5th Corps to Stony Creek, and the two divisions of the 2nd Corps *not* on the frontline should go to Reams's Station. Thus, Warren's 5th Corps would support Gregg's

³ OR 46/2:367.

raid on Belfield, and Humphreys's truncated 2nd Corps would support Warren if needed. From bitter experience, Meade knew the Rebels' favorite maneuver of slipping between Federal corps as they moved out on these offensive thrusts, delivering devastating flanking attacks and capturing large numbers of Federal prisoners. Meade wanted a secure link from the fortified Union left flank through to Gregg's raiding cavalymen.

At 3:30 p.m., Grant sent Meade a brief message approving his modification, commenting that he only chose the 2nd Corps because Warren's 5th Corps had undertaken the previous expedition. However, since dispatching his initial response (2:10 p.m.) to Grant, Meade must have given the plan further consideration, possibly discussing it with senior subordinates, because, at 4:30 p.m., he wrote to Grant suggesting a substantive modification.⁴

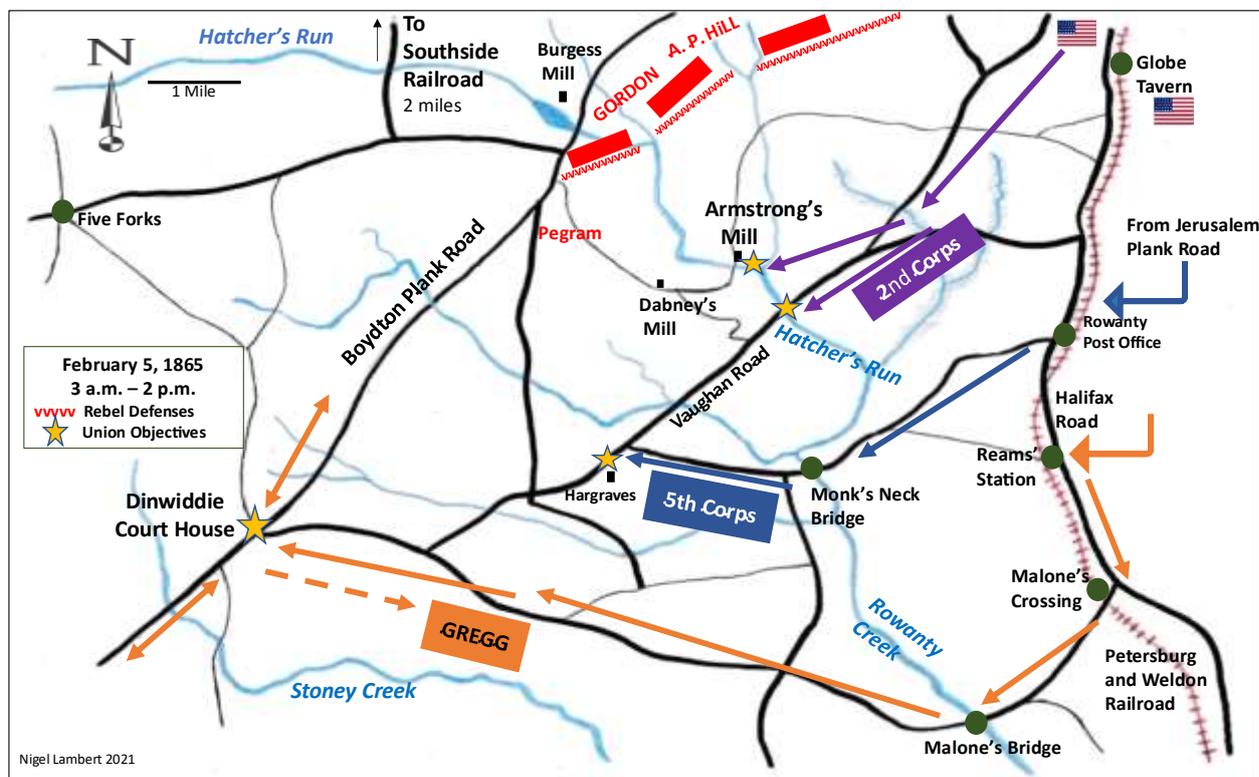
Meade's Revised Plan

Rather than sending Gregg's cavalry around 40 miles south to Belfield, Meade proposed that they move south for about 10 miles before heading west to Dinwiddie Court House (CH) on Boydton Plank Road. He reasoned they could intercept Confederate supply wagons there just as easily as at Belfield. Warren's 5th Corps would march to the western end of Vaughan Road to support the cavalry. The two divisions of the 2nd Corps would move a few miles southwest down Vaughan Road and take up positions at Armstrong's Mill and the Hatcher's Run crossing. Here, they could block the Confederate forces in their substantial works defending Boydton Plank Road from moving out and cutting off either Warren or Gregg from the main Union lines. For Meade, this plan retained the same objective as Grant's initial idea but involved less risk. It required traveling shorter distances, with the three forces remaining closer together, thus reducing the chance that the Rebels would isolate one of them. Furthermore, a Confederate cavalry force, commanded by Maj. Gen. Rooney Lee, known to be in the Belfield vicinity, would have a greater distance to cover to engage the Union troops.

Meade added one final comment, asking Grant, "Are the objects to be attained commensurate with the disappointment which the public are sure to entertain if you make any

⁴ *OR* 46/2:367. Note the spelling of Reams's Station. You will find various versions in established texts. In the Official Records and texts written around the time, it was referred to as Reams' Station. It is likely that the station was named after the "Reames" family, who owned a farm nearby. Personal communication, Petersburg National Battlefield Trust. Meade was aware, for example, of the disastrous actions of Grant's second Petersburg offensive in June 1864, Horn, *The Petersburg Campaign*, 75-95.

movement and return without some striking result”? This illustrated Meade’s acute awareness of public backlash to failed military operations and hinted at skepticism regarding the importance of the objective.



Map 1.2: The Revised Union Offensive

At 6:45 p.m., Saturday, February 4, Grant replied to Meade, agreeing to all the changes and assuring him that “The objects to be attained are of importance. I will telegraph to Secretary Stanton in advance, showing the object of the movement, the publication of which, with the reports of operations, will satisfy the public.” Finally, Grant asked, “When do your troops start out”?⁵

Throughout the afternoon, Meade had notified his cavalry and infantry commanders to prepare for action early the next day. With the plans finally completed, at around 7:00 p.m., Meade issued a “general circular” to the AOP explaining the forthcoming offensive by Gregg, Warren, and Humphreys. Meade placed the remainder of the AOP on alert to move at

⁵ OR 46/2:368. AOP commanders had known that Rebel cavalry was at Belfield since late December 1864; OR 42/2:1092. Edwin M. Stanton was the US Secretary of War.

short notice. Major General John G. Parke (9th Corps commander), Maj. Gen. George W. Getty (6th Corps commander) and Maj. Gen. Miles (commanding the 2nd Corps division in front of Petersburg) held their commands in readiness to move. They should anticipate that any movement ordered would entail the withdrawal of all troops except the minimum number necessary to maintain picket lines and the works garrisons. The chiefs-of-staff departments appointed officers to take charge of withdrawing trains and property to the entrenchments covering City Point (the main Union base) in the event of a whole army movement. The general staff officers should prepare to accompany Meade tomorrow at 8:00 a.m. The senior officer commanding the provisional brigade at AOP headquarters should hold his command in readiness for orders to move.⁶

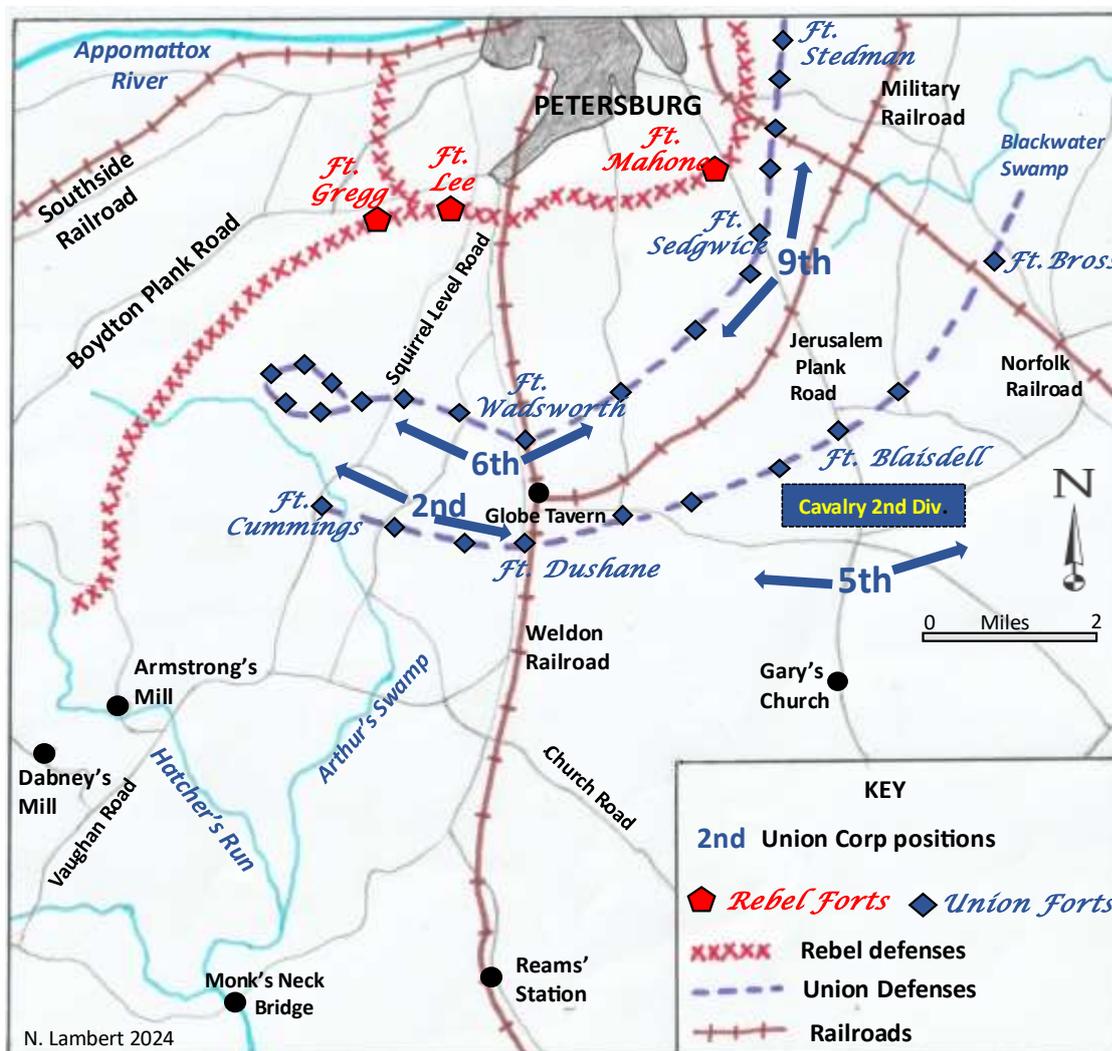
That evening, Gregg, Warren, and Humphreys subsequently received their individual orders, including instructions on how they should cooperate in the forthcoming offensive. These commanders disseminated the orders down to their subordinate officers. The cavalry had to move out at 3:00 a.m. the next day, so this allowed little time.

David Gregg

With the farthest to travel in the expedition, Gregg's cavalry division would move out first. They would break camp at 3:00 a.m. the following day (Sunday, February 5), leaving behind the minimum number of pickets to secure the camp. With four days' rations, Gregg's designated route involved passing through Reams's Station, crossing the Rowanty at Malone's Bridge, before striking Boydton Plank Road at Dinwiddie CH. There, he should patrol up and down the plank road "to intercept and capture any wagon trains carrying supplies from Belfield, and to take advantage of any opportunity of inflicting injury on the enemy." Upon mission completion, the cavalymen should return to Malone's Bridge via the same route. Gregg's orders explained that Warren's 5th Corps, positioned nearby around the Hargrave house, would support him. Gregg received instructions to give Warren a cavalry regiment and a supply train holding one and a half days' forage and Gregg's reserve ammunition. Gregg should notify Warren of everything that occurred, and in the event of an

⁶ *OR* 46/2:370-71. A "general circular" was an important order issued centrally to many recipients. The order was issued by Meade's Assistant Adjutant-General George D. Ruggles. The established commander of the 6th Corps, Maj. Gen. Horatio Wright was on leave.

engagement, he would take his orders from Warren. Finally, Gregg learned that Confederate Maj. Gen. Butler's Cavalry Division had gone to North Carolina.⁷



Map 1.3: The Location of Union Corps on February 4, 1865.

Gouverneur Warren

Warren's 5th Corps' role entailed supporting Gregg's cavalry in case they encountered difficulties. Warren's orders directed him to move his corps at 7:00 a.m. the next day, taking:

two batteries, one rifled and one smooth-bore, and the usual amount of ammunition in limbers and caissons. You will be rationed for four days from tomorrow a.m. (three on hoof), with fifty rounds of ammunition on the person and forty rounds in reserve.

⁷ OR 46/2:380-81

To maximize speed, he could take only half the usual allowance of ambulances, with one hospital and one medicine wagon to each brigade, together with only half the usual entrenching tools besides the pioneer tools. He must withdraw most of his pickets but leave enough to protect his camps from Rebel guerrillas. Warren's orders directed him to:

travel down the Halifax Road to Rowanty Post-Office, then by the road direct to the crossing of Rowanty Creek at W. Perkins', thence across Hatcher's Run to J. Hargraves on the road leading to Dinwiddie Court-House, taking a position at or near that point to support General Gregg's cavalry.

His orders summarized Gregg's expected role, detailing how Gregg would keep him posted on developments, and should the cavalry encounter difficulties, they would report to Warren. The orders also described Humphreys's role.⁸

Andrew Humphreys

Humphreys's 2nd Corps would provide a protective link between Warren and the western (Federal left) flank of the permanent Union fortifications facing Petersburg. He received instructions to move at 7:00 a.m. the next day, February 5, with the two divisions of his corps, *not* on the Petersburg line. Miles, who commanded the division facing Petersburg, would stay under his command but report directly to army headquarters anything of importance that might occur, independent of his reports to Humphreys.

Humphreys received the same instructions as Warren regarding the amounts of rations, ammunition, limited ambulances, and entrenchment tools. He had to leave as few pickets as necessary to safeguard his camp. He received orders to take two artillery batteries. His orders directed him to "move to the crossing of the Vaughan Road over Hatcher's Run and to Armstrong's Mill and hold these two points." This would block the Confederate forces entrenched in front of Boydton Plank Road from sweeping down and cutting off Warren or Gregg from the permanent Union line.

Humphreys's orders explained the proposed activities of Gregg and Warren, emphasizing that his (Humphreys') primary mission entailed supporting Warren, including

⁸ *OR* 46/2:377-78, 381. This reference implies that Warren had initially been ordered down Jerusalem Plank Road to Reams's Station before heading west, but at Warren's request, the orders were changed to the shorter route described here.

furnishing him with reinforcements, should he request them. A telegraph line would run to Humphreys' headquarters on Hatcher's Run, and general army headquarters would either reside there or on the road nearby. Humphreys must maintain communications with Warren in his front and the Union lines to his rear.⁹

Final Communiques

At 7:45 p.m., Meade messaged Grant saying:

The orders are all issued; the cavalry will move at 3 a.m. and the infantry at 7 a.m. Contrabands have come in this p.m., reporting the departure last Thursday week of [Confederate Maj. Gen.] Butler's cavalry division for North Carolina. This would leave only one division, W. H. F. [Rooney] Lee's, to oppose Gregg.

No doubt encouraged by the news of Butler's departure, Grant again pushed his original Belfield idea. At 8:30 p.m., Grant asked Meade, "if Gregg can possibly go to Belfield, he probably will be enabled to destroy a large amount of stores accumulated there. The departure of one division of the enemy's cavalry will favor this."

Meade tactfully replied to Grant at 9:30 p.m. that he had now ordered Gregg to proceed to Belfield, *providing* he found upon reaching Dinwiddie CH any reliable intelligence suggesting that he could achieve anything there. Meade pointed out that the Rebels would store any accumulated supplies at the Hicksford depot on the other (Confederate) side of the Meherrin River from Belfield. Furthermore, Rebel artillery protected the position, as Union forces had discovered in December 1864. Meade finally added, "We also believe that W. H. F. [Rooney] Lee's division of cavalry is in that vicinity. Gregg goes without artillery." Thus, while not directly opposing his superior's desire to strike at Belfield, Meade effectively killed off the idea through sound reasoning.¹⁰

Finally, at 10:00 p.m., as he promised Meade, Grant sent a dispatch to Secretary of War Stanton explaining the proposed offensive. Thus, the president and his cabinet would understand the situation when reports of the operation began appearing:

I have ordered the cavalry to move down the Weldon Road tomorrow for the purpose of breaking up the enemy's wagon train as far as they can, which is being used to draw supplies

⁹ OR 46/2:371-72.

¹⁰ OR 46/2:368-69.

from Belfield to Petersburg. A corps of infantry goes as far as Stony Creek in support. I telegraph this so that you may know the object of the movement when you hear of it.

Curiously, this message described the Belfield offensive rather than the revised Dinwiddie CH plan. Thus, Grant gave his political masters advanced warning of the impending action without sharing any details that could be questioned or tampered with.¹¹

The Union Soldiers' Perspective

For the typical Union soldier in the ranks of Gregg's, Warren's, or Humphreys' forces, Saturday, February 4, began as just another day. They had lived in relative comfort since the Applejack Raid two months earlier. Their newly built winter camps offered sound protection from the harsh weather. Camp rumors centered around the three Confederate peace delegates crossing their lines and the possibility of ending hostilities. This relative tranquility ended abruptly with the arrival of marching orders.

A 24th Michigan (Warren's 5th Corps) history recalled the regiment happily helping to erect a chapel when marching orders arrived in the afternoon, bringing construction to a sudden close. Speculation abounded as to where they were going and why:

the night was passed as usual on such occasions, in receiving a good supply of rations and a full complement of cartridges and in reducing knapsacks to their marching weight, as well as writing letters home, perhaps farewell ones. Then too it was a source of anxiety if this mid-winter movement would result in an abandonment of their cozy and comfortable winter cabins.¹²

Some regiments received marching orders in the afternoon as the plans continued to evolve. Other troops received them much later, after Meade had disseminated the final orders. During that evening, Sgt. Thomas D. Marbaker of the 11th New Jersey with Humphreys's 2nd Corps remembered that:

orders came to be ready to march at daylight the next morning. That night services were held in the chapel for the last time, and then the men lay down to get what rest they could, for marching orders brought with them an uncertainty as to when another opportunity would be had; and under the conditions existing in the army at that time they were almost equivalent to orders to fight.¹³

¹¹ *OR* 46/2:366.

¹² Orson B. Curtis, *History of the 24th Michigan of the Iron Brigade* (Detroit, 1891), 289.

¹³ Thomas D. Marbaker, *History of the 11th New Jersey Volunteers, from its Organization to Appomattox* (Trenton, NJ, 1898), 265.

Corporal John W. Haley, 17th Maine, also in the 2nd Corps, received orders around midnight to be ready to move at a moment's notice. He noted how this upset the soldiers' equilibrium as they didn't know whether to start making preparations or to sleep until definite orders appeared. Most compromised, packing some belongings before resting. More disruption soon followed, with orders to send the sick and physically weak on picket duty.¹⁴

Lieutenant Samuel E. Cormany, 16th Pennsylvania Cavalry, remembered receiving orders late at night to move out at 2:30 a.m. He dozed near a fire until 1:00 a.m., before going to all company headquarters and waking the officers.¹⁵



Lt. Samuel E. Cormany
The Cormany Diaries



Maj. Gen. W. H. "Rooney" Lee
Library of Congress

The common soldier found this phase of warfare especially stressful. He faced marching to an unknown destination with the likelihood of combat and the accompanying fears of mutilation or death. Many sought rest, but sleep might not be so sound with swirling thoughts of loved ones back home and the worry that the next sunrise could be one's last.

The Confederate Experience

For the Confederate soldiers protecting "Bobby" Lee's right flank, their duties continued, ignorant of the extensive Union planning. The main activities during the first few days of February entailed constructing winter quarters and picketing. One bored Tar Heel with Pegram's division complained that there was nothing to relieve the monotonous routine

¹⁴ John W. Haley, *The Rebel Yell & Yankee Hurrah: The Civil War Journal of a Maine Volunteer*, Ruth L. Silliker, ed. (Camden, ME, 2014), 240.

¹⁵ James C. Mohr, ed., *The Cormany Diaries: A Northern Family in the Civil War* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1982), 516.

of camp life, of roll calls, drills, inspections, and dress parade. Others noted a general gloominess around the camps, brought about by a lack of food, the prospect of losing the war, and receiving no pay. The commonplace desertions also added to the low morale.¹⁶

Camp conversations included speculation about the outcome of their peace envoys, who were known to have crossed over into the Union lines. Officers organized distractions to help boost the ebbing morale. Some regiments made formal written pledges to continue fighting until they had secured independence. On Thursday, February 2, Pegram held a dress review of his division as a treat for his new bride. All the senior Confederate generals attended, along with many ladies and “aristocrats of Virginia.” “Bobby Lee” himself sat on Hetty’s right. Corps commander Gordon and Pegram ceremoniously trooped the line of proud soldiers; for some, this was their first opportunity to see such esteemed officers as Robert E. Lee, James Longstreet, and A. P. Hill. Amid much cheering and whooping, the event nearly ended on a sour note, as upon leaving the grand display amid all the noise, Hetty’s horse became uppity and ran into a Rebel soldier. As she began apologizing, the excited Tar Heel sprang up and, removing his hat, said, “Never mind, Miss. You might have rid all over me, indeed you might!”¹⁷

On the same day, 40 miles further south, Rooney Lee’s Cavalry Division staged a mock jousting contest. Rumors also circulated of a possible Federal attack. On February 3, Pegram ordered his division to ready itself to fall in at a minute’s notice. Early on February 4, Capt. Oscar Hinrichs rode with Maj. John P. New and Pegram to inspect their outposts. In the afternoon, they crossed Hatcher’s Run and ventured to the Cummings house, where they could see the Union outposts. There, they met a Rebel spy (named George) who informed them that his contacts had not heard of any Union movements, but he believed that the

¹⁶ Samuel D. Buck, *With the Old Confeds: Actual Experiences of a Captain in the Line* (Gaithersburg, MD: 1983/1925), 129; Charles R. Jones, “Historical Sketch: Our Living and Our Dead” *New Bern [NC] Petersburg Siege Newspapers*, May 20, 1874, p1-2; Sherrill, *The 21st North Carolina*, 410; William T. Venner, *The 11th North Carolina Infantry in the Civil War: A History and Roster* (Jefferson, NC, 2015), 195; Waters & Edmonds, *A Band of Spartans*, 169-70.

¹⁷ Douglas, *I Rode with Stonewall*, 311; Sherrill, *21st North Carolina*, 410-411; Lambert & Suderow, “The Battle of Hatcher’s Run,” 44; Harrison, *Recollections Grave and Gay*, 203-05; Dunham, *Allegany to Appomattox*, 157; Griggs, *General John Pegram*, 115-16.

Yankees were planning something. They returned to headquarters, where Hinrichs wrote in his diary about his concerns for the following day.¹⁸

Analysis of the Union Plans

The exchange of dispatches between Meade and Grant provides a fascinating insight into their working relationship. Bold and daring, Grant always looked to seize the initiative, while Meade displayed more caution and practicality. Unlike other leaders, Grant wasn't dogmatic about his ideas. As overall commander, Grant could have insisted that Meade carry out his Belfield plan. However, he allowed Meade to scale back his ambitious original project. Like any prudent general, Grant accepted the advice of his subordinate closer to the situation. Given their military relationship, there is the suspicion that Grant could claim credit for any successes while having Meade available as a scapegoat for failures.

Upon reflection, Grant's initial plan appears weak and reckless. Less than two months earlier, a similar Union force had ventured to Belfield during the Applejack Raid, destroying the Weldon Railroad along the way. They had found Belfield well-fortified and defended by artillery positioned at Hicksford across the river. The Federals had quickly deemed the position too formidable to attack and withdrew. This proved a wise decision, as a Rebel force under A. P. Hill headed for their rear. Yet, despite this recent experience and lucky escape, Grant proposed a similar venture. It is unclear how long he had contemplated this raid; it seemed rather impromptu. Intriguingly, Grant's detailed memoirs said *nothing* of this offensive.¹⁹

It is doubtful that Gregg's cavalry could have captured Belfield without artillery support. As Meade pointed out, the Confederates would safely store any wagons/supplies at Hicksford across the river. Furthermore, Rooney Lee's three brigades of cavalry had recently joined the small Rebel force and artillery guarding Belfield/Hicksford, a fact known to the Federal high command. This force would have proven a formidable foe for Gregg's troopers.

¹⁸ Sherrill, *The 21st North Carolina*, 410-11, Driver, *First and Second Maryland*, 310; Neil H. Raiford, *The 4th North Carolina Cavalry in the Civil War: A History and Roster* (Jefferson, NC, 2006), 83; Richard B. Williams, ed., *Stonewall's Prussian Mapmaker: The Journals of Captain Oscar Hinrichs* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2014), 238-39.

¹⁹ Trudeau, *The Last Citadel*, 271-284; Grant, *Personal Memoirs*, 2:439-40.

If Meade had followed Grant's original plan, his Union cavalymen could have met with calamity.²⁰

Grant was desperate to do something! The planned offensive would keep "Bobby Lee" and his soldiers occupied, and thus less able to slip away, Grant's biggest fear. The mission also suited Grant's temperament, as he often didn't respond well to inactivity. However, February was notoriously a bad time for launching offensives. The wintery conditions made large troop movements extremely challenging. The forthcoming fight around Hatcher's Run was the only Civil War battle in Virginia to occur during a February. Grant's correspondence demonstrates his belief that breaking up the Confederate supply line from Belfield represented a vital military goal. Many memoirs, both blue and gray, suggested that Grant's aim for the offensive involved capturing Boydton Plank Road or the Southside Railroad, essential Rebel communication arteries. Grant never mentioned these targets in any dispatches planning the offensive. The false assumptions surrounding the mission's goal and Grant's desire to keep Lee occupied were neatly encapsulated at the time by Francis M. Wafer, a 2nd Corps acting brigade surgeon.²¹

With much shorter distances to travel and the three attacking forces more compact, Meade's revised plan to intercept the Rebel supply line around Dinwiddie CH entailed fewer risks. However, it still involved endangering the best part of two army corps (nearly 28,000 men) supporting the cavalry raid of 6,500 troopers.²² The 2nd Corps also had to secure two probably well-defended strategic crossings of Hatcher's Run. Meade had voiced concerns that such a large-scale offensive would need to yield substantial achievements to appease the public and politicians. Interestingly, throughout all the planning, neither Grant nor Meade mentioned that cavalry commander Gregg had recently tendered his resignation, with both apparently content for him to spearhead the raid.

With plans completed and orders and supplies issued, Grant's eighth offensive in the Petersburg sector would soon commence. No one foresaw the terrible three-day drama and carnage about to unfold.

²⁰ Daughtry, *Gray Cavalier*, 242; *OR* 42/2:1092.

²¹ William H. Price, *Civil War Handbook* (Fairfax, VA, 1961), 67-69; Francis M. Wafer, *A Surgeon in the Army of the Potomac*, Cheryl A. Wells, ed. (Montreal, Canada, 2008), 133-34.

²² Thomas L. Livermore, *Numbers and Losses in the Civil War in America 1861-65* (Dayton, OH, 1986), 133.