

Chapter 8

Trying to Locate the Enemy

February 6, 6:00 a.m. – 1:30 p.m.

At 6:40 a.m., Monday, February 6, Humphreys messaged Meade, summarizing the Union's situation:

Everything remains quiet. The troops of the Sixth and Ninth Corps were got into position last night, and hold the line strongly to Fort Cummings, with strong reserves. Warren's infantry came up before morning and Gregg's cavalry are coming up now. All of Mott is now on the right of Smyth.¹

By concentrating his forces overnight around Humphreys's 2nd Corps, AOP commander Meade had valid reasons for feeling more confident. At 7:15 a.m., Meade wrote to Grant saying that Warren and Humphreys were in position, with the army's right flank secured by Fort Cummings and the left flank by two 5th Corps divisions at the Vaughan Road–Hatcher's Run crossing. Gregg's cavalymen had now joined Warren's force. Meade shared with Grant how he'd ordered Warren and Humphreys to move out to determine if any enemy forces resided outside their line of works. His Federals would drive in any Rebels discovered in the open, but they would not attack Confederates within their well-prepared defensive positions. However, how Meade and his chief-of-staff, Maj. Gen. Alex S. Webb disseminated these orders, caused significant confusion and delays.²

After Meade, Warren was the senior Union officer on the battlefield, responsible for all forces present. When Warren received orders around 8:00 a.m. to probe the Rebels on his front and attack any in the open, he interpreted the dispatch as requiring him to reconnoiter on Humphreys's front. After all, fierce fighting had occurred there the previous evening, and that was where the Federals expected another attack.

¹ *OR* 46/2:422-23.

² *OR* 46/1:152; *OR* 46/2:417, 423. Maj. Gen. Webb had been shot through the head at Spotsylvania in May 1864 and presumed dead. He'd only returned to the army as chief-of-staff in Jan 1865. In 1891 he received a Medal of Honor for his deeds at Gettysburg.

Consistent with this interpretation, Warren heard from Humphreys (8:45 a.m.) that he'd deployed troops from Maj. Gen. Mott's division, 2nd Corps, and Maj. Gen. Hartranft's division, 9th Corps, to probe for the enemy on his front. Furthermore, Humphreys had directed his 2nd Corps soldiers to prepare to attack should he discover any Confederates outside their works. Warren swiftly replied, acknowledging the information, and said he had ordered one of his own divisions (Crawford's) to be ready to support Humphreys if required. Warren reported that on his front, the Rebels only had vedettes. He believed the Rebels' main line extended south to Gravelly Run about a mile west of Dabney's Mill. He added that Gregg had just reported skirmishing with the enemy on Vaughan Road. Warren concluded by saying he was preparing for anything and would await further developments.³

So instead of *both* Warren and Humphreys probing their fronts, as Meade intended, only the latter executed the order. This communication mishap arose from Meade's assumption that Humphreys outranked Warren. In Meade's defense, Humphreys was much older than Warren and far senior in the Regular Army. However, Warren outranked Humphreys in the Volunteer Army (by two months only), which determined seniority during the war.⁴

Humphreys Probes His Front

At 9:00 a.m., Humphreys ordered Brig. Gen. De Trobriand, Mott's division, to conduct a reconnaissance beyond the Tucker house, discover the whereabouts of the Confederates, and learn if they had retired into their works. De Trobriand took four regiments on the mission: 2nd U.S. Sharpshooters, 20th Indiana, 17th Maine, and 1st Maine Heavy Artillery.⁵ He deployed the sharpshooters right and left of the road running north, with an advance guard on the road and a reserve. On the left of the Thompson house, he found a side road through some woods, where he left two 20th Indiana companies to secure his rear. De Trobriand proceeded northwards unopposed, the Confederates having withdrawn their advanced picket line. Upon reaching an opening, he noticed a few Rebels occupying light

³ OR 46/1:254; OR 46/2:433.

⁴ Donald R. Jermann, *Union General Gouverneur Warren: Hero at Little Round Top, Disgrace at Five Forks* (Jefferson, NC, 2015) 19; OR 46/2:422, 430.

⁵ We first met the 2nd Sharpshooters in Chapter 4. The Indiana regiment was the 20th in name only; the soldiers of the 20th had mustered out of service in Oct 1864. By Feb 1865, the 20th IN was a collection of officers and men remaining from the 7th, 14th, and 19th IN, the latter regiment being originally one of the famous Iron Brigade. The 1st ME Heavy Artillery acquired the sad record for losing the greatest number of killed and mortally wounded of any regiment in the Union Army in a single day of battle – June 18, 1864.

works constructed across the road. A few shots swiftly dislodged the Confederates. De Trobriand saw the Watkins house ahead and beyond that, about 250 yards, a continuous line of occupied Confederate defenses. The Yankees advanced toward the house and, after trading shots, quickly ousted some Rebel outposts.



Maj. Gen. Alex S. Webb
Library of Congress



Brig. Gen. P. Regis de Trobriand
Library of Congress

De Trobriand realized that he'd reached the Confederates' main works. He pushed forward his skirmishers to ascertain the enemy's strength. He saw a large Rebel force rushing toward the side road where he'd left the two 20th Indiana companies. De Trobriand withdrew his men, fearing that he could be cut off. He transferred his reconnaissance from the road running north to the road running west of the Thompson house. As the Rebels showed no desire to attack, he sent forward two companies under Lt. Col. Albert S. Andrews, 20th Indiana, who advanced across a swamp. The bluecoats soon found themselves before major Confederate entrenchments, including a redoubt armed with two cannons commanding the road.

The Yankees opened fire on the Rebels from Pegram's division, visible above the barricades. The Confederates briskly returned fire, and many jumped over their parapets to occupy small pits in front of their entrenchments. De Trobriand reported the progress of his mission to division and corps commanders. With the objective fully accomplished, he followed orders and returned to the Federal lines.⁶

⁶ *OR* 46/1:227-28; *OR* 46/2:424. The redoubt just north of the Crow house would feature prominently in the battle. A description of the redoubt is provided in *Atlanta [GA] Weekly Intelligencer*, April, 1865. In the *OR*, Union officers used the terms: probe, reconnaissance, reconnoiter the enemy's position, feel out one's front, interchangeably to mean the same thing.

Towards 10:00 a.m., Humphreys ordered Hartranft to send out a regiment to reconnoiter beyond the Smith and Hawks houses and determine, if possible, the position and strength of any Rebels outside of their main works. Hartranft dispatched the 200th Pennsylvania, commanded by Lt. Col. William H. McCall. One of Hartranft's staff officers, Capt. Watts, familiar with the roads in the vicinity and the location of the Confederate main position, accompanied the party. Watts soon reported that no Confederates resided outside their works except the usual pickets occupying their customary pits. Consequently, following Humphreys's orders, the regiment did not engage and returned to its division.⁷

A Perplexed Warren

Meanwhile, Warren continued to seek clarification of his role. At 9:30 a.m., he received the following confused message from Meade's chief-of-staff, Maj. Gen. Webb:

my dispatch of 7.50 a.m. was written and sent before General Humphreys' telegram of 7.20, and was considered necessary owing to the misapprehension he [Meade] labored under yesterday of your relative rank, rendering it, in his judgment, prudential to repeat the instructions given last night. General Humphreys' dispatch of 7.20 is perfectly satisfactory, and thus mine of 7.50 proves to be unnecessary.

The dispatch highlights the misunderstanding about rank seniority. It also explains the cross-over of messages with Humphreys, who had telegraphed his intention to probe his front *before* receiving Webb's 7:50 a.m. message to Humphreys and Warren ordering them to probe their fronts. However, Webb's latest message only partially resolved the matter, and Warren remained perplexed. To compound the confusion, about twenty minutes later, the communications operator at headquarters sent Warren a note stating that the message he had received around 8:00 a.m. should be timed as sent at 7:50 a.m.

Warren, known for his strict attention to detail, quickly replied (10:00 a.m.) to Meade's chief-of-staff, explaining that he had not received any dispatches with times marked on them. He had received one around 8:00 a.m. (with no time upon it), ordering him to probe to his front. Warren asked, was this the order that was now no longer necessary? He stated that he'd organized his forces according to his overnight orders. Humphreys had told him of his plan to probe the enemy and attack if possible. Consequently, he (Warren) was keeping his troops in readiness if Humphreys needed support. Warren revealed that the Rebel

⁷ OR 46/1:344. The 200th PA had only formed in Sept 1864 and joined Hartranft's division on Nov 28, 1864.

presence facing him appeared light, and if he probed on his front, he would be marching over the same road that Meade had recently ordered him to take. But he was happy to do so or support Humphreys, whatever Meade wanted.⁸

With the communication problems unresolved and Warren still unaware that Meade wanted him to probe on his front, Warren faced another issue as the cavalry skirmishing along Vaughan Road intensified.

Union Cavalry Actions

After marching through the night, David Gregg's exhausted cavalry started to reach Warren's 5th Corps around 4:00 a.m. Brigadier General Davies returned from leave that morning to resume command of his brigade. At 8:00 a.m., as the troopers rested near the Gravelly Run crossing, dismounted Rebel cavalry vigorously attacked their rearguard. Sergeant Major Edward P. Tobie, 1st Maine Cavalry, Knowles's brigade, recalled:

the men were generally cooking their breakfast, when there was sharp firing just in the rear. The rear guard – 4th Pennsylvania Cavalry – was attacked and the enemy was driving it in with severe loss. The 1st Maine [Cavalry] were ordered to the rescue. Leaving their cooking utensils and prospective breakfast where they were, leaving overcoats, leaving everything but their carbines the boys jumped into line.

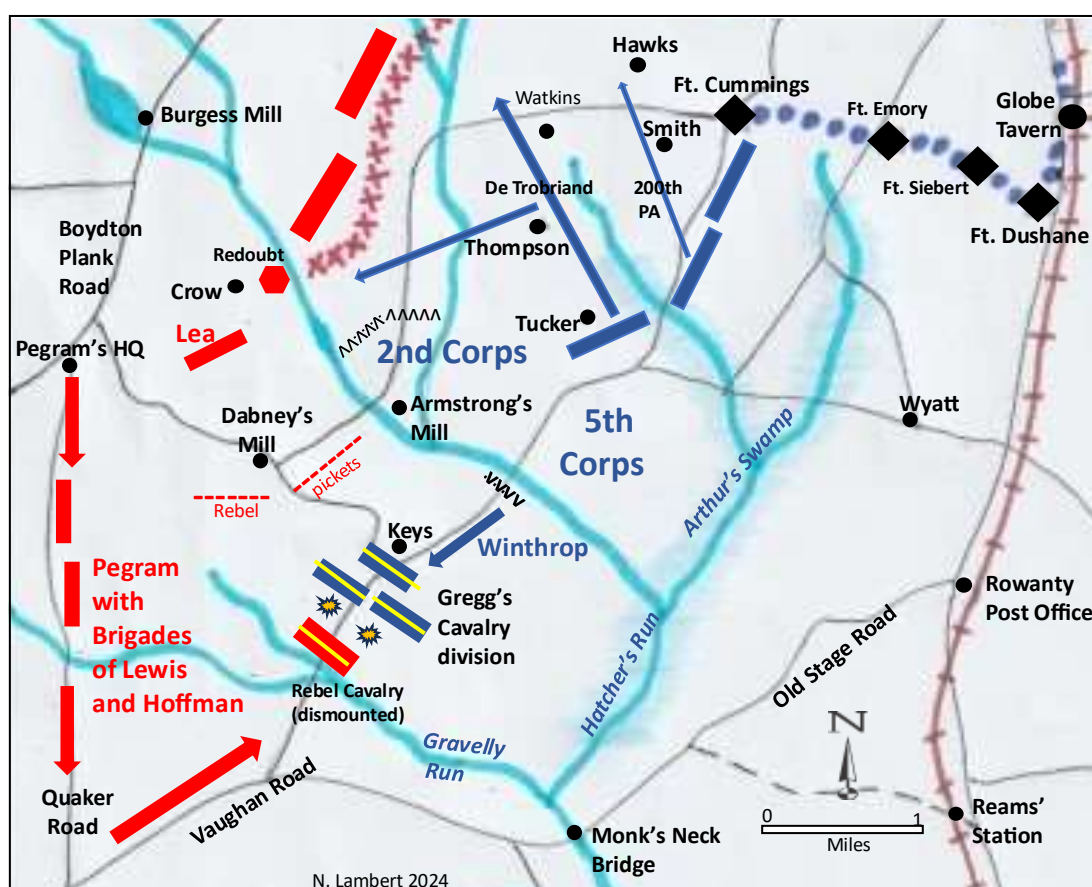
With their horses sent to the rear, Capt. John D. Myrick's battalion, 1st Maine Cavalry, led the advance and charged, checking the Confederate assault. Once relieved, the 4th Pennsylvania Cavalry retired in relatively good order. Myrick then advanced his Maine men to a crossroads where they sought cover and defensible positions. The remainder of the 1st Maine Cavalry (268 officers and men) drew up just behind on the brow of a hill. Tobie remembered "the fun they had that morning shooting at the enemy's sharp-shooters, who occasionally showed themselves around some out-buildings, in the edge of the woods on the opposite side of the field." This situation continued with sporadic shooting until about 1:00 p.m.⁹

Other Union cavalymen had different recollections. They remembered how the Rebels (most likely troopers of Beale's Cavalry Brigade) had shadowed their column all morning. After halting for breakfast, Rebels drove in the rear Federal pickets and attacked the

⁸ OR 46/2:423, 430-31.

⁹ OR 46/2:430; Crowninshield, *History of the 1st Regiment*, 249; Tobie, *History of the 1st Maine Cavalry*, 378-79; Merrill, *Campaigns of the 1st Maine*, 318-19. Tobie received a Medal of Honor for deeds he performed during the final days of the war.

reserve. The 10th New York Cavalry, Davies's brigade, quickly formed, and following behind brigade skirmishers from the 24th New York Cavalry, they drove back the Rebels. Joined by Knowles's brigade (dismounted), they hastily constructed light breastworks across Vaughan Road near the Keys house as the firing continued. Armed with repeating rifles, the bluecoats easily held off the dismounted Rebel cavalrymen. However, the arrival of Rebel infantry, from Pegram's division, around 11:00 a.m., intensified the skirmishing and threatened the Union cavalrymen.¹⁰



Map 8.1: Army Movements, 8:00 a.m. to Noon, Monday, February 6.

The Union forces had to maintain control of the strategically important Vaughan Road. About a mile up the road from this skirmishing, Warren ordered Brig. Gen. Winthrop's brigade, Ayres's division, to support the embattled cavalrymen. As they marched the short distance, they found Gregg's dismounted cavalry skirmishing with the enemy. Memoirs from

¹⁰ Preston, *History of the 10th Regiment of Cavalry*, 240-41; Hand, *One Good Regiment*, 191; OR 46/1:366; Henry R. Pyne, *The History of the First New Jersey Cavalry, (Sixteenth Regiment, New Jersey Volunteers)* (Trenton, NJ, 1871), 303. Some Union cavalry claimed, in error, that the Rebel infantry arrived around 10:00 a.m.

cavalrymen remembered that infantry relieved them around 1:00 p.m.¹¹

Winthrop reported that the 146th New York relieved the cavalry pickets. The 5th and 140th New York deployed on the right-hand side of Vaughan Road, and the 15th New York Heavy Artillery (now an infantry regiment) was on the left-hand side in a large open field. However, Sgt. J. Ansel Booth, 140th New York, claimed *they* had relieved the cavalry pickets. He noted that the cavalrymen had Spencer repeating rifles, and “half a dozen of them [were] worth a whole company of our Springfield rifles.” He continued, “advancing closely to the Rebel picket line in the woods, we soon had as much shooting as we cared to make.” This action continued for nearly an hour, allowing the Federal cavalry to regroup. Gregg’s cavalrymen had now been active since 3:00 a.m. the previous day with little or no rest.¹²

Warren Finally Acts

Between 11:00 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. Humphreys informed Meade and Warren of his reconnaissance mission, namely that De Trobriand and Hartranft had met little resistance and found no significant Rebel forces outside their defenses. At 12:15 p.m., Warren received a dispatch (with precise timings) from Meade’s chief-of-staff, trying again to explain the communication mix-up. It stated that the plan was for *both* he (Warren) and Humphreys to determine if the enemy was outside their works on their respective fronts and, if so, to drive them in. Hence, Warren received explicit orders to conduct a reconnaissance south and west of Hatcher's Run to ascertain the whereabouts of the enemy's lines. Shortly afterward, Meade arrived at Warren’s headquarters, presumably to clarify the orders and personally inspect the situation on the ground.¹³

Suitably enlightened to Meade’s intentions, at 1:15 p.m., Warren instructed Crawford to move his division along Vaughan Road to where it met Dabney's Mill Road and take that road toward the old sawmill. Crawford should drive back any Confederates encountered and ascertain the position of their main defensive lines, believed to be nearby. Ayres and his

¹¹ OR 46/1:254, 279; Schlosser & Robortella, *Writing Home*, 63; Tobie, *History of the 1st Maine Cavalry*, 379; Preston, *History of the 10th Regiment of Cavalry*, 241. Accounts of the skirmishing along Vaughan Road contain numerous inconsistencies. I have oriented the text around those events most supported by eyewitness accounts. In his report, Winthrop claimed he moved out to support the cavalry at 1:00 p.m.; it was probably nearer noon. One of Winthrop’s infantrymen wrote that the sun was up and “the day getting quite warm like May.” Most memoirs be it from blue or gray commented on how cold and wet the weather was that day.

¹² Schlosser & Robortella, *Writing Home*, 63; OR 46/1:279; Pyne, *The History of the First New Jersey Cavalry*, 303.

¹³ OR 46/2:424, 431-32, 434; OR 46/1:254.

division received orders to follow Crawford, taking Winthrop's brigade, currently supporting the cavalry down Vaughan Road, with him. Griffin's division remained as a reserve in the Hatcher's Run-Vaughan Road crossing entrenchments. David Gregg received orders to send a cavalry force down Vaughan Road and drive any Rebels across Gravelly Run. Warren believed this would be easily accomplished as he thought Gregg faced only a few Confederate cavalry skirmishers. In addition, Gregg should dispatch a small force to screen the left flank of the advancing infantry column of Crawford and Ayres and send a small cavalry force to watch the road leading down the east side of Rowanty Creek to Monk's Neck Bridge.¹⁴

By 1:30 p.m., Crawford's and Ayres's divisions marched purposefully down Vaughan Road towards the Dabney's Mill Road intersection. Slightly further up the road, having been relieved by Winthrop's men, David Gregg's cavalry prepared to execute their orders and push the Confederates over Gravelly Run.

The Confederate Situation

Throughout the morning, the Rebels had adopted a primarily defensive posture. Heth's Division rested securely within the main Confederate fortifications north of Armstrong's Mill, their advanced pickets having retreated from De Trobriand's earlier probe. These forces showed no appetite for leaving their works. Sergeant Probest, 2nd Maryland Battalion, McComb's Brigade, remembered the very cold day. At 7:00 a.m., his battalion marched 300 yards to the right of Davis's camp, stacked arms behind the breastworks, and built fires. Henry Ammen, also in McComb's Brigade, wrote in his diary at noon, "All quiet along the lines. Poor Fred Wingate [wounded the previous day] died at 10 o'clock this morning." Captain John Sloan, 27th North Carolina, Cooke's Brigade, remembered returning to their camps on February 6, where they enjoyed quiet and rested until late March. Evans's division returned to the Confederate works on Heth's right. Mahone's Division (currently commanded by Brig. Gen. Finegan), which had arrived towards the end of the Rebel assaults the previous day, lay in their lines until around noon. Upon receiving orders to return to their camps in front of Petersburg, they set off along Boydton Plank Road.¹⁵

¹⁴ OR 46/1:254; OR 46/2:434.

¹⁵ Driver, *First and Second Maryland*, 313; Sloan, *Reminiscences of The Guilford Grays*, 110; Gleeson, *Erin Go Gray*, 35; Horn, *The Petersburg Regiment*, 358-61.

Pegram's division, occupying the far right of the Rebel line, showed more aggressive intentions. This force included the brigades of Brig. Gen. Johnston, Col. John Hoffman, and Brig. Gen. William G. Lewis. Recall that Johnston was absent throughout the battle, with brigade command passing to Col. Lea. At about 10:00 a.m., Pegram ordered Lea to "extend his line (curving it backwards) to the works at the Masonic Lodge in front of our camp." With his 775 men, Lea received orders to hold this line (nearly two miles) for as long as possible. If compelled to fall back, he must do so slowly until reaching the defenses near the Crow house, which must be held. Lea learned that Pegram would accompany the brigades of Hoffman (631 men) and Lewis (902 men) down Quaker Road to Vaughan Road and strike the enemy there.¹⁶

At 11:00 a.m., an undisclosed Rebel commander ordered Lea to probe toward the Vaughan Road-Hatcher's Run crossing as the Yankees appeared to be retreating. Lea gave the task to the 1st North Carolina Battalion commanded by Capt. Reuben Wilson.¹⁷ They advanced nearly a mile before Yankees fired upon their front and left flank, forcing them to withdraw. Shortly afterward, Lea received orders from Corps Commander Gordon to take his brigade and strike the retreating Federals at the crossing. A seasoned veteran, Lea was aware of the large, entrenched Federal force (Humphreys's 2nd Corps) around Armstrong's Mill blocking that maneuver. He declined the order until his immediate commander, Pegram, knew the complete situation. Moments later, Maj. Giles B. Cooke, from Gen. R. E. Lee's staff, and Lt. Thomas Jones, from Gordon's staff, visited Lea, who showed them the Union's strong position. The staff officers quickly rode back to Gordon with the news while Lea awaited the outcome. Starved of cavalry intelligence, the Confederate high command may have misconstrued the withdrawal of De Trobriand's brigade from Hatcher's Run to undertake a probe (see above) as a broader Union withdrawal.¹⁸

¹⁶ *ORS* 7:803-04; Lambert, "Rebel Units and their Commanders at the Battle of Hatcher's Run" Part 2; Sherrill, *The 21st North Carolina*, 414. In note 9 of Chapter 45, Sherrill discussed the Quaker Meeting House and the Masonic Lodge. The location of the latter still seems uncertain.

¹⁷ Reuben Wilson acquired notoriety the following month. While patrolling in western North Carolina, he allegedly took five Union sympathizers from jail and shot them. Calls for his prosecution lasted long after the war ended. On April 2, 1865, a shell tore off his left leg. Hospitalized, Wilson was paroled on Apr 21, only to be re-arrested and taken to Libby Prison, where he remained until Dec 20, 1865. David C. Williard, "Executions, Justice, and Reconciliation in North Carolina's Western Piedmont, 1865-67," *Journal of the Civil War Era* (March 2012), Vol. 1, No. 1, 31-47.

¹⁸ *ORS* 7:803-04; Sherrill, *The 21st North Carolina*, 414. The reports of Lee and Gordon were minimal, mentioning no specific orders, *OR* 46/1:381, 390. Sherrill claimed that Lea's orders originated from R. E. Lee. Lt. Thomas Jones was the officer mentioned in the cancelled ambush of Brig. Gen. McAllister on the previous afternoon.



Maj. Giles B. Cooke
Wikipedia



Capt. Reuben Wilson
Library of Congress

Meanwhile, Pegram rode down Quaker Road towards Vaughan Road with the brigades of Lewis and Hoffman. By around 11:00 a.m., Lewis and Hoffman were in a battle line north of Vaughan Road near the Gravelly Run crossing. They joined elements of Rooney Lee's dismounted cavalymen who had been skirmishing with the Federal cavalry for several hours along Vaughan Road. Pegram's infantrymen moved up to support their cavalry, intensifying the fighting.¹⁹

By 1:30 p.m., Crawford's and Ayres's bluecoats marched towards Lea's position near Dabney's Mill, and David Gregg prepared to sweep all Confederates along Vaughan Road back over Gravelly Run. Fierce fighting was inevitable.

Analysis

Although the primary events of this battle phase are clear, some details appear baffling. With his three forces successfully regrouped, Meade planned to discover the position of his enemy and push any Rebels found in the open back into their defenses. Unfortunately, Meade's failure to recognize Warren's position as the senior-ranking field officer, combined with some shoddy communication skills, resulted in significant misunderstandings and delays. Although Warren's assumptions and actions appear reasonable, just how punctilious he was about the dispatches he received remains an open

¹⁹ I have found no detailed Rebel accounts that describe the skirmishing along Vaughan Road up to 1:30 p.m. I assume the elements of Rebel cavalry to be Beale's Brigade. Accounts from Lewis's Tar Heels, Hoffmans Virginians and Beale's cavalymen only mention this phase of the battle in passing.

question. Warren had a reputation for altercations with his superiors. At the end of March 1865, he would again experience opaque orders from Meade, which ultimately cost Warren his army career and reputation.²⁰

After his meeting with Meade around noon, Warren had no doubts regarding expectations. What occurred at this meeting is unknown; one might imagine the irascible Meade venting his anger toward Warren for the inactivity. One can further assume that Meade had approved the orders that Warren issued soon afterward. The scale of Warren's probe is perplexing. Humphreys used five regiments to reconnoiter his more active front, whereas Warren committed two infantry divisions and a cavalry division to "probe" his less threatened front. This seems disproportionate. No battle account has questioned this decision. A probe up Dabney's Mill Road with an infantry brigade appeared the logical tactic. If they met with substantial Confederate resistance, Warren could have sent more troops in support. The decision to dispatch a "reconnaissance of force" had significant implications for subsequent events.

Again, little testimony describes the Confederate activities for the morning of February 6. Evidence suggests that by the dawn of February 6, "Bobby" Lee considered the battle over. Lee's primary concern remained keeping the Federals from Boydton Plank Road. Heth's and Evans's soldiers returned to their works, and Lee ordered Mahone's men back to Petersburg. Not the actions of a commander planning to initiate a battle.

And yet, on the Confederate right flank, Pegram, for some reason, split his small division (2,353 men) and sent two-thirds of this force south to probe along Vaughan Road. What did he hope to achieve? Had Gordon or Lee ordered him to divide his force? This isn't evident from their brief official reports. Recall the testimony of Adjutant Esten Cooke from the previous night, stating that Gordon had warned Pegram to expect a strong Union attack on his front in the morning. If true, splitting his force and leaving just Lee's brigade to cover the heart of his position makes little strategic sense.²¹

"Bobby" Lee had summoned up his son's (Rooney Lee) cavalry division from Belfield the previous day. Without them, he was operating with insufficient intelligence, leaving him virtually blind to the enemy's dispositions. It's hard to strike a foe if you don't know where they are. As discussed previously, the composition of the Rebel cavalry present

²⁰ Jermann, *Union General Gouverneur Warren*, 19; Calkins, "History and Tour Guide of Five Forks," 32, 109-111.

²¹ *OR* 46/1:381, 390.

at Hatcher's Run is unknown. Accounts only support the presence of Beale's Brigade along Vaughan Road. Testimony from Rooney Lee's other two cavalry brigades, commanded by Brig. Gen. Barringer and Brig. Gen. Dearing, consistently omits any discussion of the battle. It appears that few, if any, of these troopers made the 40-mile trip from their Belfield camps. Perhaps Pegram had expected to combine forces with *all* of Rooney Lee's troopers rather than just Beale's Brigade? Such a force might have held the Dabney's Mill Road-Vaughan Road intersection, thereby protecting Lea's brigade and posing a sizeable obstacle to Crawford's Federal division, which was about to occupy that significant road junction.

The three hours following 1:30 p.m. would see vicious fighting on two fronts, separated by about a mile of wooded terrain interspersed with open fields, ravines, and swamps. The following chapter describes the events along Vaughan Road before I dial the clock back to 1:30 p.m. and discuss the actions around Dabney's Mill in chapter 10.