

Chapter 3

Gouverneur Warren's Story

February 5, 7:00 a.m. – 4:30 p.m.

Four hours after Gregg's cavalry vacated their camps, Maj. Gen. Warren's 5th Corps (17,000 men) left their bases as Sunday dawned around 7:00 a.m. Soldiers across the many 5th Corps regimental camps south of Petersburg recalled the morning. Some were awake at 3:00 a.m. as camps burst into life, preparing to move out. Those medically unable to march stayed to guard the bases. Tents and most of the men's equipment also had to remain behind. The retention of pickets and the "light marching" order suggested to veteran Yankees that the forthcoming operation would be brief.

Each 5th Corps soldier experienced his own personal challenges as he prepared to face the unknown. In this mass of humanity, Sgt. D. Porter Marshall, 155th Pennsylvania, was destined to march near the back of the corps. He recalled that his company commander, Lt. Benjamin Huey, was so sick he couldn't go, and Marshall led the company despite having such a bad cold he could hardly speak above a whisper. Men with the 190th Pennsylvania spotted Maj. Gen. Warren riding his old gray horse, which they took as a sure sign that fighting would occur. Nor did it escape the soldiers' attention that, yet again, a mission would begin on the Sabbath.¹

The division of Maj. Gen. Romeyn B. Ayres led the way, followed by Maj. Gen. Charles Griffin's division; 12 field pieces of artillery (with eight horses to each piece and each caisson); then Maj. Gen. Samuel W. Crawford's division, and finally bringing up the rear, a "train" consisting of half the Corps' ambulances, 50 wagons of infantry ammunition, and 56 wagons heavily loaded with forage and ammunition for the cavalry. Three squadrons of the 6th Ohio Cavalry under Capt. John Saxon rode in front, providing a screen.

¹ OR 46/1:253; Livermore, *Numbers and Losses*, 133; Other data suggests a 5th Corps strength of nearer 13,500 men (Griffin's and Ayres' divisions, 4,700 each and Crawford's division of 4,000 men. Taylor, *Gouverneur Kemble Warren*, 203 note 1; Curtis, *History of the 24th Michigan*, 291-92). OR 51/1:286, 288. The order "light marching" meant that soldiers had only to carry their musket, ammunition, canteen, and haversack. Curtis, *History of the 24th Michigan*, 289-90; Richard. E. McBride, *In the Ranks: From the Wilderness to Appomattox Courthouse* (Cincinnati, 1891), 147; D. Porter Marshall, *Company "K," 155th Pennsylvania Volunteer Zouaves* (London, UK, 1888), 221-22.

The Union infantry traveled south down Halifax Road, which ran alongside the Weldon Railroad. The sun rose, bringing a bright, crisp, frosty morning. Sergeant J. Ansel Booth, 140th New York, recalled a beautiful day for action, with no snow and the ground sufficiently frozen to enable dry marching.²



Maj. Gen. Gouverneur K. Warren
Library of Congress



Maj. Gen. Romeyn B. Ayres
Library of Congress

Upon reaching Rowanty Post Office, the Union column turned southwest along Old Stage Road towards Monk's Neck Bridge, three miles distant. Confederate obstructions placed on the road delayed the 6th Ohio Cavalry scouting ahead, such that the infantry column caught them up as they approached the stream.³

The leading elements of Warren's force reached the bridge spanning Rowanty Creek at around 10:00 a.m. The Rowanty splits into Hatcher's Run and Gravelly Run less than a mile north of this position. Despite the predominantly densely wooded terrain, a 118th Pennsylvania soldier reported that "the countryside from camp to Rowanty was fairly open with trees only skirting one side of the road at a time." Although the 5th Corps column head had reached the bridge, regiments towards the rear remained miles away.⁴

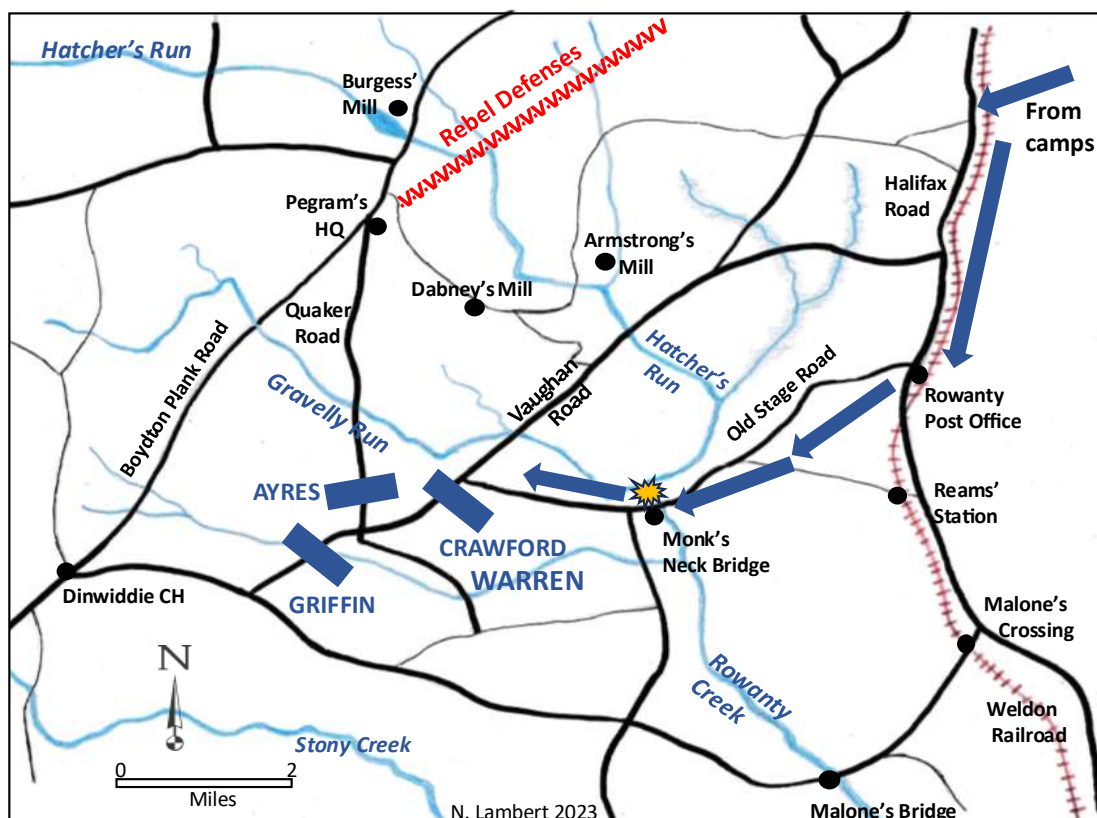
² Richard E. Matthews, *The 149th Pennsylvania Volunteer Infantry Unit in the Civil War* (Jefferson, NC, 1994), 203; Marcia Reid-Green Ed., *Letters Home: Henry Matrau of the Iron Brigade* (Lincoln, NE, 1993), 107; Mickey Schlosser & John M. Robortella, *Writing Home: Civil War Letters from the Hinchey Family Archive* (New York, 2013), 63; Brian A. Bennett, *Sons of Old Monroe: A Regimental History of Patrick O'Rorkes 140th New York Volunteer Infantry* (Seattle, WA, 1992), 578-79. A squadron typically comprised two companies.

³ OR 46/1:259.

⁴ OR 46/1:253; The Survivor's Association, *History of the 118th Pennsylvania Volunteers: Corn Exchange Regiment, from their First Engagement at Antietam to Appomattox* (Philadelphia, 1905), 548.

Crossing Rowanty Creek

A challenging situation confronted Warren. The enemy had destroyed the bridge, and about 100 Confederates defended the crossing in rifle pits along the opposite bank. The Federals surveyed the scene from a slight ridge about 300 yards back. Open ground sloped steeply down to the creek with a few small trees on the bank. On the other side, the more wooded land rose equally abruptly. Here, the Rebels waited concealed in their rifle pits. No more than 30 yards separated the Federal side of the creek from the Rebels' location.⁵



Map 3.1: Movement of Warren's 5th Corps, February 5, 7:00 a.m. - 5:00 p.m.

With Warren and Ayres in attendance, a 6th Ohio Cavalry squadron received orders to dismount, advance, and seize the bridgehead. However, the few Ohioans could not dislodge the entrenched Rebels; it would require more force. At the front of the 5th Corps, Maj. Gen. Ayres halted his infantry about 500 yards from the creek near the Perkins farm and prepared for action. He called upon his lead brigade, commanded by Brig. Gen. James Gwyn, to “force the crossing.”⁶

⁵ McBride, *In the Ranks*, 148; OR 46/1:253, 284.

⁶ OR 46/1:253, 277, 284. “Force the crossing” was military parlance for seizing a river crossing.

Accounts of what occurred next are contradictory and complicated. Witnesses agreed that Brig. Gen. Gwyn sent forward the 190th and 191st Pennsylvania to dislodge the Rebels. However, these regiments had consolidated months earlier. The Pennsylvanian Reverend Richard. E. McBride wrote a detailed account of the events, and I follow his lead in referring to the unit as the 190th Pennsylvania, commanded by Col. Joseph B. Pattee.⁷

McBride recalled that when the regiment reached the ridge, they halted. The Ohioan cavalymen kept a lively fire just ahead and to the right. Colonel Pattee quickly ordered the 190th forward to skirmish. Excitedly, they came running around the corner and faced toward the enemy. Before the regiment's rear had left the main road, the rest were charging down through the open field. "They looked like a mob as they broke ranks and went pell-mell over the field, yelling like madmen." However, they found the stream covered with ice. A soldier at the front stepped upon it, but it instantly gave way, and down into the icy water he went. "Just the top of his head stuck out above the fragments of ice. He was fished out as expeditiously as possible, and the idea of crossing in that way was abandoned."

Some Pennsylvanians appeared with axes and began to fell trees across the creek on which to cross. The rest of the regiment, armed with Spencer repeating rifles, managed to keep the Rebels down behind their works, preventing them from firing. As the trees came down, Yankees soon began scrambling across. A loud yell went up as 40 to 50 men got safely over and charged the Rebel position. As more Federals crossed, some of the Confederates surrendered while others fled. McBride cited the Pennsylvanian casualties as 15 wounded and one or two killed.⁸

The above account ignored the 4th Delaware, another regiment in Gwyn's brigade. Their recollections presented a different story. Staff officer Henry Gawthrop recalled how the Pennsylvanians advanced as skirmishers but were unable to cross the creek. The Delawareans then charged across the water and routed the Rebels. He explained how they charged with

⁷ OR 46/1:64-70, 284; McBride, *In the Ranks*, 148-51. Most of the 190th and 191st PA were killed or captured on Aug 19, 1864, during the Battle of Weldon Road. On leave at the time, Col. Pattee returned in Sept 1864 to lead a consolidated regiment, nominally termed the 190th PA. (Samuel P. Bates, *History of Pennsylvania Volunteers, 1861-5 Prepared in Compliance with Acts of the Legislature*, 5 vols. (Harrisburg, PA, 1871), 5:279-287). However, as of Feb 1865, the OR still regarded them as two independent regiments. Gwyn's report listed *both* regiments and cited their respective commanders as Capt. Richard M. Birkman and Capt. Perez L. Norton. Their casualties for the Hatcher's Run battle also appear separately. The AOP Organization Report for December 31, 1864, listed both regiments but jointly commanded by Col. Pattee (OR 42/3:1118). It is likely that Pattee went on leave in Jan 1865, which was not uncommon, leaving Birkman and Norton in temporary command, but he returned in early Feb to lead the consolidated regiment into battle.

⁸ McBride, *In the Ranks*, 148-51.

bayonets, as they obviously didn't load their rifles before entering the water and hadn't the time afterward. One of their officers, Maj. Daniel H. Kent received a severe wound in the fight. Two Delaware soldiers, among the first to attempt the crossing, provided further testimony. Indeed, both received a Medal of Honor for their courageous acts that morning, although over 100 yards separated their deeds.⁹



Ayres' Division Fighting Across Rowanty Creek, February 5.

A.W. Warren Sketch, Harper's Weekly, February 25, 1865

Lieutenant David E. Buckingham commanded Company E on the extreme right of the 4th Delaware line; the movement "by the right flank" put them at the front of the regiment. As they passed Maj. Gen. Ayres, their divisional commander, they heard him say to Maj. Kent: "You are expected to carry the bridge if you lose every man"! Buckingham and his men broke into a double-quick march and came under fire. The men gave a lusty cheer as they went down the road with Maj. Kent riding alongside Buckingham. Upon discovering the destroyed bridge, they moved along the bank. The rest of the brigade (around 3,000 men), on top of the meadow and protected by trees, poured a heavy fire into the entrenched Confederates.

Buckingham dismounted and gingerly stepped on the ice, which extended only six feet from the shore. It broke under his weight, and he tried to wade to the other side. However, soon beyond his depth, he began to swim, with Minie balls skimming the water around him. Reaching the bank, he clutched a projecting stump root and assessed the situation. Harvey Durnall, John Bradford, and Holton Yarnall of his company had waded in up to their waists, but, discovering the stream's depth, they fell back. In the meantime, Maj. Kent was severely wounded while urging his horse into the water. Alone after having crossed

⁹ Justin Carisio, *A Quaker Officer in the Civil War: Henry Gawthrop of the 4th Delaware* (Charleston, SC, 2013), 127. Two shots struck Maj. Kent, one splintering an arm bone and the other grazing his breast.

the stream in that area, Buckingham didn't feel like scaling the bank, and he decided to wait in the icy water for reinforcements. For at least fifteen minutes, he waited.

Further upstream, his regimental colleagues scrambled across felled trees and thicker ice. Buckingham soon heard them charging the Confederate position, capturing many, with the rest fleeing; the Yankees had secured the crossing. Buckingham swam back and dried his clothes beside a roaring fire his compatriots had made.¹⁰



Capt. S. Rodmond Smith
wikimedia



Lt. David E. Buckingham (postwar)
cmohs.org

Captain S. Rodmond Smith, commander of Company C, 4th Delaware, recalled the events as follows. His company halted about 400 yards from the crossing and discovered that the bridge had been destroyed, with Rebels entrenched on the bluffs of the opposite bank. A Pennsylvania regiment, presumably the 190th, from the brigade advanced to force the crossing. After some heavy firing, the Rebels forced the Pennsylvanians to retire. Rodmond Smith stated, “our regiment, with Major D. H. Kent in command, was then detailed for the service and immediately moved down the road to the crossing.” The ground was slightly rolling and open farmland, except for a thin skirt of trees bordering the river, which afforded some cover. Under heavy fire but somewhat protected by the trees, Maj. Kent filed the regiment to the right of the destroyed bridge. The mounted Kent tried to lead the regiment across the river, but he was soon shot and carried to the rear. With lots of ice floating in the

¹⁰ Walter F. Beyer & Oscar F. Keydel, ed., *Deeds of Valor; How American Heroes Won the Medal of Honor; History of our Country's Recent Wars in Personal Reminiscences and Records of Officers and Enlisted Men who were Rewarded by Congress for Most Conspicuous Acts of Bravery on the Battle-field, on the High Seas and in Arctic Explorations*, 2 vols. (Detroit, MI, 1905), 1:481. Pioneers were specially trained soldiers within each brigade that undertook engineering and construction tasks.

stream and seeing the depth of the water, the regiment decided not to cross but continued to move slowly to the right, keeping up a brisk fire on the enemy.¹¹



Swimming the Frozen Rowanty Creek
Deeds of Valor



Monks Neck Bridge 2024
David Lambert

Two or three hundred feet farther to the right, Capt. Rodmond Smith saw some bushes projecting from the water; thinking this indicated shallower water, he called upon his command to follow him as he sprang into the stream. However, finding the water over six feet deep, he had to swim for it. Despite the inconvenience of a haversack, belt, cape overcoat, and enemy bullets splashing around him, he managed to reach a small island mid-stream. His men declined the invitation to enter the stream and continued moving to the right, seeking cover within the scattered trees. The Delawareans joined Smith on the island by taking advantage of fallen logs and thicker ice. From there, they managed to wade across to the opposite shore and carried the enemy's entrenchments with a rush, capturing some 50 or 60 Rebels as the rest quickly ran away.¹²

In retrospect, pockets of Union soldiers from both the Pennsylvania and Delaware regiments likely managed to scramble across the stream at various points, mainly via felled trees. As Brig. Gen. Gwyn reported, "when the Rebels discovered they were being flanked, they quickly departed, and the crossing was secured; 25 Rebels were captured at the cost of 8

¹¹ Beyer & Keydel, *Deeds of Honor*, 1:479-80. The commanding status of Maj. Kent is complicated. The established 4th DE commander was Lt. Col. Moses B. Gist. Neither Buckingham nor Carisio specified that Gist or Kent commanded the regiment on Feb 5. The Delaware Historical Society kindly supplied testimony from a newspaper revealing that Gist was on leave at the time (*The Wilmington State [DE] Journal and Statesman*, February 21, 1865). As senior commander, Kent did lead the regiment at the battle. Recently promoted in Dec 1864; it was the first time Kent had commanded the regiment. Gist was back in command by the end of Feb. Adding to the confusion, Gwyn erroneously listed Maj. D. H. Kent as commanding the 157th PA. (OR 46/1:284).

¹² Beyer & Keydel, *Deeds of Honor*, 1:480-81.

wounded Federals.” Despite gaining a Medal of Honor, trying to swim across the icy creek didn’t appear to be the wisest choice. Buckingham’s award proved controversial, with many claiming that several soldiers had tried a similar feat.¹³

After about one hour of fighting, by around 11:00 a.m., the Federals had secured the crossing. The long column of soldiers and wagons had backed up, with those towards the rear, miles away, blissfully unaware of the Rebel resistance.¹⁴

Who Were the Rebel Defenders?

Testimony describing this action from the Confederate perspective proves elusive. Indeed, it isn’t clear who the Rebel defenders were. Monk’s Neck Bridge seems too far southeast to implicate Pegram’s pickets and too far north to suggest Rooney Lee’s cavalry pickets. Several Confederate cavalry memoirs support their involvement at Malone’s Bridge. It feels strange that these sources would have omitted any defense of Monk’s Neck Bridge. Warren himself was conflicted. His report stated that “100 of the enemy infantry” defended the crossing. Yet, in his communique to Meade’s chief-of-staff, he reported finding “the enemy’s cavalry defending the bridge.” Sadly, Federal reports of the captured Rebels gave no identifying details¹⁵

Building Bridges and Journey’s End

Under Warren’s personal supervision, his “pioneers” (engineers) began rebuilding the bridge to enable his corps to proceed. Allegedly 60 feet wide, neither men nor horses could ford the stream “en masse.” As construction began, a few unfortunate individuals of the lead division (Ayres) had to wade across the icy creek to cover the bridgehead. The pioneers quickly constructed a crossing suitable for infantry and cavalry by 12:45 p.m. A 24th Michigan memoir recalled:

The bridge building was simple. Two trees at the proper distance from each other on the bank were felled transversely across the stream by the pioneers. The fallen trees served as stringers upon which was constructed a solid bed of boughs.

¹³ OR 46/1:284; Carisio, *A Quaker Officer*, 128 (note 133).

¹⁴ OR 46/1:253, OR 46/2:400.

¹⁵ OR 46/1:253; OR 46/2:400.

However, they only completed a sturdy structure to support artillery and wagon trains by about 3:45 p.m.¹⁶

At 11:30 a.m., Warren messaged Meade's chief-of-staff, Maj. Gen. Alex S. Webb to report his progress, but the dispatch only arrived at 3:45 p.m. He explained how they had overcome enemy resistance at the Rowanty crossing and that a 60-foot-long bridge would need to be constructed. He added that he hadn't heard from Gregg or tried to contact him. Warren then ordered aide-de-camp Capt. Emmor B. Cope and the Ohio cavalry to push ahead. They quickly reached Vaughan Road and met Maj. Henry E. Tremain of Gregg's staff, who informed Cope that Gregg had pressed on to Dinwiddie CH. Further to the right, around 3:00 p.m., they made contact with elements from Humphreys's 2nd Corps.¹⁷

Back at the bridgehead, as fast as the regiments crossed the creek, they headed northwest towards Vaughan Road, less than three miles away. The lead elements arrived by 3:00 p.m. without encountering further Confederate opposition. However, some soldiers in Pearson's brigade, Griffin's division, observed a curious encounter on Vaughan Road. Warren and Griffin, with their staffs, approached a group (around 20-30) of soldiers dressed in Union uniforms and asked them who they were. A volley of musket fire revealed they were Confederates (reported as cavalrymen). A squad from the 155th Pennsylvania drove them away, but not before a bullet passed harmlessly through Warren's coat.¹⁸

An unsourced modern account suggested that Confederate cavalry vedettes had alerted Col. John W. Lea, one of Pegram's brigade commanders based around the Crow house, to Warren's advance. As Lea prepared to march his brigade to Monk's Neck Bridge, news arrived of a Federal strike at Armstrong's Mill, and Pegram countermanded the movement.¹⁹

A 146th New Yorker with Brig. Gen. Frederick Winthrop's brigade, Ayres's division, recalled how the entire brigade had crossed the Rowanty by 4:00 p.m. Subsequently, the men

¹⁶ Bennett *Sons of Old Monroe*, 578-79; Curtis, *History of the 24th Michigan*, 290; OR 46/1:253, 258. Stringers are the lightly loaded longitudinal beams in a bridge deck, while the heavier, transverse members are known as floor beams.

¹⁷ OR 46/2:400; OR 46/1:253, 258, 260.

¹⁸ Marshall, *Company 'K' 155th Pennsylvania Volunteer Zouaves*, 222; Charles F. McKenna, ed., *Under the Maltese Cross, Antietam to Appomattox: The Loyal Uprising in Western Pennsylvania, 1861-1865; Campaigns 155th Pennsylvania Regiment* (Pittsburgh, PA, 1910), 331-32; Nathan S. Clark *Diary 20th Maine*, page 120, [diaries4 \(civilwardigital.com\)](http://diaries4.civilwardigital.com).

¹⁹ Sherrill, *The 21st North Carolina*, 412-13.

hurried forward to Vaughan Road. The brigade deployed in line of battle at the intersection of Quaker Road and Vaughan Road. With no evidence of the enemy, the men quickly built fires to prepare their dinners and dry out uniforms that had stiffened from the ice.²⁰

As the Union regiments reached Vaughan Road, they took up positions assigned in the previous day's orders. Ayres's division covered Quaker Road; Griffin's division went near the Hargrave house, only three miles from Dinwiddie CH, and covered Vaughan Road leading west; and Crawford's division occupied a field near the Old Stage Road / Vaughan Road junction with the artillery and wagons parked nearby.²¹

Regiments towards the back of the 5th Corps column only made camp after 5:00 p.m. in the growing darkness. At 4:30 p.m., Maj. Tremain, D. Gregg's aide-de-camp, informed Warren that they had reached Dinwiddie CH and were now heading back to Malone's Bridge, where they would bivouac for the night. Warren immediately passed this information to Meade's chief-of-staff. Soon afterward, some Confederate cavalry (undoubtedly the 13th Virginia Cavalry) unexpectedly appeared and, after observing the mass of blue infantry, captured a couple of stragglers and scampered away briskly.²²

With darkness closing in, after a day's march estimated at 15-18 miles, we temporarily take our leave of the 5th Corps as they settle down by their early-evening campfires and prepare for some rest. Their story is continued in chapter 7, and we discover that their day's exertions had not concluded.²³

Analysis

This narrative contains a few gaps and issues. The most significant is the identity of the Confederates defending the bridge. Eyewitness McBride commented that a stronger Rebel force in those entrenchments would have caused a bloody Federal repulse. One might have expected 100 entrenched Rebels to inflict more casualties than eight wounded (as reported by Warren). The Yankees had to move across open meadows and stumble over the icy stream. Although McBride put the Federal losses at 15 wounded and one or two killed. It could be that Union claims of 100 Rebel defenders were an exaggeration. The 4th Delaware, armed with repeating rifles, could have significantly helped subdue any Confederate fire. Captain

²⁰ Bennett, *Sons of Old Monroe*, 579.

²¹ OR 46/1:258, 260; OR 46/2:402.

²² Reid-Green Ed., *Letters Home*, 107; OR 46/1:253, 276; OR 51/1:295; OR 46/2:401.

²³ OR 46/1:287.

Rodmond Smith's claim of capturing 50-60 Confederates was probably hyperbole; Warren's report mentioned about 25.²⁴

The width of the Rowanty is a contentious issue. Warren and others claimed that the stream was 60 feet wide. However, other eyewitnesses mentioned a more modest distance of 15-20 feet. The former estimate feels relatively high and indicative of aggrandizement. To swim 20 *yards* across an icy river doesn't seem realistic.²⁵

The near shooting and capture of Warren and Griffin is an intriguing story. It's not mentioned in the *OR*. The alleged Confederate horsemen were probably a 13th Virginia cavalry patrol. Mounted upon his gray horse, Warren would have presented a visible target. The killing or capture of a Federal corps commander (and possibly a divisional commander) would have provided the Rebels with a significant morale boost. The impact of such a Union loss on the following two days remains a historical "what-if." The battle's notoriety certainly would have increased.

The next chapter describes the exploits of the other Federal infantry corps under Maj. Gen. Andrew Humphreys.

²⁴ McBride, *In the Ranks*, 151-52; *OR* 46/1:253.

²⁵ *OR* 46/1:253; Matthews, *The 149th Pennsylvania Volunteers*, 203; Bennett, *Sons of Old Monroe*, 579; McBride, *In the Ranks*, 148; Curtis, *History of the 24th Michigan*, 290.