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Sheridan at Five Forks

A FORTIETH ANNIVERSARY WAR STORY

March 30-April 1, 1865

(Copyright, 1905, by G. L. Kilmer.)
SHERIDAN reached the lines of the besieging army in front of Petersburg the 27th of March, 1865, bringing 18,000 cavalry from the Shenandoah valley. In anticipation of his arrival General Grant had ordered a movement of the infantry forces around the right flank of Lee's lines protecting the city. The object of this advance was to cut Lee's communications southward and if possible get between his army and Lynchburg.

Before the arrival of Sheridan the Army of the Potomac mustered 75,000 men for duty. Sheridan added 18,000, and 17,000 more were brought from the Army of the James, which confronted Richmond on the north side of the Appomattox, making a total in hand for the new movement of 105,000 and leaving a reserve before Richmond of 20,000. Lee had a total at Petersburg and Richmond of 57,000, spread over a defensive line twenty miles in length.

The several movements on the Federal left at Petersburg had crowded the Confederates back to one road run-

keep open. Sheridan's plan of attack was to make a feint of turning the enemy's right flank close to the forks with cavalry while the Fifth infantry corps under General G. K. Warren stormed the intrenchments on the Confederate left by approaching the position diagonally and charging over the works and across the road at the same lunge.

The extreme end of Pickett's intrenched line was in the woods and could not be located within many hundred yards. The first and second divisions of Warren, marching by the flank, passed it, and the third and last division, which was also the smallest, led by Romayne B. Ayers, following the other two, received a galling fire from the Confederates posted behind the angle. Ayers quickly faced his reserve brigade toward the blazing guns. It was led by Colonel Frederick Winthrop of the Fifth New York, a cousin of Major Theodore Winthrop, the hero of Big Bethel. The brigade was composed entirely of New Yorkers. They charged at double quick, with Winthrop at their head. The Confederates



SHERIDAN'S MEN CHARGING PICKETT'S WORKS AT FIVE FORKS.

ning in a general direction southwest and lying between the Federal positions and Hatcher's run. Hatcher's run is a swampy stream and made a good barrier when defended at the forks. About thirteen miles west by south of Petersburg there is a good road crossing the run and leading to the South Side railroad. This railroad has Lynchburg and Danville connections and was of highest importance to Lee in Petersburg. At Five Forks this road was defended from the Federal positions by intrenchments, and at Dinwiddie Court House, five miles south-east, there were outposts and defenses to guard against a surprise at Five Forks. Sheridan and the corps of Warren, Wright and Humphreys moved together toward the Federal left, and Lee sent out General R. H. Anderson with detached divisions to cope with this strong force.

When General Lee learned of the presence of Sheridan on the Petersburg lines he promptly concentrated all of his available cavalry to co-operate with Anderson and placed General Fitz Hugh Lee in command. Fitz Lee at the time was in front of Richmond with his own division and marched promptly to Five Forks. Early on March 30 the Confederate troopers with Lee rode out toward Dinwiddie Court House, which had been reached by Sheridan's advance. A sharp skirmish took place. Late that day Fitz Lee was joined by the cavalry divisions of General T. L. Rosser and General W. H. F. Lee, making a total of nearly 6,000 sabers in the corps. Lee retired his troopers to Five Forks, where General George E. Pickett, the hero of the famous charge at Gettysburg, arrived about the same time with nearly 7,000 infantry.

While Fitz Lee stood off the Federal advance with a cordon of sabers Pickett intrenched his infantry on a line extending about a mile east and west respectively of the junction of roads at Five Forks. The lines of cavalry extended still farther on each flank. During the 31st Sheridan's cavalry under the immediate command of General Wesley Merritt pressed close to Pickett's works on the direct front and engaged in considerable sharp fighting.

During the preliminary movements of the troops Sheridan had visited Grant at the headquarters of the army and received instructions to take command of the Fifth army corps and drive the enemy from Five Forks. General Pickett's works at Five Forks were ingeniously constructed to cover the forks of the roads and to protect nearly two miles of the White Oak road leading from Five Forks to Pe-

which it was Lee's object to

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