

The Red Badge of Courage as a Novel or the Civil War

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[The Historical Setting of *The
Red Badge of Courage*][^]

The setting of *The Red Badge of Courage* is the Battle of Chancellorsville, which took place in the spring of 1863. The battle was fought in the "Wilderness" of northern Virginia, so named because of the dense forests and tangled underbrush that covered much of the area. The movements of the Union army were hindered by the Wilderness and the primitive condition of the road system running through it; the Confederates, more familiar with the area, used it to conceal their whereabouts. The sense of darkness and foreboding of this locale adds a great deal to the sense of terror and confusion that pervades Crane's novel.

During the winter of 1862—63, the Union Army of the Potomac, numbering over 130,000 men, encamped on the north side of the Rappahannock River at Falmouth, Virginia. Starting his command in January, Major General Joseph "Fighting Joe" Hooker worked hard to revive the sinking morale of his men by improving their rations and by instituting corps badges, insignia for each corps and division to foster a sense of group identity and pride. Frequent drills, inspections, and parades helped the men to feel like soldiers. The desertion rate fell as soldiers in efficient units were allowed furloughs home to their families.

Hooker had been an able division and corps commander known for his hard drinking, handsome countenance, and huge conceit. In an army in which everyone wore a beard or mustache, he was clean shaven; it was said that he did not want whiskers to hide his good looks. In an army famous for political conniving and infighting, he

excelled at cutting support from under his superiors. President Abraham Lincoln personally warned Hooker that this atmosphere of contention he had helped to create in the army might one day turn against him.

The Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, just over 60,000 men strong and commanded by General Robert E. Lee, was camped on the south side of the river at Fredericksburg. There were squabbles and personality conflicts in this army, too, but, unlike their adversaries, the Southerners all were united behind their commander. They were victorious through most of 1862, but the winter was hard on the poorly equipped, malnourished troops, causing a sharp increase in the number of deaths and desertions among them.

The two armies faced each other, much as they had done all winter since the Union defeat at Fredericksburg in December 1862. Major General Ambrose Burnside, Hooker's predecessor, had attacked Lee, and the resulting Battle of Fredericksburg was a disaster. Union troops crossed the river and assaulted Lee, who had taken a strong position on high ground outside of town. Wave after wave of Burnside's men were cut down in the futile attacks. In the end, Burnside withdrew to his camp at Falmouth.

Every soldier knew that spring would bring a renewal of the fighting, and each had his own ideas about where and when the inevitable offensive would begin. Hooker devised a bold plan. By moving a sizable force up the north bank of the Rappahannock River, he could cross his men at lightly defended upstream fords and then fall upon the rear of Lee's army. He would leave some of his men in the area of Falmouth to make Lee think he was about to attack at Fredericksburg again, while three full corps, comprising 70,000 men, would move on Lee's flank. Once those troops were safely across, the bulk that remained behind would march to join the men already south of the river. Hooker predicted that the enemy either would "ingloriously fly" or fight it out in the open. In either case, he was sure he could whip the Rebels.

Hooker's plan had merit and its opening moves were accomplished with such speed that, for once, General Lee was taken by surprise. Confederate General E. P. Alexander considered this the most dangerous attack ever launched against the Southern army. Lee quickly recovered the initiative, however, and made none of the moves that Hooker expected. Instead, Lee divided his force in the face of a superior enemy, something soldiers were taught never to do, and moved to the attack. He left some of his men behind to prevent the Union Sixth Corps from advancing beyond Fredericksburg and marched the rest of his army west to meet Hooker in the Wilderness.

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In the opening passages of *The Red Badge of Courage*, Crane describes the encampment at Falmouth on the north side of the Rappahannock from where one can see the "red eyes" blinking across the river, the campfires of the Confederates at Fredericksburg. One morning, Private Henry Fleming finds himself in the dark in formation with his regiment, awaiting orders. Soon they are marching west, up river, with the rising sun to their backs.

The main action of the novel is based on the events of Saturday and Sunday, May 2 and 3, 1863. On Saturday, Lee, who quickly had taken the measure of his opponent, held Hooker in place and once again divided his own smaller force. He sent General Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson on his famous march by the back roads and trails of the Wilderness to gain the right flank of the Union army. The march and the attack that followed crushed the Union Eleventh Corps and drove in the exposed flank. Jackson's goal was to cut off the Union army from the river crossings and destroy it. Disaster for the North was averted only by the coming of night and by the timely arrival of backup units, including Major General Daniel Edgar Sickles' Third Corps, which blunted Jackson's drive.

Just before dawn on Sunday, May 3, the Confederates renewed their attack but were stalled by Sickles' men. All morning the Third Corps and parts of the Eleventh and Twelfth Corps battled the best units of the Rebel army to a standstill while thousands of other Union men, close at hand, did not fire a shot. These troops and their corps commanders knew that the fury of the Rebel assault had been spent; they were only awaiting word from Hooker to launch a counterattack.

On the eve of battle Hooker boasted, "My plans are perfect and when I put them into operation, may God have mercy on General Lee, for I shall have none." But Hooker never issued the order that would put his plan in action. Instead he was wounded and his confidence was further shaken at being on the field against the legendary Robert E. Lee. Instead of sending his fresh troops forward, Hooker ordered the whole army to fall back and withdraw to the old camp at Falmouth. His plan had been a good one, but his execution was so flawed that it turned what should have been a stellar victory into another shameful defeat.

This dismal performance in the face of an enemy fewer in number brought about Hooker's rapid fall from favor. In June, as both armies marched north toward Gettysburg, Hooker argued with his superiors and submitted his resignation to President Lincoln, who accepted it only days before the Battle of Gettysburg.

As for General Lee, because of the audacious use he made of his

troops, Chancellorsville is considered his greatest battle. It was not a decisive victory, however, as the Union army simply fell back to regroup and was soon ready to fight again. Casualties on both sides were heavy, but the North could draw upon far larger numbers than the South to replace its fallen soldiers.

Even though the Confederates repulsed the Union troops, they were seriously drained of manpower. Even worse, Stonewall Jackson was mortally wounded by his own men during the battle. His absence from the Battle of Gettysburg, less than two months later, may well have been the decisive factor in the Confederate defeat.

The Battle of Chancellorsville boosted the spirits of the South and encouraged Lee to launch his second invasion of the North. It further depressed the North and caused the removal of yet another Union general.

But the battle is no less important because it served as the setting for *The Red Badge of Courage*, which would come to be recognized as a classic of American literature. Stephen Crane's novel is based upon the experiences of real soldiers, including some "Orange Blossoms" who sat in the park in Port Jervis and told the young author about the day they twice charged the Rebs and earned the red badge of courage.¹

1. The 124th New York Volunteer Regiment, which fought its first battle at Chancellorsville, was known as the Orange Blossoms because the regiment drew its men from Orange County, New York. Crane spent several boyhood years in Port Jervis, an Orange County town [*Editors.*]