

Civil War Military Operations in Northern Virginia in May-June 1861

By WILLIAM H. PRICE

During May-June 1861 the military action in northern Virginia was limited to small skirmishes.

The secession of Virginia in 1861 was followed closely by the appointment of an officer cadre directed by the Governor to recruit and train volunteer companies and regiments throughout the State. Small units of infantry and cavalry began to spring up in the areas bordering the Potomac, and an artillery battery was organized in Alexandria. The activity of these volunteer units and the State Militia, particularly the troops from Alexandria, was a cause for great concern in Washington. The Capital was vulnerable, and though little was known of Southern intentions, the possibility was not ruled out that Virginia troops, by destroying the bridges across the river, could use the Potomac as a defensive barrier and lay siege to the Federal City.

Arlington Heights commanded the low terrain on which many of the Government buildings were situated, and even the Capitol would prove easy prey for artillery placed on the Virginia hillside. It was also feared that a few well-placed batteries below Alexandria could close the Potomac to navigation.

Early in May the Federal War Department decided that the Capital City could be protected and its safety insured only if the ground across the Potomac was occupied. This was no simple task, for an adequate force was not available: the problem of securing communications from the Capital north through hostile Maryland placed a heavy drain on the meager resources at hand. Finally, toward the end of May, an army capable of carrying out the occupation was assembled under Gen. J. F. K. Mansfield.

On the night of May 23, regiments selected for the occupation were assembled, and Washington camp sites were alive with activity. Shortly before midnight a patrol moved across Long Bridge and secured the Virginia end without opposition, and by 2 o'clock in the predawn hours of May 24 two long blue columns were winding their way through the moonlit Washington streets toward the Potomac. One column, led by the Seventh New York Infantry, turned down 14th Street and tramped across Long Bridge, touching Virginia soil at 4 A.M. The other column moved over the cobblestone streets of Georgetown, crossed the Aqueduct Bridge, and moved out the Georgetown Wagon Road (Wilson Boulevard), camping near present-day Clarendon.

Not far below the bridges two steamers from the Navy Yard sailed down the Eastern Branch of the Potomac (Anacostia River) to Giesboro Point and took on board the New York Fire Zouaves in their fancy red trousers and gold-braided jackets. Under the watchful eyes of the gunboat *Pawnee* the

steamers churned toward the Virginia shore. The sun was just rising as a boatload of Marines was put ashore on the wharves of Alexandria. With the situation well in hand, the Zouaves landed and immediately set out to silence the telegraph wires leading south, while one company was detached to destroy the railroad. Three blocks away from the telegraph office Col. Elmer E. Ellsworth spied a "secesh" flag flying from the Marshall House, but before the regiment could reach its assigned destination he lay dead from a wound.

The small Confederate infantry force in Alexandria withdrew along the railroad to Orange without putting up a fight, but Capt. Dulaney Ball was captured with his company of cavalry, as he rode out Duke Street, by the First Michigan Infantry moving on Alexandria from Long Bridge.

Later in the afternoon, Company B of the Second United States Cavalry advanced along the Georgetown Wagon Road and reached the Loudoun & Hampshire Line about 5 o'clock. They intercepted a passenger train bound for Alexandria and arrested all its occupants, two of whom were Confederate soldiers.

By sundown on May 24 northern Virginia was occupied by eleven regiments of infantry, one cavalry regiment, and a detachment of engineers. Outposts were scattered from present-day Clarendon down to Vose's Hill on Columbia Pike, and from there along the road to Alexandria. That evening the line was extended when two troops of D.C. Cavalry crossed Chain Bridge and occupied the high ground covering the Virginia approaches.

On May 26 and 27 a regiment of 26th New York Infantry and Varian's Artillery Battery were brought across the Potomac and posted at Lee Mansion. Engineers were already throwing up earthworks at the Virginia end of Long Bridge, while another detachment of sappers cut a road from the Mansion to the Georgetown Wagon Road. Lee Mansion soon became the headquarters of the newly created Department of North Eastern Virginia, under the command of Brig. Gen. Irwin McDowell. A Mexican War veteran, McDowell had graduated in the same West Point class with Confederate Generals Beauregard, William J. Hardee, Henry Sibley, and Alexander Reynolds. After the War, Sibley and Reynolds went to Egypt and served in the Army of the Khedive, Sibley as a brigadier general of artillery. Reynolds, a colonel, served on the staff of Gen. W. W. Loring, another ex-Confederate general, who commanded a division in the Khedive. Sibley returned to the United States and died in Fredericksburg, where he is buried.

By June 1, 1861, scattered outpost units were becoming more involved in small actions and skirmishes. Shortly before daylight on that morning, Lieutenant Thompson's company of U.S. Cavalry made a reconnaissance out Little River Turnpike past Fairfax Courthouse. On their return through the town, they were attacked by a detachment of Warrenton Riflemen. In this short action, Capt. John Quincy Marr became the first Confederate casualty of the war, and a canny eagle-eyed colonel, who would later rise to fame as Lee's 2d Corps commander, received a slight wound.

That same day two Federal steamers moving down the Potomac engaged a Confederate artillery battery at Aquia Creek. The artillerymen escaped lightly, one receiving a wound in the hand, and the officer commanding thought it worthwhile to mention that a horse and a chicken were killed by stray shells.

On June 2, shortly after midnight, a Confederate scouting party attacked a Union outpost at Arlington Mills on Columbia Turnpike. Using guerrilla tactics, the small party hid in the woods until dawn and then made a hasty retreat on a stolen handcar. Another outpost on the Georgetown Wagon Road was charged by a squad of Rebel cavalry on the following night, but they too successfully eluded their pursuers.

Beset by guerrilla activity and little nagging raids, the harassed occupation forces began to retaliate. On June 7 a detachment of engineers from the 69th New York regiment, accompanied by Lieutenant Thompson's Cavalry, was sent to Ball's Cross Roads. There they arrested Richard Veitch and a farmer named Ball. These two were herding fifty head of cattle toward "secesh" lines in Falls Church. Mr. Ball, the leader, had in his possession the muster roll of a Rebel company, and a search of his home revealed arms, bedding, and cooking utensils for at least fifty men. Two days later, a company from the 1st Michigan Infantry, patrolling near Burke Station, arrested two more men. Both were dressed as civilians but admitted being soldiers of the Confederate Army.

While Union outposts were kept busy by these activities and demonstrations, soldiers along Arlington Heights and in Alexandria tended to less hazardous duties. Men of the 69th New York Regiment moved their camp equipment from Georgetown College Campus to Rosslyn, where they held a flag-raising ceremony attended by 1,800 men. Rhode Island soldiers completed a pontoon bridge linking Georgetown with Virginia, while men of the military telegraph corps were stringing wire to main outposts throughout the county. On June 10 the soldiers of the 5th Pennsylvania turned out the first issue of *Expedition*, a soldier's paper printed on the *Alexandria Sentinel* press.

With the situation seemingly well in hand, General McDowell turned to the problems of securing communications with General Patterson's forces operating near Harper's Ferry. The Union Army had no wagons; thus, the only means of transporting troops and supplies between Washington and Harper's Ferry was by way of the C. & O. Canal and the Loudoun & Hampshire Railroad. The Union grand strategy was to strike at Virginia from all accessible points along the Potomac perimeter. Thus McDowell was quick to realize the strategic significance of these two means of transportation; nor did the Confederate forces fail to recognize the value of disrupting these lines.

On June 12 Rebel raiders from Leesburg crossed the Potomac at Edward's Ferry with a small force and tried to break and drain the canal. That afternoon, two battalions of D.C. Volunteers were sent up the C. & O. Canal

to Seneca. A strong guard was posted at the aqueduct over Seneca Creek and the town was occupied. Detachments were sent to Poolesville and Darnstown, while a full company was sent to Great Falls to watch the ferries. On the Virginia side of the Potomac, another party of Confederate raiders burned several bridges on the Loudoun & Hampshire line and destroyed some of the track. On Leesburg Pike, the bridge over Goose Creek was destroyed.

Beset by the problem of keeping the rail line open, as well as the canal, General McDowell ordered the First Connecticut Regiment under Gen. Dan Tyler to proceed by rail and make an inspection of the track and bridges toward Leesburg. The bridge most vulnerable to destruction lay across Difficult Run above Vienna.

Vienna was then a charming small village; its population, half Northern and half Southern, got along very well. Dr. William Hendrick, who had come from Vienna, N.Y., to Ayr Hill in 1855, changed the name to Vienna for his original home. Now that peace and charm were shattered by the sound of a locomotive bearing Connecticut troops passing through. George Mills and William Temple Walker hid about a mile southeast of Vienna, and when the train returned they fired into the troops on the flatcar, wounding Pvt. George Busbee of the Connecticut Life Guards. The train stopped; the soldiers scoured the woods and found the two men at McMill's house. A Negro witness was taken along with the two prisoners to the Provost Marshal in Alexandria.

That same day the First South Carolina Regiment under Col. Maxcey Gregg marched in the morning from Fairfax Church up the Old Ox Road and at Frying Pan joined Terry's troop of Virginia Cavalry and Capt. Dell Kemper, a prominent Alexandrian, with his artillery battery of two six-pounders. With a total force of 680 men they started for Dranesville.

Reaching there late in the afternoon, the troops bivouacked for the night. Early next morning Colonel Gregg, with Terry's cavalry, rode over to Great Falls to inspect the Potomac crossings in that area. Satisfied that Union troops were not going to threaten that area, the party turned and headed back toward camp. By the time Colonel Gregg returned to Dranesville the South Carolina troops were under arms and ready to move. The column filed out of the village and down the road to Hunter's Mill Station. The sun, not quite so hot as the first few days, bounced brightly off the rattling swords of the cavalymen leading the column. The horses kicked up clouds of dust along the narrow dirt road. The foot soldiers kept pace with martial music played by Negro musicians of the South Carolina regiment.

At Hunter's Mill, Colonel Gregg was met by G. W. Hunter, who volunteered his services as guide. He informed the officers that a trainload of Federals had been at the mill on the previous day and that a force might still be in Vienna. Cavalry was sent forward to reconnoitre, but at Vienna they found no sign of Federal troops. The Carolina infantry soon filed into town and was quickly put to work destroying the rail station and water

tower. Steam locomotives were thirsty, and without this supply of water they would not be able to proceed past Vienna. With their tasks completed, the troops were assembled and marched down the road to Fairfax.

The Federals also had been busy. General McDowell had received the report on the brief encounter with Walker and McMills at Vienna, and the wounding of Private Busbee. This was cause enough for McDowell to order a show of force in Vienna. At noon on June 17, while the First South Carolina was marching down toward Vienna, a message was sent by telegraph to the camp of the First Ohio Infantry at Roach's Mill. They were ordered to move by train to Vienna and post a small force there. At 2 o'clock in the afternoon one engine pushing two coaches and five flatcars pulled up by the Ohio camp. The 668 men boarded the flatcars and the officers occupied the coaches. Gen. Robert Schenck commanded the expedition.

The engineer was warned to move with caution, and General Schenck had orders to post guards at critical bridges and crossings along the lines. An important point lay in a small valley where the wagon road from Georgetown (now Wilson Boulevard) crossed the track and ran past Falls Church into Rebel territory. Here the first stop was made, and two companies alighted to guard the junction while two more moved toward Falls Church, scouting the roads in that area.

The next stop was just short of Lee Highway where the railroad bridge spans Four Mile Run. Two more companies detrained to guard this vulnerable point. Its load somewhat lightened, the little engine steamed away with the remaining four companies.

The two short pauses had thinned the regiments's ranks, but the 271 volunteers remaining on the cars did not appear to be concerned. The Rebs certainly wouldn't show up; they were known to lurk in the underbrush and then quickly depart without putting up a fight—at least that is what the newspapers said. But if they did show themselves, the Dayton Light Guards and the Cleveland Grays would take it out of their hides for shooting George Busbee.

Unknown to the Confederate commander, the train bearing the Ohio Light Guards moved past the outskirts of Falls Church and across the Leesburg Turnpike toward their destination. The captain of the train stood in his cab gazing at the familiar Virginia landscape, and the soldiers, their bayonets glistening in the sunlight, sat leisurely on the flatcars while General Schenck and the officers lounged in the coach, filling the small car with cigar smoke and talk about their first engagement.

Vienna was not far away. The engineer had been instructed to stop within a mile of Vienna so that skirmishers could be thrown out to scout the area. Instead, the locomotive continued to pace along, its captain seemingly more concerned about something alongside the track—maybe some children waving at the soldiers, or a stubborn cow refusing to be trespassed upon. Whatever it was, it caused the engineer to give a long tug on his whistle.

It was about 6 o'clock when these melancholy notes echoed across the countryside, and the hot afternoon sun was making its descent toward the Bull Run Mountains. Colonel Gregg's Rebel troops had proceeded about half a mile out of Vienna toward Fairfax when through the woods came the distant sound of the locomotive's whistle. Within a moment the men were halted, the column wheeled, and the soldiers marched rapidly back to Vienna. Arriving at the railroad just a quarter of a mile south of town, Kemper's two six-pounders were placed on the southwest side of the track where the curve in the line ends. The small elevated position could not have been more carefully selected; it commanded the lazy bend in the railroad. Colonel McIntosh's company fell in behind the artillery as support. The remainder of the South Carolina regiment, under Lieutenant Colonel Hamilton, hastily formed on the crest of the hill to the right of Kemper's guns. Terry's Virginia troopers were drawn up still farther to the right. No sooner had the men taken position when the first flatcar rounded the curve in the deep cut. The Ohio boys were chatting and laughing, unconscious of the impending peril.

The train moved on to within 150 yards of the ambushade, when suddenly the calm afternoon air was torn by the resounding bark of a cannon followed closely by a second sharp report. Five of the Buckeye men were felled immediately by the first volley of grape. They probably never knew what hit them; death was instant. Several others were wounded as the round shot flew among their ranks. Those who stood erect received the worst part of the cannonade, but the men who sat on the platform were more fortunate, for most of the shot flew over their heads. The foremost car, as it came out of the curve, just missed the diagonal crossfire of the Confederate artillery, but the men sitting exposed on the second and third cars received the brunt of the fire. Before the train could come to a full stop, another volley of cannister raked the hind cars and coaches. The Union soldiers scurried from the train and formed in a thicket to the right of the track. The engineer frantically shoved the locomotive into reverse, but the cars and coaches would not budge. He excitedly stammered out to an officer that the brakes were down and he could not move the train.

In the thick of the confusion, Lt. William Raynor managed to unloose the brakes of his car, and as he ran back to the next car behind him, he shouted for someone to unloose the rest. General Schenck ordered the train to be withdrawn a short distance down the road and out of range to wait there as a rallying point. Lieutenant Raynor headed for the cab to see that the orders were carried out, but someone had uncoupled the last coach next to the engine from the rest of the train, and with the throttle open the frightened engineer backed away with the single car. The engine rounded the curve at full speed and, contrary to orders, dashed out of sight toward Alexandria.

Colonel McCook formed his four Ohio companies into line of battle and moved across the track. Kemper's Alexandria cannoneers quickly sought them out with their fire. The blue line wavered, and the volunteers, untrained and unseasoned, scattered into the woods. Some stopped to pick up pieces of

round and grape shot, a few picked up explosive shells as souvenirs. The Confederate gunners had fired the shells with such rapidity and excitement that they had forgotten to set the fuses to ignite them.

Other men gathered into a sufficient force to throw out skirmishers, while a few busied themselves helping their wounded comrades. The engineer had deserted his passengers, but one of the brakemen stood fast and bore a musket alongside the Ohio volunteers. The Confederate troops now advanced, and the Federal soldiers fell back along the track and through the woods. The South Carolina skirmishers found no supporting force; so Colonel Gregg dispatched Terry's Virginians, under the guidance of Mr. Hunter, in pursuit of the Yankees. But now it was near 7 o'clock and darkness aided the Yankees. The evening sun cast its shadows through the trees and twilight prevented pursuit. The returning troopers helped the Carolinians burn the captured cars. In the growing darkness, flames crept up the sides of the coach as Kemper's artillerymen busied themselves hitching up the field pieces while the infantrymen gathered their rightful spoils—muskets, pistols, blankets, haversacks, and even a considerable number of carpenter's tools. A civilian traveling with the troops picked up a U.S. soldier's cap as a trophy for his friends back in Richmond, and another became the possessor of a Yankee officer's sword.

The Confederate artillerists had expended about twelve rounds with no casualties, whereas the Ohioans had fired several ineffective rounds of musketry and suffered seven deaths and six wounded. One of those who suffered from the fire was Pvt. J. R. T. Barnes, who sat in the last coach in front of the engine. As the train began its hasty retreat, a shell fragment hit Private Barnes, and death delivered him of his fear before he reached Alexandria.

The retreating Federals reached their camp in Alexandria at 10 P.M., transporting the wounded in rude litters made from the soldiers' blankets and muskets. The two companies detached earlier toward Falls Church had started to their support but were too late.

The Rebels, having deranged the rails at Vienna, reached camp at Fairfax Court House around 1 A.M., weary and tired. The two days' march under the hot June sun had been too much, but that was only a sample of what was to come when they would join Stonewall Jackson and his "foot cavalry."

Colonel Gregg reported that he had encountered 850 Yankees when there were actually only 271 confronting him. General Schenck ascertained that the total Rebel force attacking him numbered 2,000 plus a select group of 150 Negroes who were armed and posted in a grain field near the tracks; Gregg's total force did not exceed 680. Thus the two commanders established a pattern of overestimating opposing numbers, a practice that prevailed throughout the war on both sides.

The next day, "a perfectly reliable Union man [Josiah Bowman], residing in Vienna," drove his wagon into the Federal encampment and "in patriotic

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ganization headed by a Fire Chief, an Assistant Chief, and three Battalion Chiefs. Total paid personnel now numbers 165.

There are now ten fire stations in Arlington County:

Number 1—Arlington
1041 South Edgewood Street

Number 2—Ballston
911 North Stuart Street

Number 3—Cherrydale
3900 Lee Highway

Number 4—Clarendon
1006 North Hudson Street

Number 5—Jefferson
501 23d Street, South

Number 6—Falls Church
6929 Lee Highway

Number 7—Fairlington
3116 South Abingdon Street

Number 8—Hall's Hill
2209 North Culpeper Street

Number 9—Walter Reed
1900 South Walter Reed Drive

Number 10—Rosslyn
1559 Wilson Boulevard

The Fire Division operates 20 pumpers (some having a 1,000-gallon-per-minute capacity), four ladder trucks (one of which has a 100-foot aerial ladder), and six ambulances with which the Rescue Squad answers emergency calls. These are all equipped with two-way radios. This is a far cry indeed from a "short ladder and ten round bottom, leather buckets." The volunteer companies still own seven of the ten station houses, and there are over 500 volunteers on the rolls but only about 10 percent are active.

Jokingly, the Fire Division boasts: "We seldom lose a foundation and we have never lost a lot."

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and Christian kindness delivered the lifeless bodies of six men who had been left behind during the hasty retreat. This gentleman, whose name was omitted from the report, was present during the attack and afterward gathered the frightfully mangled bodies, carefully folding each one in a blanket before delivering them to their last bivouac. An assistant surgeon and two soldiers accompanied the Vienna gentleman back to the small Virginia hamlet to get the last remaining soldier, John Volmer, who was dangerously wounded and could not be moved with the others.

Private Volmer recovered a month later at Georgetown Infirmary and returned to his home in Ohio. His nine comrades, killed or mortally wounded at Vienna, were the first soldiers from the State of Ohio to give their lives in the Civil War. They probably did not know that they too were the first in the history of warfare to use the railroad tactically in an engagement. These men from Zanesville and Portsmouth were buried at Camp Lincoln near the old cotton factory known at Roache's Mill. The location of their remains today is unknown, but perhaps someone living in the Presidential Gardens Apartment area will recall that some unidentified graves were uncovered by construction workers, and maybe a county coroner will remember where the remains were taken. Two questions could then be answered—one from the 1860's and another from the 1940's—and the final footnote could be added to our story.