

The Darkness, and Jackson, and Fear (The Battle of Chancellorsville)

By Bruce Catton

Excerpted from Chapter 3 of Vol. 3, *The Centennial History of the Civil War* (1965). The Battle of Chancellorsville was fought April 30-May 6, 1863, in Virginia. Note: Catton's work has been republished in various forms. *The Centennial History of the Civil War* trilogy is distinctly different from his *Army of the Potomac* trilogy, which is best known today as *Bruce Catton's Civil War*.

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Darkness brought universal confusion. Bursts of fire kept breaking out in unexpected places, drifting smoke stained the moonlight, no one knew where anyone else was, and one Federal said it all when he wrote: "Darkness was upon us, and Jackson was on us, and fear was on us." Jackson's triumphant corps was half-disorganized itself, brigades and divisions having become all intermingled in the formless fighting. Far out in front, Sickles' men began to understand that something had gone very wrong far in the rear, and they made a shaky, uncoordinated retreat, fighting blindly with other Federal units when they collided in the darkness. Over at Fredericksburg, Sedgwick got a preemptory order from headquarters: he was to occupy Fredericksburg and march at once along the road to Chancellorsville, being sure to "attack and destroy" any Confederate force he met. Around the Chancellorsville clearing, powerful Federal artillery opened a blind fire whenever the gunners saw anything moving in the woodland in front. For the time being the Confederate attack had come to a standstill.

Then Jackson paid the penalty for being the kind of man he was. He was strange, impassioned, made of fire crossed with a belief in pre-destination, and this evening he could think of nothing except that his enemies were in trouble, so he tried with furious single-mindedness to keep the battle moving. His corps desperately needed realignment, not to mention rest, and a cautious general would have called a halt in order to get people sorted out. But Jackson knew that if he could put armed Confederates on the bank of the Rappahannock before the night ended Hooker might lose his entire army, and he had not the faintest notion of stopping. He rode on ahead of his troops, looking for the roads that might lead to his goal, and in the darkness and general mix-up he got in front of a North Carolina regiment that had been bracing itself for an expected attack by Yankee cavalry. The regiment saw Jackson and his mounted aides, moving horsemen coming out of the deep shadows, it opened fire – and Jackson was shot off his horse, bullets in him, a death wound on him. They got him back to the rear at last, and at last the night became quiet.

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