

Chancellorsville, May 1863: Lee Uses Audacity, Surprise to Defeat Union Forces

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Before May 1863, Chancellorsville, Va., was little more than an intersection on the way to Fredericksburg. Today, the area is renowned as the site of what many historians call GEN Robert E. Lee's "greatest victory."¹ At the formerly sleepy crossroads, Lee's dedicated but severely outmatched Army of Northern Virginia clashed with MG "Fighting Joe" Hooker's well-supplied yet troubled Army of the Potomac in a spectacular display of Lee's tactical brilliance. Lee's success at Chancellorsville, while unlikely given the conditions, is not inexplicable. Through expert application of the offensive characteristics of **audacity** and **surprise**, Lee's outnumbered force was able to defeat the Army of the Potomac at Chancellorsville on 1-4 May 1863.

Background

The Civil War had raged for more than two years by the time the two armies clashed at Chancellorsville. During this period, the two armies met multiple times in heavy fighting. The Army of Northern Virginia proved itself a worthy opponent and prevented the Army of the Potomac from achieving any decisive victories on the battlefield.² The northern public quickly tired of consistent battlefield failures, and political divisions over the war split support in the northern states.³ Even the slim victory at Antietam and the revelation of the Emancipation Proclamation had only a mixed impact on the North's morale.⁴ Lincoln knew he needed to defeat the Army of Northern Virginia and was desperate to find the general who could lead the Union to victory.

Conversely, the Confederates, although successful on the battlefield, were beginning to feel the logistical strain of the prolonged conflict. Lee knew that his army and the Confederacy as a whole could not outlast the Union in a war of attrition. Any hope for success was hinged upon fighting quickly and aggressively and forcing the Union into negotiations.⁵

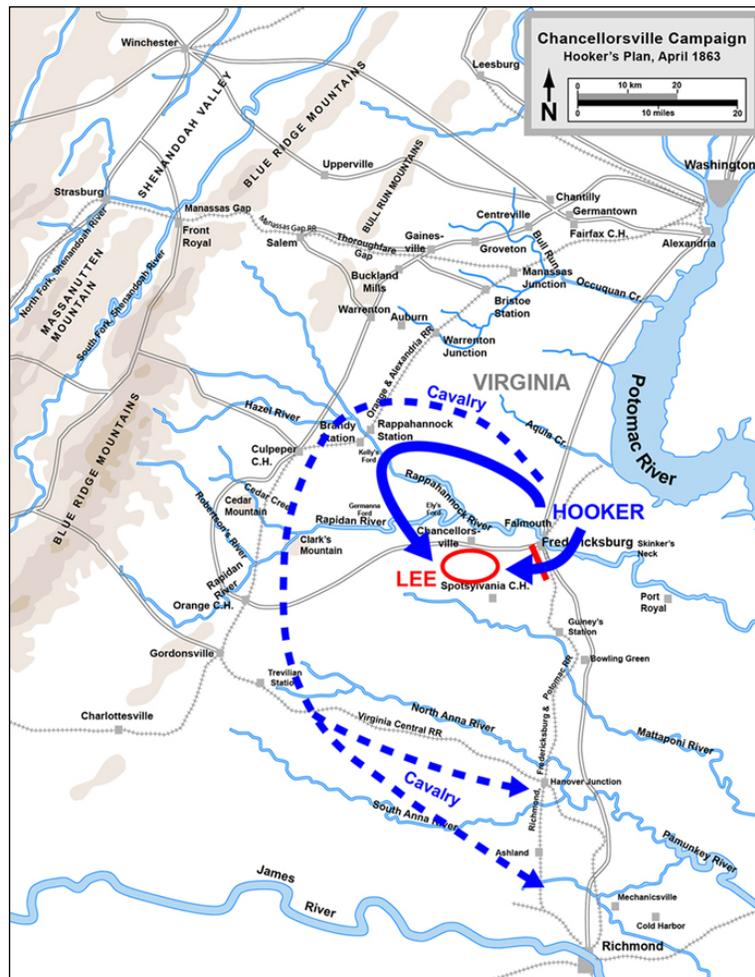
It was under these circumstances that the two armies met again in December 1862 in Fredericksburg, Va. The engagement was another Union defeat, and the Army of the Potomac suffered staggering casualties in an ill-conceived frontal assault on the Confederates' defensive position before withdrawing across the Rappahannock.⁶ Fredericksburg was crucial in setting the stage for Chancellorsville just months later. After the Union Army's withdrawal, both sides settled into winter quarters in the area (the Union across the Rappahannock to the east and the Confederates behind the high ground to the west).⁷ Over the winter Lee continued to improve his army's strong defensive position on the heights and turned his attention to resupplying his troops.⁸ With food and ammunition in short supply and the surrounding countryside heavily depleted, Lee dispatched LTG James Longstreet and two divisions east in late February to forage and screen against a possible attack.⁹ This degradation to his overall strength would exacerbate the already heavily skewed Union numerical advantage at Chancellorsville. The Union Army's failure at Fredericksburg prompted Lincoln to replace MG Ambrose Burnside with Hooker.¹⁰ Hooker, a brash self-promoter but adept organizer, utilized the remainder of the winter to restructure and refit the Army of the Potomac.¹¹

Hooker's Plan

By March of 1863, the Union Army was once again in fighting shape, and by late April Hooker formulated and distributed his plan of attack. He settled on a grand double envelopment. The Army of the Potomac would split into two "wings." The right wing consisting of four infantry corps would cross

the Rappahannock at ford sites north of Fredericksburg and march to the crossroads known as Chancellorsville before moving southeast to flank Lee's army. The left wing, under the command of MG John Sedgwick, consisted of the I, II, and VI Corps and would hold opposite Fredericksburg to fix as much of Lee's army as possible. This would allow the two "wings" to crush Lee's army between them. These movements would be supported by a preparatory cavalry strike conducted two weeks in advance of the main attack by the newly reconstituted Union Cavalry Regiment (see [Map 1](#)). Under the command of BG George Stoneman, the regiment would cut Lee's lines of communication to Richmond.¹²

Whether by arrogance or oversight, Hooker determined that this plan left Lee no choice but to "ingloriously fly," finally giving the Union Army the decisive victory it so desperately craved.¹³ Confident that his attack would succeed, Hooker remarked, "I have the finest army the sun ever shone on. My plans are perfect, and when I start to carry them out, may God have mercy on General Lee, for I will have none!"¹⁴



Map 1 – Hooker's Plan

The Battle of Chancellorsville

The plan was set in motion on 13 April 1863 when Hooker dispatched Stoneman and the Union cavalry. After moving just 25 miles, weather prevented the cavalry from crossing the Rappahannock, an inauspicious beginning to Hooker's assault.¹⁵ Weather continued to delay Hooker's plans, and the first of the three corps in the right wing of his attack began movement across the Rappahannock on 28 April.

Movement continued for two days with all elements of the wing in place by the early morning hours of 30 April.¹⁶

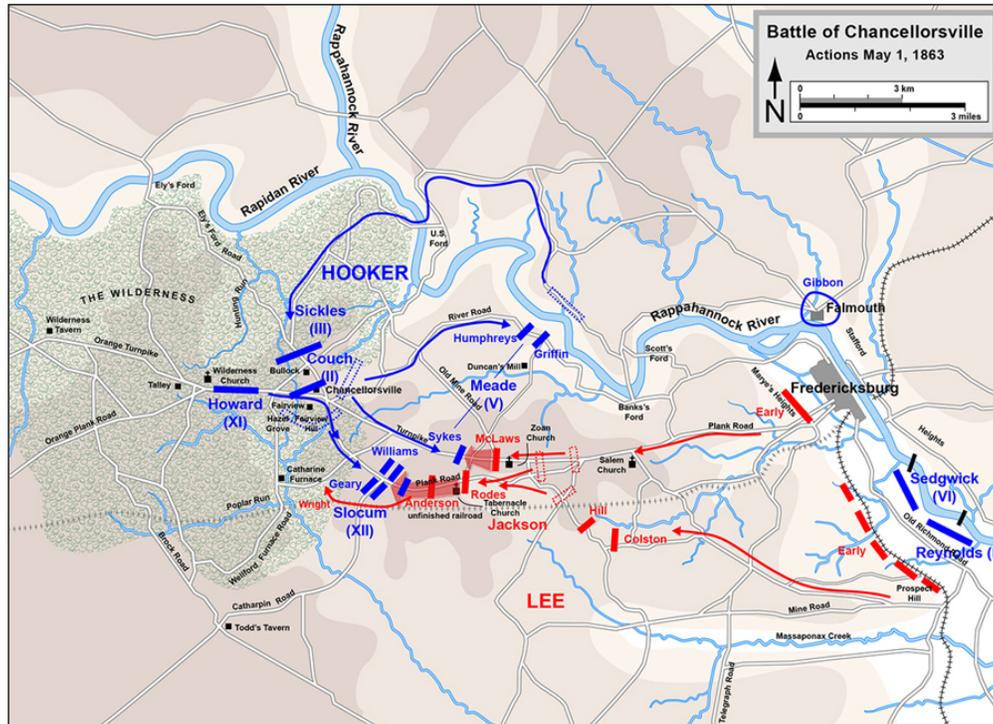
At receiving word of the first of these movements, Lee believed that Union force to his north was a diversion.¹⁷ Lee knew that his positions near Fredericksburg, anchored by MG Stonewall Jackson's II Corps, were strong; another Union assault there would be no more successful than the first two. However, as more information came in from MG J.E.B. Stuart's Confederate cavalry specifying the size and location of the Union forces, Lee realized this initial conclusion was wrong. The enemy force to the west was not a diversion but rather the principal threat intent on flanking his force from the rear. A careful examination of the map revealed the Chancellorsville crossroads as the most likely launching point for Hooker's assault, and Lee began to move his forces to counter this threat.¹⁸ On 29 April, Lee ordered the 1st Division, I Corps — commanded by MG Richard Anderson — to move from its position guarding the fords north of Fredericksburg west towards the Chancellorsville crossroads to stem Hooker's eastern movements and augmented him with the Confederate artillery. He then directed MG Lafayette McLaws, commander of 2nd Division, I Corps, to move from his defensive position south of Fredericksburg to join Anderson to the west. This divided Lee's already outnumbered army and left only Jubal Early's 3rd Division of Jackson's II Corps to defend against what Lee now believed to be the Union diversion force across the river from Fredericksburg. Lee also ordered Stuart to rejoin the main army immediately for fear that they would be separated by the Union attack.¹⁹ Lee immediately sent word to Longstreet calling for his return. Lee would need all the strength he could muster to counter Hooker's strong assault.²⁰

As Lee was beginning to understand Hooker's intentions, the Union Army continued executing its plan. Following the successful crossing at Elys Ford, MG George G. Meade marched his V Corps southeast to the Chancellorsville crossroads, arriving at the Chancellor House around mid-day on 30 April.²¹ Within hours the remainder of the right wing of the Union force descended on the crossroads, and the corps commanders — excited at the prospect of finally having the advantage over Lee — conferred.²² This excitement was short-lived as early in the afternoon of 30 April the commanders received word from Hooker that "no advance be made from Chancellorsville" until the II and III Corps arrived to further augment the force.²³ Instead of pressing the Union advantage, the right wing of Hooker's attack remained in position at the Chancellorsville crossroads until morning.²⁴

While Hooker's momentum was slowing, Lee's began to rise. Reports from the west and his own observations of the Union line near Fredericksburg solidified his opinion; the main attack would come through Chancellorsville.²⁵ After conferring briefly with Jackson, Lee decided to drastically divide his force to support the defenses in the vicinity of Chancellorsville. With the exception of William Barksdale's Mississippi Brigade in the town of Fredericksburg and Jubal Early's division arrayed directly opposite of the Union encampment, Lee ordered Jackson's II Corps to march north to join Anderson's defensive line. Rather than retreat under the Union advance, Lee postured himself for a fight.²⁶

Jackson and his men marched early on 1 May and arrived at Anderson's defensive position by mid-morning. Lee had implicit trust in his battle-hardened subordinate commander and gave Jackson orders simply to "make arrangements to repulse the enemy."²⁷ Jackson, as offensively minded as Lee, judged the best course was to seize the initiative and attack. He gave the order to advance around 1030 on 1 May and moved toward Chancellorsville up Orange Plank Road and the Orange Turnpike.²⁸ Just miles away, Hooker (and the Union Army) was unaware of Jackson's bold advance. Satisfied that his force was moving well and that the reports he received of Lee's forces moving from their defensive lines near Fredericksburg indicated a retreat, Hooker unhurriedly issued his next orders. Hooker directed Sedgwick to make a feint toward crossing at Fredericksburg around 1300 to draw Lee's attention back south. He directed Meade to move toward Bank's Ford along River Road to secure the area for the future true

crossing of Sedgwick while the remaining three corps would move along Orange Plank Road and Orange Turnpike toward the reported Confederate position near Tabernacle Church.²⁹ These two roads were separated by just one mile at their farthest point; however, the terrain between them was dense woods. While mutual support was possible, movements through the “wilderness” were neither easy nor quick. Synchronization of effort would prove to be a challenge in such terrain.³⁰

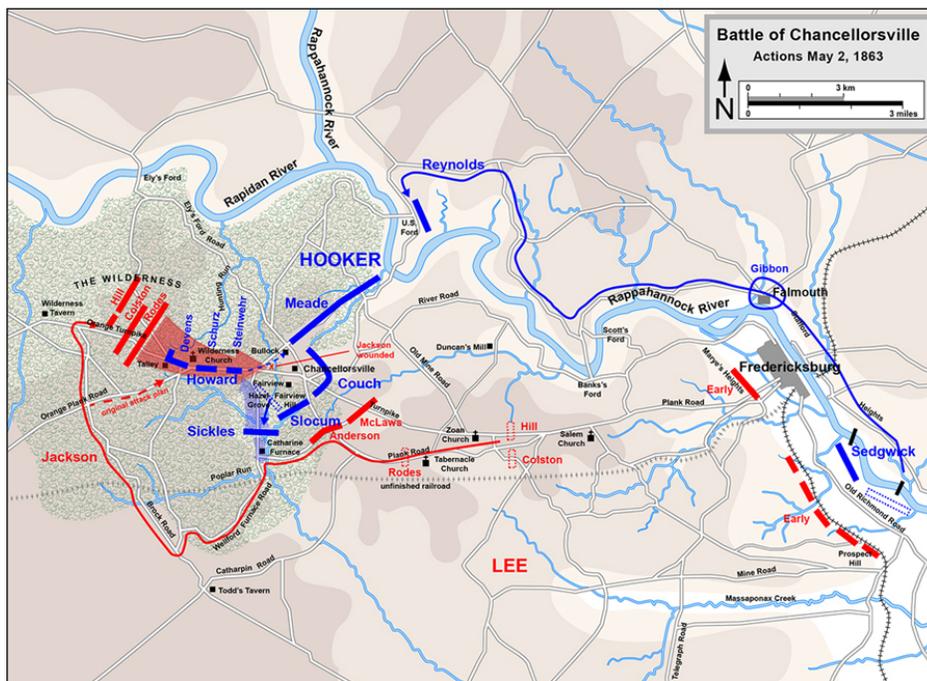


Map 2 – Battle of Chancellorsville, Actions on 1 May 1863

The two armies met around 1115 when skirmishers from Jackson’s lead brigade on the Orange Turnpike collided with pickets of the Union cavalry. Both sides quickly brought up artillery to support the engagement, and MG George Sykes advanced his troops, slowly pushing the Confederates back down the turnpike. Around 1230 Sykes became concerned that he was isolated from the remainder of the Union Army on Orange Plank Road; he halted his advance and sent word to Hooker. His worries were well founded. MG Henry Slocum and the remainder of the Union force were behind Sykes’ advance by nearly two miles due to delays caused by a complicated movement formation. When Slocum finally managed to get his troops progressing at 1300, he was met within half an hour by Confederate artillery and the skirmish lines of Anderson’s division (the other half of Jackson’s attacking force). Anderson methodically pushed Slocum back up the Plank Road toward Chancellorsville, nearly flanking his rear and cutting him off from Chancellorsville. Meanwhile, Meade’s march towards Bank’s Ford was progressing well, and his troops were within two miles of the river.³¹

At this time Hooker made another fateful decision. Upon receiving word from Sykes, Hooker immediately dispatched orders to all his corps commanders (including Meade who was nearly to his objective) to retreat back to the defensive positions outside Chancellorsville.³² As the Confederates continued to press, Union forces retreated to their positions of the previous day. They reached Chancellorsville as dusk fell and began to fortify their lines at Hooker’s orders.³³ The Union Army established a u-shaped defense oriented around Chancellorsville. The lines ran from approximately one mile northeast of the Chancellorsville crossroads, gently curving around to the south along the turnpike and Chancellorsville clearing before hooking slightly westward for approximately two miles and then

ending in the dense “wilderness” to the west. Thus, the main body of the Union’s defense was oriented almost exclusively south and east. The western flank, Hooker’s reserves under MG O.O. Howard, did not fortify its position. Howard considered the dense vegetation obstacle enough and argued to Hooker that any significant action from Lee to the west was unlikely at best. Hooker did not press the issue, and the western flank remained exposed.³⁴



Map 3 – Battle of Chancellorsville, Actions on 2 May 1863

This decision created an opportunity for Lee. Intent on maintaining the initiative gained through the day’s attacks and Hooker’s retreat, Lee and Jackson conferred the night of 1 May. Lee knew his small force could not outmatch the overwhelming strength of the Union Army and its prepared defenses head on, but he had to attack quickly to prevent Hooker from realizing the weakness of his defensive line at Fredericksburg.³⁵ As Lee and Jackson debated plans of attack, they received word from Stuart’s cavalry scouts. Stuart reported that Hooker’s western flank was exposed, unprotected by prepared defenses or a natural obstacle. Together, Lee and Jackson developed a bold plan. Lee would divide his already drastically outnumbered forces yet again. Jackson would take his II Corps and daringly flank the Union Army, crossing in front of the entire Union line to attack Hooker from the west. Lee and just two divisions would remain to distract the Union main body to the southeast and cover Jackson’s movement.³⁶ Movement was set to begin at first light.³⁷

Delays in preparing the corps to advance pushed the movement to 0700. To conceal his long march, Jackson took his men along a circuitous path: west along the Union front then south for several miles before turning north onto a little used local farm road set back in the “wilderness” that joined the turnpike at Dowdall’s tavern, just beyond the end of Union defensive lines.³⁸ As Jackson marched, Hooker received reports of the Confederate movements. He sent a quick cautionary note to Howard regarding the possibility of a flank attack from the west; however, Hooker was convinced Lee’s movement posed no real threat. Indeed, Hooker assured himself that these movements were further signs of Lee’s retreat and that his plan was working just as he had hoped. To spur Lee along, Hooker

ordered MG Daniel Sickles and Slocum to “harass” Lee’s retreat, which resulted in an inconsequential attack on Jackson’s rear guard.³⁹

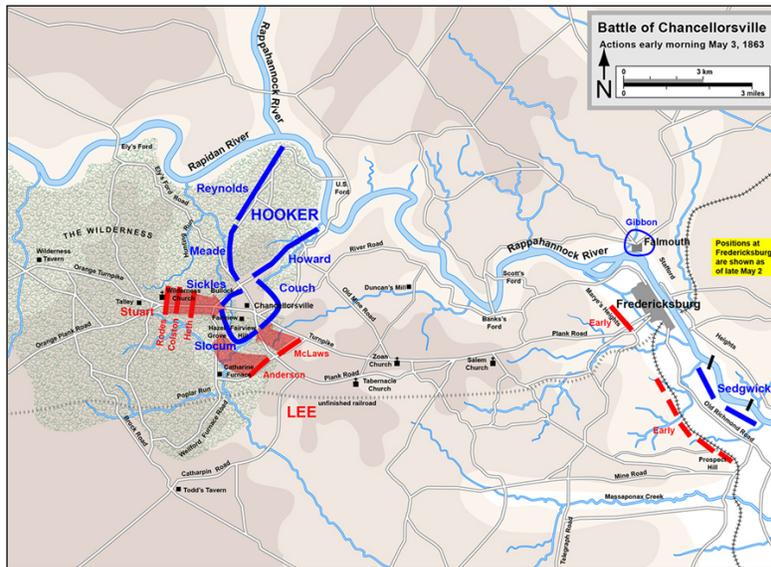
By mid-afternoon Jackson’s corps arrived at Dowdall’s tavern and reconsolidated for its attack. By 1700 that night, Jackson’s men were ready. As the sun was setting, Jackson gave the order and initiated the attack on Howard’s unsuspecting XI Corps.⁴⁰ Advancing in two waves along Orange Turnpike, Jackson’s onslaught quickly overwhelmed the unprepared Union troops who began to fall back towards the main Union position.⁴¹ After pausing to reform their lines, the Confederates pressed the attack, pushing in two waves against the retreating Union troops. Soon Jackson’s left flank outpaced his right, whose cautious commander piecemealed his movements fearing reports of Union cavalry.⁴² This hesitation allowed enough time for the Union to gather itself into a hasty defense. Hooker received word of the Confederate attack approximately one and a half hours after the assault began, and despite his shock reacted decisively. He ordered artillery to Hazel Grove where Alfred Pleasonton’s cavalry was already mounting a hasty defense. Hooker then shifted a division of Sickles’ corps to Fairview Knoll and Meade’s V Corps to the Chancellorsville crossroads to offer resistance.⁴³ Reynolds’ I Corps, which had just crossed at U.S. Ford, was directed to “occupy the ground vacated by the XI Corps,” a somewhat futile task.⁴⁴ The remainder of the Army took up defensive positions between Fairview Knoll and the Chancellorsville crossroads, and fighting continued into the night.⁴⁵

Jackson wanted to continue pressing the attack but needed to evaluate the Union Army’s new positions and so set off in the dark with a small group of staff on a reconnaissance of the Union lines. It was then that tragedy struck the Confederate Army. When attempting to re-enter the Confederate lines following his reconnaissance, Jackson was shot and wounded by members of his own corps. Command of II Corps passed to MG A.P. Hill as Jackson was evacuated.⁴⁶ (He died on 19 May 1863.) Before Hill could continue the attack, he was also wounded and forced to leave the field. Hill appointed Stuart to command II Corps. Stuart, however, was not present so command temporarily passed to BG R.E. Rodes. Rodes ordered that the attack be halted for the night, and Jackson’s bold advance temporarily stopped.⁴⁷

Fighting resumed early on 3 May. At dawn that morning, Hooker ordered Sickles to withdraw from Hazel Grove, judging the ground to be untenable. Seizing the opportunity, Stuart ordered three brigades forward. After meeting some resistance from the Union artillery on Fairview Knoll and the rear guard of Sickles’ retreating force, the Confederates seized Hazel Grove by 0630. The Confederates established artillery in the grove, and then Stuart continued to press the attack along the Orange Turnpike. Unlike the day before, the Confederates faced stiff opposition, and their attack on the fortified Union position was slow and bloody.⁴⁸ As Stuart pushed the federals toward the Chancellorsville crossroads from the west, Lee and his two divisions attacked from the south, slowly uniting the Confederate lines.

This synchronized effort squeezed the Union lines, and grudgingly the Union surrendered ground as they retreated northeast toward Chancellorsville. Hooker realized his position at Chancellorsville was no longer tenable; he ordered the Army of the Potomac to withdraw from Chancellorsville at 1000 on 3 May.⁴⁹

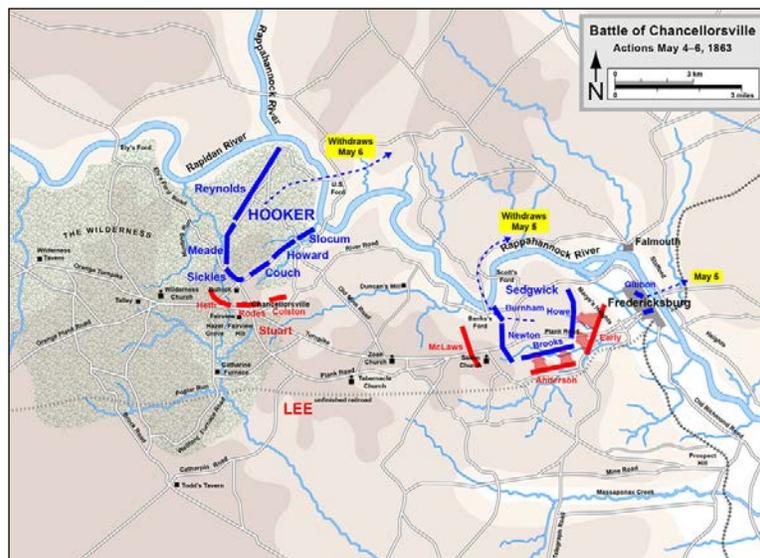
Sedgwick’s forces, whom Hooker had ordered across the river the previous day to reinforce his position, had fought their way through the weakened Confederate lines at Fredericksburg.⁵⁰ Skillful delaying actions by the outnumbered Confederates held Sedgwick’s forces between Salem Church and Bank’s Ford, too far south to offer any reinforcement to Hooker’s position.⁵¹ Unaware of the ordered withdrawal, Sedgwick held this position waiting for Hooker to reinforce him as he had promised in his orders. Hooker did not send any reinforcements.



Map 4 – Battle of Chancellorsville, Actions Early Morning 3 May 1863

Lee sent two divisions from his main army to fix Sedgwick and protect his rear. Lee's augmented force attacked Sedgwick around 1800 on 4 May. After suffering 4,500 casualties, Sedgwick withdrew his forces across the river under the cover of darkness.⁵²

Sedgwick's defeat to the south was the final nail in the coffin of Hooker's plan. Hooker decided to completely withdraw Union forces, ending his assault south of the Rappahannock. The Army of the Potomac began its retreat across the river early on 5 May, and by 0900 the following day all Union forces were on the northern banks. Hooker's "grand envelopment" had failed.⁵³



Map 5 – Battle of Chancellorsville, Actions 4-6 May 1863

Analysis

The battle of Chancellorsville stands out among Robert E. Lee's impressive list of victories for good reason. While certainly aided to a degree by Hooker's actions, Lee's expert application of the

characteristics of the offense — specifically **audacity** and **surprise** — allowed him to seize the initiative and decisively defeat a much larger force.

The first and perhaps most evident characteristic Lee applied at Chancellorsville is that of **audacity**. Conventional military wisdom dictates that in the face of much larger attacking force one should mass his strength and adopt the strongest defensive position available or, if no positions are tenable, retreat. This was how both Lee and Hooker had been taught at West Point and is the exact behavior Hooker believed he was forcing on Lee through his “grand envelopment.” Lee, who was strongly offensive-minded, however, chose to repeatedly and boldly ignore this conventional wisdom at Chancellorsville. He chose to divide his already smaller force and meet Hooker’s assault with his own attack — not once but twice. The first division occurred on 1 May when Lee ordered Jackson’s II Corps from its strong defensive position on the heights overlooking Fredericksburg to attack towards Chancellorsville. This left just one Confederate division to oppose three Union corps staged across the river, creating a risk to Lee’s rear flank. However, Lee correctly surmised that staying in place at Fredericksburg would play directly into Hooker’s hand, trapping his army between Hooker’s advance to the west and Sedgwick’s corps across the river — forcing retreat or destruction. By attacking, Lee not only created distance between his main body and Fredericksburg, which increased his maneuverability, he also stalled the Union attack. As Hooker was so thrown off by Lee’s unexpected attack, he halted his own advance and withdrew into defensive positions, essentially ceding the initiative. Lee then capitalized on Hooker’s hesitation with the second and most famous example of **audacity** at Chancellorsville — Jackson’s flanking march on 2 May. Not only did the flanking movement divide Lee’s army for a second time, an almost unthinkable risk according to convention, it also took Jackson’s II Corps across the entire front of the Union defensive lines, potentially exposing the majority of his troops. Lee understood the risks of this maneuver; however, he judged them to be worth the reward. While the Union had faltered on 1 May, its defensive positions were too strong for Lee to meet head on. Lee determined that attacking the western flank — where the Union defenses were weak — was his only chance to force the Union out of its prepared positions and the only way he could push Hooker back north. As he had the first time, Lee again accepted risk to keep the initiative and force Hooker to fight on his terms. Lee’s division of troops at Chancellorsville is still regarded as one of the most audacious maneuvers in military history and is a major reason he achieved victory at Chancellorsville.

Directly tied to Lee’s application of **audacity** at Chancellorsville was his use of **surprise**. Lee understood Hooker’s frame of mind and the intent of his actions and exploited them by consistently behaving counter to Hooker’s expectations. Rather than withdraw to his prepared defenses or retreat towards safety near Richmond, Lee postured his smaller force to attack the advancing Union Army on 1 May. This action surprised Hooker enough to cause him to halt the Union attack and take up defensive positions even though his force still held the initiative and numerical superiority over its attackers. Jackson’s historic flank attack was the very definition of **surprise**, assaulting through what Howard had thought was impenetrable forest from a direction far from the reported Confederate lines. This shock proved the decisive point in the battle of Chancellorsville. Jackson’s attack decimated Hooker’s western flank and over the next two days forced the Union defensive positions to collapse, eventually causing Hooker’s full retreat across the Rappahannock.

By almost every metric, Hooker and the Army of the Potomac had the advantage on the eve of the battle of Chancellorsville. His force numbered more than double that of Lee’s and was well supplied and rested from its winter encampment. However, despite these advantages and the most promising tactical plan the Union had yet developed, Hooker was no match for Lee.⁵⁴ Through the expert application of **audacity** and **surprise**, Lee and his statistically outmatched Army of Northern Virginia defeated the Army of the Potomac at Chancellorsville in one of the most stunning Confederate victories of the Civil War.

Notes

- ¹ Stephen W. Sears, *Chancellorsville* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin Co., 1996), 445.
- ² Edward J. Stackpole, *Chancellorsville: Lee's Greatest Battle* (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Co., 1958), 85.
- ³ *Ibid*, 86.
- ⁴ Ernest B. Furgurson, *Chancellorsville, 1863: The Souls of the Brave* (NY: Knopf, 1992),13-15.
- ⁵ Carl Smith, *Chancellorsville, 1863: Jackson's Lightning Strike* (London: Osprey, 1998),7.
- ⁶ David G. Martin, *The Chancellorsville Campaign: March-May 1863* (Conshohocken, PA: Combined Books, 1991),9.
- ⁷ Smith, 10-11.
- ⁸ Stackpole, 63-67.
- ⁹ Smith, 15.
- ¹⁰ Furgurson, 16-17.
- ¹¹ Smith, 9.
- ¹² Martin, 89.
- ¹³ Stackpole, 94.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, 95.
- ¹⁵ Furgurson, 67.
- ¹⁶ Stackpole, 124-126.
- ¹⁷ Furgurson, 103.
- ¹⁸ Smith, 39.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid*, 39.
- ²⁰ Sears, 174.
- ²¹ Stackpole, 136.
- ²² *Ibid*, 136-144.
- ²³ *Ibid*, 145-146.
- ²⁴ *Ibid*, 151.
- ²⁵ Sears, 188.
- ²⁶ *Ibid*, 189.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, 198.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, 199.
- ²⁹ Martin, 106.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*,108.
- ³¹ Martin,109-110.
- ³² *Ibid*, 111.
- ³³ *Ibid*, 114-115.
- ³⁴ Furgurson, 137.
- ³⁵ *Ibid*, 138.
- ³⁶ *Ibid*,139.
- ³⁷ *Ibid*, 142.
- ³⁸ *Ibid*,145.
- ³⁹ Smith, 50.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid*, 52.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid*, 54-55.
- ⁴² *Ibid*, 55.
- ⁴³ Stackpole, 245.
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 246.
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 245-254.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 261.

⁴⁷ Ibid, 262-266.

⁴⁸ Smith, 65-68.

⁴⁹ Ibid, 68-69.

⁵⁰ Ibid,71-75.

⁵¹ Ibid,78.

⁵² Ibid, 79-82.

⁵³ Ibid, 82-84.

⁵⁴ Sears, 120.

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