The Lexington

It was merely a harbinger of the terrible war that was to come. Yet, for a few days in June 1861, the Battle of Big Bethel was the conflict’s most spectacular event.

By David A. Norris

The Zouaves of the 5th New York Regiment take the offensive during the Battle of Big Bethel, in an illustration from the New York Illustrated News.
AFTER THE SOUTHERN ATTACK on Fort Sumter on April 12, 1861, thousands of young men—in the North and South—flocked to recruiting offices. Most believed the war would be a short, exciting adventure that would end in a quick victory for their side. Some Confederate units, such as the 1st North Carolina Volunteers, were
Some Confederate units were so confident that their men enlisted for only six months—more than long enough, they thought, to whip the Yankees and go home. The Yankees were even more sure of themselves and raised many “90-day regiments.” Both sides anticipated a great decisive battle, but weeks passed with no more than minor skirmishes. That all changed on June 10, 1861, when a Virginia village called Big Bethel became the site of the Civil War’s first major land battle.

Early in the war, confusion, uncertainty, and just plain bad luck plagued the Union. Officers with a decisive nature (and a measure of good luck) quickly became national heroes. One such man was Benjamin F. Butler. Heavy, balding, and with one eye permanently askew, Butler did not look like a warrior. In fact, he was a lawyer who knew little of military matters. More importantly, he was a Democratic politician who supported the war effort and became a useful ally of President Abraham Lincoln and his administration. Lincoln appointed him as a major general of volunteers, and Butler became one of the Union’s more prominent “political generals.”

Butler soon received command of the Union stronghold of Fort Monroe, Virginia, a vast, practically impregnable fortress at the end of a peninsula between the James and York Rivers. Its guns commanded the entrance to the James, giving the Union a much-needed toehold in coastal Virginia.

Left to right: George Randolph commanded artillery at Big Bethel and later became secretary of war for the Confederacy. D.H. Hill had an abrasive personality that created friction throughout the Civil War. John Magruder gained the nickname “Prince John” for his love of ceremony.

At Fort Monroe, an aspiring novelist named Theodore Winthrop obtained a post as Butler’s military secretary and aide. Winthrop had spent several adventurous years traveling through Central America and California during the gold rush before settling down to a life of practicing law and writing. He held an odd semi-official position under Butler. He may not have enlisted; he told his sister that his rank was “I suppose, captain or major.” Butler thought highly of the bright, eager young Winthrop and learned to rely on his advice.

Twenty miles from Fort Monroe, Confederate troops gathered at Yorktown under the command of Colonel John B. Magruder, a 54-year-old career army officer who resigned from Federal service on April 20, 1861, to fight for the South. Magruder challenged Butler by sending a force to Bethel Church, eight miles from Butler’s headquarters. Bethel Church gave its name to two villages, Big Bethel and Little Bethel, four miles apart. The coming battle would be known variously as Big Bethel, Bethel Church, and Great Bethel.

Colonel Magruder chose Colonel Daniel Harvey Hill of the 1st North Carolina Volunteers to command the force he sent to Bethel Church. Hill, a West Point graduate and a veteran of the war with Mexico, ran the North Carolina Military Institute in Charlotte. His brother-in-law was the soon-to-be-famous Thomas J. “Stonewall” Jackson. Strong-willed and stubborn, Hill displayed impatience with incompetent or halfhearted efforts and sometimes injected sarcastic humor into his formal reports. (He once denied a bugler’s request for a furlough with the quip “shooters before tooters.”)
After dark on the rainy night of June 6, Hill and his regiment, along with the Richmond Howitzers, an artillery company under Major George W. Randolph, finished a nine-mile march to Bethel Church. Hill ordered his men to begin digging in, a task the soldiers found distasteful. As Private Louis Leon of the 1st North Carolina Volunteers had earlier complained at Yorktown, “[T]o think of the indignity! We were expected to do the digging!” Hill also established a smaller post at Little Bethel, close enough to Fort Monroe to really annoy Butler. Then the Confederates made themselves more of a nuisance by skirmishing with Union raiding parties.

Butler called a meeting at his headquarters on Sunday morning, June 9. Winthrop had assembled as much information as possible about the enemy positions, thanks in part to an escaped slave turned spy named George Scott. Among Winthrop’s notations was one saying that Scott was to be issued a “shooting iron,” making him perhaps the first black man to bear arms in the Civil War. Butler and Winthrop then put together a plan for a decisive attack on Big Bethel. Under the command of Brigadier General Ebenezer Pierce, 4,400 men of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, 5th, and 7th New York Regiments; parts of the 4th Massachusetts and the 1st Vermont; and a small detachment of the 2nd U.S. Artillery were to crush Hill’s forces. Before dismissing the meeting, Butler cautioned Winthrop, “be as brave as you please, but run no risk.” Winthrop replied, “Be bold! Be bold! But be not too bold shall be our motto.”

The men would march in separate groups and rendezvous near Little Bethel before proceeding on to Big Bethel. Butler carefully sealed off the roads leading to Hampton and Newport News at 10:00 P.M. and sent his men out around midnight on June 10. It was a confident army that marched toward Big Bethel. Many of the men joked that they could “whip the Rebels with cornstalks.”

The plan was sound enough on paper, but it unraveled quickly in practice. To prevent friendly fire incidents in the dark, Butler gave his men a password and ordered them to wear white armbands to distinguish themselves from enemy troops. Somehow, orders about the password and armbands never reached Colonel John E. Bendix of the 7th New York Infantry. Near Little Bethel, Bendix’s men saw a mass of troops marching in the predawn gloom and opened fire on them. Several agonizing minutes passed before they realized they were firing on the 3rd New York. By the time the regiments recognized each other, two men were dead and 19 wounded.

Not too surprisingly after the commotion, the Federals found no one waiting for them at Little Bethel. Some of Pierce’s officers strongly argued against continuing to Big Bethel now that they had lost the chance for surprise. Pierce, though, was determined to press on with the attack.

There were 1,400 Confederates at Big Bethel, including the 1st North

Although later considered little more than a skirmish, the fighting at Big Bethel proved a harsh lesson in war to those who fought there.
lying works south of the river, manned by the 3rd Virginia with a howitzer, protected the main position. Although the forces were nominally under the command of Colonel Magruder, Colonel Hill directed the Confederate defense in the battle.

At 9:00 A.M. on June 10 the "glittering bayonets" of the Union army came into view. The Rebels promptly greeted them with an exploding howitzer shell, sending the Federals scattering for cover. The Yankees returned fire, bolstered by three guns of the 2nd U.S. Artillery under Lieutenant John T. Greble, and the battle settled into a noisy stalemate for a couple of hours, with both sides staying in place and firing at long range. Under fire for the first time in their lives, the soldiers of both sides noted with relief that their enemies were shooting too high and doing more damage to trees than men. Union shells and musket balls peppered the Confederate lines but struck only a few horses. Hill steadied his men with his calm demeanor and his humor, making wisecracks about the Yankees' poor shooting.

At 11:00 A.M., the 3rd and 5th New York massed for a charge against the breastworks south of the river. The 5th was a "Zouave" regiment and wore uniforms inspired by Algerian units of the French Army. Its charge was a memorable and colorful sight. The distinctive costume of bright red pan-taloons, caps, and ornate short jackets lent an exotic and adventurous air to the Virginia battlefield and gave the regiment the nickname "the Red-Legged Devils." When a priming wire broke off in the vent of the Confederates' howitzer, rendering it inoperable, the Virginians retreated before the Yankee onslaught. The Zouaves soon had the Stars and Stripes waving over the Rebel position, and it began to look as though the Federals would win the easy victory they had expected.

Their joy turned to dismay when Colonel Frederick Townsend of the 3rd New York looked through the woods to his left and was shocked to see the gleam of bayonets. Fearing he would be outflanked, the colonel quickly ordered his regiment to retreat, leaving the 5th New York unsupported. The "enemy" force seen by Townsend was actually one of his own companies that had become separated in the woods and was trying to rejoin the regiment.

Townsend's sudden withdrawal gave Hill the opportunity to change the course of the battle. He sent Captain John L. Bridgers and the Edgecombe Guards of the 1st North Carolina across the river to retake the captured howitzer battery. One of Bridgers' men, Corporal John Huston Thorpe, remembered, "[W]hen we crossed the road... near the church, it was swept by a continual shower of canon [sic] balls—shell and canister. Here two of our Comp. were severely wounded. I was almost deafened by the whistling of the shots as they passed, and saw the dust cut up almost under my feet." Bridgers' company drove the Zouaves...
out of the captured works, saving the day for the Confederates. The 5th New
York Zouaves suffered more deaths than any other Union regiment that day. Dur-
ing the battle, a piece of grapeshot ripped part of the insignia off the shoul-
der of their commander, Colonel Abram Duryea, tore through the leg of Captain
H. Judson Kilpatrick, and killed a soldier behind them. Another Zouave officer
was wounded when he dodged a cannon ball only to run into the bayonet of
one of his men.

When Bridgers' men drove them back, some of the Zouaves took cover
behind a wooden building and put up
a menacing return fire. Bridgers called
for volunteers to burn the building, and
five men of the Edgecombe Guards
stepped forward. They set out with
"matches and a hatchet," but enemy
fire halted them and killed Private
Henry L. Wyatt. John Huston Thorpe
saw Wyatt struck down. He "never ut-
ered a word or a groan, but lay limp
on his back, his arms extended, one
knee up and a clot of blood on his
forehead as large as a man's fist. He
was lying within four feet of me, and
this is the way I saw him." Despite his
terrible wound, Wyatt, a 19-year-old
carpenter's apprentice, lived long
enough to be carried back to York-
town, where he died that night. He
was the first Confederate soldier killed
in a Civil War battle.

After Wyatt's death, the fighting on
that side of the field ended. One of
Randolph's shells finally ignited the
building Wyatt had died trying to
reach. The flames spread to the out-
buildings and fences, denying any shel-
ter to the enemy.

The final Union effort came on the
other side of Hill's lines. Winthrop had
reconnoitered the area on foot and evi-
dently thought he had found a way to
break through the Rebel left. Leading the
detachments of the 1st Vermont and the
4th Massachusetts across the Back River,
Winthrop crossed a patch of woods,
climbed a small rise in the ground, and
arrived at a rail fence 75 yards from the
Confederate left. A North Carolinian
remembered, "[O]ur attention was
called by cheering to the advance of
Winthrop's troops . . . [W]e saw the
Major and two privates on the fence. His
sword was drawn, and he was calling on
his troops to follow him. Our first volley
killed those three . . . ." The young Car-
olinians, adjusting to the experience of
battle, were "in high glee, and seemed
to enjoy it as much as boys do rabbit-
shooting," according to Hill. The forma-
tion of the ground protected the rest of
Winthrop's men, but their leader's death
unnerved them, and the charge col-
lapsed. Winthrop, thought Hill, was the
"only one of the enemy who exhibited

THE ZOUAVES
The 5th New York was among the war's most colorful regi-
ments, literally and figuratively. They adapted their uniforms
from those of the original Zouaves, Algerians who enlisted in
the French Army. The Zouave uniform typically consisted of
baggy, bright red pants, a short, open, and often elabor-
ately decorated jacket, a soft cloth cap, a French-style
kepi, or even a fez. These exotic uniforms were popular
with both sides in the Civil War, especially in the early months. Young soldiers consid-
ered themselves particularly dashing and heroic in such outfits.

The French Army was much admired in Civil War America. Would-be military lead-
ers studied Napoleon, while soldiers eagerly adopted French innovations in fortifica-
tions, artillery, and tactics. The Zouave uniform combined this admiration of France
with the Victorian love of the exotic East. These fancy uniforms, though, could be
difficult and expensive to procure. Even more to the point, soldiers soon noticed that
the flashy Zouave outfits drew enemy fire more than the run-of-the-mill uniforms.
Most Zouave regiments eventually dropped their unusual uniforms for standard
ones, although the bright Zouave uniforms could be seen for most of the war.
even an approximation to courage during the whole day."

After Winthrop's charge failed, the battle simply sputtered to a halt. Colonel Joseph Carr, leading his 2nd New York Infantry to the scene as reinforcements, was "surprised and puzzled" by the disorganized condition of the Union army. Men and officers milled around aimlessly a mile from the front, he said, "looking far more like men enjoying a huge picnic than soldiers awaiting battle." The confused state of the Union army reflected that of its commander on the field. General Pierce, whose limited prewar militia experience had not prepared him for a real battle, was in over his head. Furthermore, faulty reconnaissance had told him the Confederates had three to five thousand men and 30 cannon. After four hours of unsuccessful attacks against what seemed like overwhelming odds, Pierce ordered his army to retreat at 1:00 p.m., although reinforcements were arriving, and many of his troops had not even fired a shot.

One of the last casualties of the battle was Lieutenant Greble. The young artillerist had been at his post under fire during most of the battle when orders to retreat reached him. As Greble prepared to leave the field, a piece of shell struck him down. He was the first West Point graduate to die in the war. His shocked and leaderless men abandoned their gun, but a company of the 2nd New York bravely faced the enemy fire and brought the gun back with Greble's body slung across it. By about 1:30 p.m., the Union army was in full retreat. Lieutenant Roswell Farnham of the 1st Vermont (a future governor of the state) remembered that "the march back to Newport News was hot, dusty, and tedious, but soon after sun-set, weary and footsore, the tired men filed slowly into camp, if not with much glory, yet with a good deal of experience..." The victors did not stay long, either. Worried about leaving Yorktown unprotected, Magruder did not seriously pursue the Yankees but ordered all but a small cavalry force back to Yorktown that same day.

Total Union casualties at Big Bethel stunned a nation that expected a quick, easy victory. Eighteen men were dead, 53 were wounded, and five were missing. The South lost only one man—Private Wyatt—killed and 10 wounded. Private Leon and some of his comrades wandered around the battlefield after the fighting was over. "We saw several of the Yankee dead—the first I had ever seen, and it made me shudder... From now on I will never grumble again about digging breastworks. If it had not been for them many of us would not be here now." Corporal Thorpe was also shocked at the carnage. "The dead and wounded were lying wherever the eye would turn," he wrote; "here might be
seen a hand—there a human body blown almost to atoms—human blood was as free as water after a rain."

Big Bethel cheered the South far beyond the battle’s merits. "Here, it will be said in after times, soldiers of the Southern Confederacy proved that they could whip Yankees," said the Richmond Examiner. "Never since the invention of gunpowder was such a victory achieved," exulted the Raleigh Register. "The signal success of our troops at Bethel Church will run like wild-fire through the whole South, and inspire our people with redoubled determination to drive back the vandals from our soil." Eager to find parallels between the American Revolution and the current war for independence, Charlotte’s Western Democrat called Big Bethel "the Lexington of the war." The newspaper also pointed out that some of the Charlotte soldiers at Big Bethel were descendants of Revolutionary War patriots.

The chastened Yankees now knew they would need more than cornstalks to put down the Rebels. Many would agree with Private J.M. Drake of the 4th Massachusetts, who wrote, "The truth is, we have been too ready to believe that the South can be easily subdued, but it is not so. Gen. [Winfield] Scott says, 'We have an enemy to fight brave and smart and our equal in everything but numbers,' and we begin to fully believe it . . . Bethel has taught our army a lesson."

Back home, Northerners were more angry than fearful after this setback. They blasted the commanders for incompetence and placed no blame on the soldiers. The New York Times scoffed, "[T]he sooner this brace of Massachusetts barristers [Butler and Pierce] are dismissed to . . . the petty warfare of the bar . . . the better it will be for the country." That paper also was indignant that "the lives and men and the early success of the cause should have been hazarded by placing in positions of responsibility civilians, whose political influence, and not their merit and ability . . . secured their appointments."

Butler survived the controversy with his general’s stars intact. Pierce was allowed to finish his 90-day enlistment as a general, but when he rejoined the army after his regiment was discharged, it was at the rank of private.

Big Bethel was not the decisive or climactic battle sought by its participants. Within a few weeks, it was overshadowed by the First Battle of Manassas (or Bull Run). First Manassas, another lop-sided Southern victory, reinforced Bethel’s effects of raising Southern overconfidence and Northern determination. The war grew into such terrifying proportions that by 1862, battles the size of Big Bethel were considered skirmishes.

Today the Battle of Big Bethel is remembered only by those with a special interest in the Civil War. Construction of the Big Bethel Reservoir early in the twentieth century flooded most of the battle site. North Carolina, though, never forgot Henry Wyatt. The young private who fell at Big Bethel is honored with a bronze statue that stands on the grounds of the state capitol in Raleigh, one of the few war memorials dedicated to an enlisted man instead of an officer.

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