

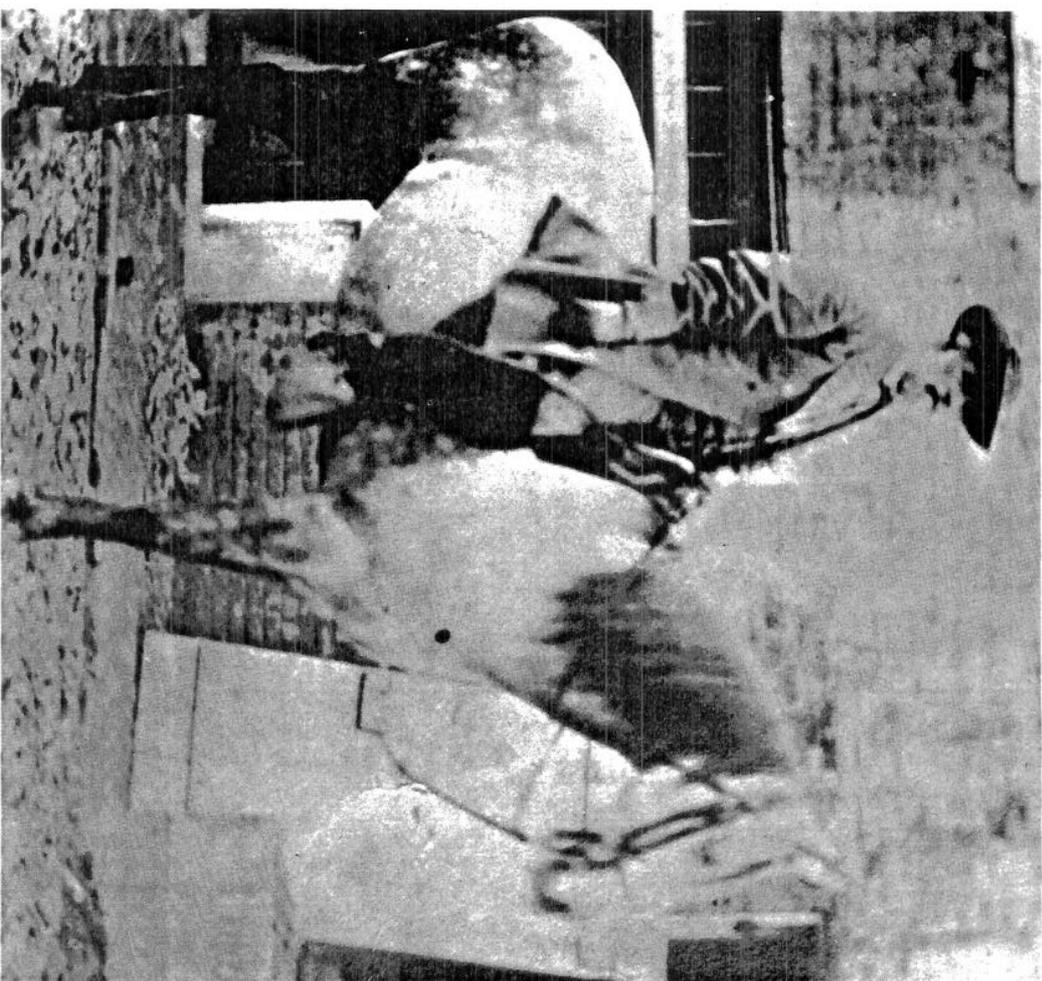
LEE'S LAST GAMBLE

By mid-March 1865 the climax of the campaign, and of the war, was close at hand. Lee's forces in both Richmond and Petersburg had dwindled to about 55,000. Grant, on the other hand, had available, or within easy march, at least 150,000. Moreover, Sheridan, having destroyed the remnants of Early's forces at Waynesboro, Va., on March 2, had cleared the Shenandoah Valley of Confederates and was now free to rejoin Grant before Petersburg.

Everywhere Lee turned, the military situation was black. Union forces under Sherman, driving the Confederates before them, had turned north from Savannah and were now hammering Johnston's forces in North Carolina. With President Jefferson Davis' consent, Lee sent a letter to General Grant on March 2 suggesting an interview. In the early morning hours of the second day following the dispatch of the letter, Lee and Maj. Gen. John B. Gordon discussed the three possible solutions to the problem which perplexed them: (1) Try to negotiate satisfactory peace terms. (This had already been acted upon in Lee's note to Grant.) (2) Retreat from Richmond and Petersburg and unite with Johnston for a final stand. (3) Attack Grant in order to facilitate retreat.

There followed a series of interviews with Confederate government officials in Richmond. Each of the plans was analyzed. The first was quickly dropped when Grant made it clear that he was not empowered to negotiate. Nor was the second proposal, that of retreat, deemed advisable by President Davis who wished to strike one more blow before surrendering his capital. This left only the third alternative—to attack.

Before settling on a definite course of action, however, Lee ordered General Gordon to make a reconnaissance of the Federal lines around Petersburg to see if they could be broken anywhere. Gordon soon reported that the best place for an attack was at Fort Stedman, a Union work located near the City Point and Petersburg Railroad and only 150 yards to the east of a strongly fortified Confederate position named Colquitt's Salient. Lee agreed with Gordon's assessment and, on the night of March 23, told Gordon to make preparations for an attack on the fort.



In Petersburg, sometime in the autumn of 1864, Lee was photographed on his horse Traveller for the first time. Although determined to fight on until all hope was gone, already Lee knew the war was going badly and that his tired, hungry, dirty, and cold soldiers could not hold out for long against Grant's growing might.

About one-half of the besieged army would be used to charge the Union line in the vicinity of Fort Stedman. It was hoped that this would cause Grant to shorten his front by withdrawing his left flank to protect his endangered right. Then Lee could detach a portion of the Confederate army to send to the aid of Johnston as, with shorter lines, he would not need as many men in Petersburg. Should the attack fail, he would attempt to retreat with all his forces for a final stand with Johnston. This would be the last desperate gamble of the Army of Northern Virginia.

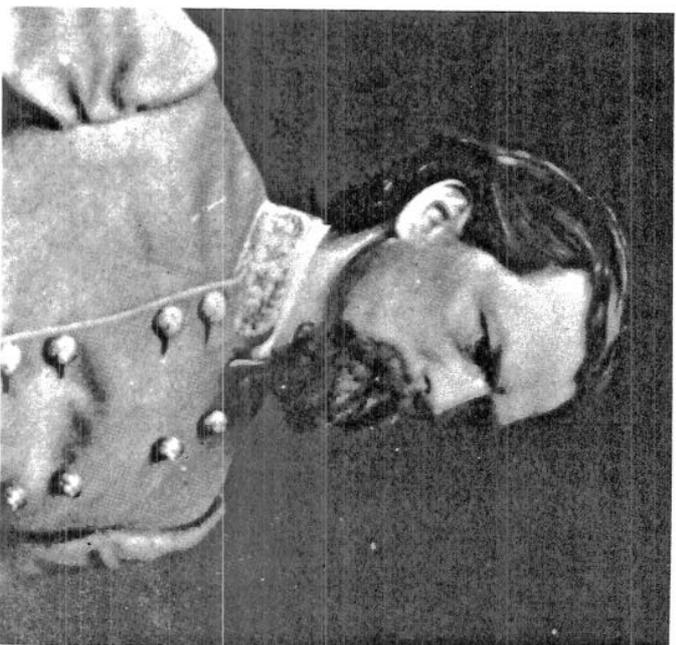
The details for the attack were worked out by Gordon. During the night preceding the assault, the obstructions before the Confederate lines were to be removed and the Union pickets overcome as quietly as possible. A group of 50 men were to remove the chevaux-de-frise and abatis protecting Fort Stedman; then three companies of 100 men each were to charge and capture the fort. When Stedman was safely in Confederate hands, these men were to pretend they were Union troops and, forming into three columns, were to rush to the rear to capture other positions.

The next step was to send a division of infantry to gain possession of the siege lines north and south of the fallen bastion. When the breach had been sufficiently widened, Southern cavalry were to rush through and destroy telegraphic communication with Grant's headquarters at City Point. They were also ordered to cut the military railroad. Additional reserves were to follow the cavalry.

The attack was scheduled for the morning of March 25. The 50 axmen and the 300 soldiers who were to make up the advance columns were given strips of white cloth to wear across their chests to tell friend from foe. The officers in charge were given the names of Union officers known to be in the vicinity and were told to shout their assumed names if challenged. Beginning about 3 a.m., Confederates professing to be deserters crossed to the Union pickets offering to surrender. Their purpose: to be near at hand to overwhelm the unsuspecting pickets when the attack began.

At 4 a.m. Gordon gave the signal, and the Confederates sprang forward. At first the attack went as planned. Blue-clad pickets were silenced so effectively that not a shot was fired. Union obstructions were quickly hewn down by the axmen, and the small vanguard of 300 swept through Battery No. X which stood immediately north of Fort Stedman. They then rushed into the fort; the occupants were completely surprised and many surrendered without a fight. Battery XI to the south of Fort Stedman was also soon in Confederate hands. Union resistance in this early stage was ineffective, although Battery XI was recaptured for a short time.

More Confederates pressed into the torn line. While three columns set out in the general direction of City Point and along the Prince George Court House Road behind Stedman, other infantry units moved north and south along the Federal emplacements. To the north, they captured the fortifications as far as Battery IX where they were stopped by the Union defenders; to the south, they progressed as far as the ramparts of Fort Haskell. A desperate struggle ensued, but here, too, the

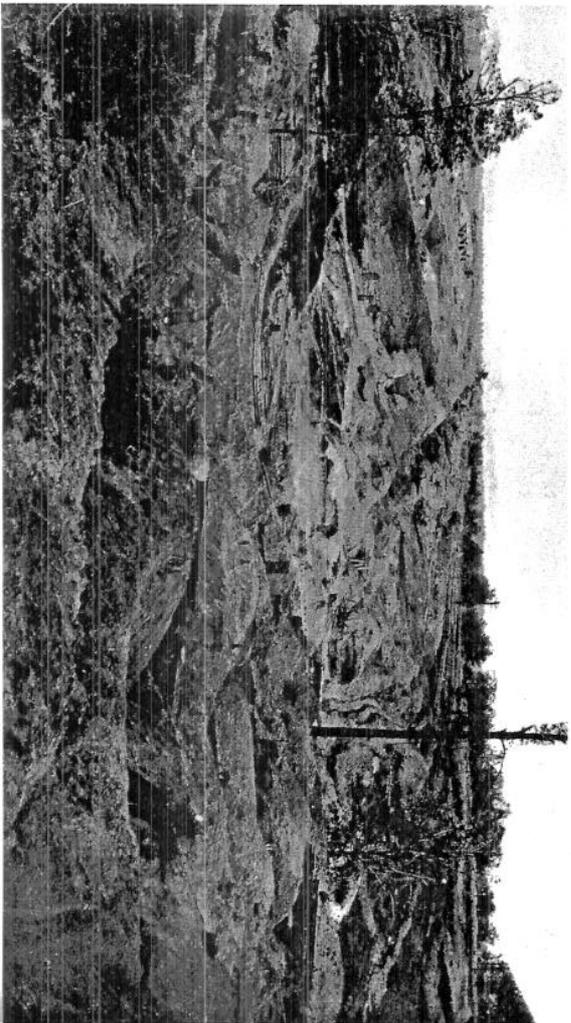


Maj. Gen. John B. Gordon planned and led the March 25 attack on Fort Stedman, one of the most advanced works on the Union line.

Northerners refused to yield. Despite these checks, the Confederates were now in possession of almost 1 mile of the Union line.

In the center of the Confederate attack, the three small columns quickly advanced as far as Harrison's Creek—a small stream which winds its way north to the Appomattox River 650 yards behind Fort Stedman. One of the columns succeeded in crossing the stream and continuing toward a small Union artillery post on the site of what had been Confederate Battery 8 (renamed Fort Friend by the Federals), but canister from the post forced the column back to the creek. Confusion took hold of the Confederates who were unable to locate the positions they had been ordered to capture behind the Union line. Artillery fire from Northern guns on a ridge to the east held them on the banks of Harrison's Creek. By 6 a.m. their forward momentum had been checked.

Union infantry then charged from the ridge to attack the Southerners. The forces joined battle along Harrison's Creek and the Confederates were soon forced back to Fort Stedman. For a brief time they held their newly captured positions. At 7:30 a.m. Brig. Gen. John F. Hartranft advanced on them with a division of Northern



troops. Heavy small-arms and artillery fire on Gordon's men threatened them with annihilation unless they retired to their own lines. About 8 a.m., Gordon received an order from Lee to withdraw his men. The order was quickly dispatched across the open fields to the soldiers in the captured Union works. By now, however, the line of retreat was raked by a vicious crossfire and many Confederates preferred surrender to withdrawal. About the same time Gordon was starting back, Hartranft ordered his division of Pennsylvania troops to recapture Fort Stedman. Within a few moments the Union line was completely restored and the forlorn Southern hope of a successful disruption of Northern communications, followed by secret withdrawal from the city, was lost. Equally bad, if not worse, to the Confederates was the loss of more than 4,000 killed, wounded, and captured as compared to the Union casualties of less than 1,500.

Of the three Confederate plans of action before the Battle of Fort Stedman, now only the second—retreat—was possible. The situation demanded immediate action, for, even as Gordon had been preparing on March 24 to launch his attack, Grant had been engaged in planning more difficulties for the harassed defenders of Petersburg.



Advancing from Colquitt Salient (far left), Gordon's men captured Fort Stea (left) but were driven or by a murderous crossfire from Federal artillery. In assault, some 4,000 Confederates were killed, wounded, or captured.