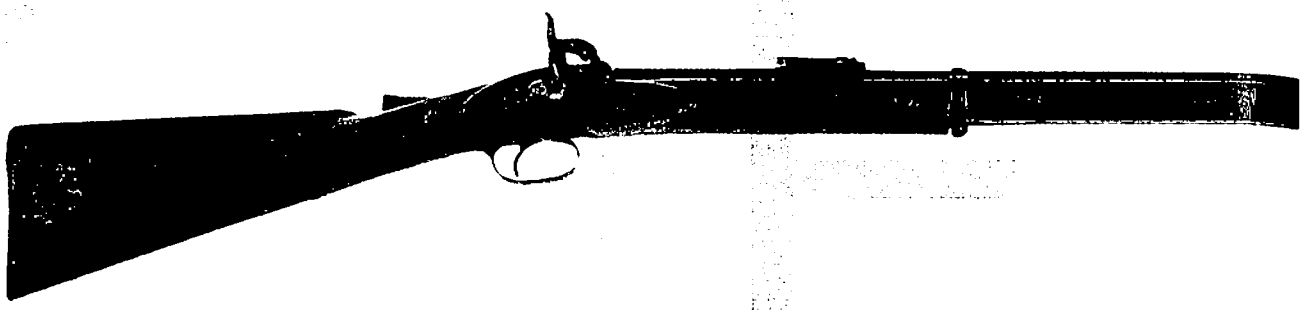
KILLING UNCLE JOHN



MAJOR GENERAL JOHN SEDGWICK FATALLY MISJUDGED THE ACCURACY OF CONFEDERATE SHARPSHOOTERS AT SPOTSYLVANIA.

BY FRED L. RAY

"I BEG OF YOU NOT TO GO to that angle," said Lieutenant Colonel Martin McMahon. "Every officer who has shown himself there has been hit, both yesterday and to-day." McMahon, Major General John Sedgwick's chief of staff, was referring to a jog in the lines of the Union VI Corps near Laurel Hill, Virginia, where Confederate sharpshooters were particularly troublesome that May 9, 1864.

John Sedgwick was one of a relatively small number of Civil War commanders with significant combat experience prior to 1861-62. Although Enfield rifles (see subsequent pages) were the most common sharpshooter weapons, it was most likely a Whitworth rifle (opposite) that ended Sedgwick's life on May 9th, 1864 (Above: Library of Congress; Opposite: James D. Julia Auctions, Fairfield, Maine; Subsequent pages: Military & Historical Image Bank, Southbury, Conn.).

Sedgwick's chief of staff, Lt. Col. Martin McMahon, begged him not to venture too far forward at the angle of the Union line near Laurel Hill. Sedgwick, believing he was well beyond effective sharpshooter range, ignored his pleas—and became the third high-ranking officer to be shot there within a few hours. He was mortally wounded, and command of the VI Corps passed to Maj. Gen. Horatio Wright, opposite (Photos: Library of Congress).

One in particular "killed with every shot" and was "said to have taken twenty lives." Casualties of rank that morning already included a staff officer, Colonel Frederick T. Locke, and one of Sedgwick's brigade commanders, Brig. Gen. William Morris, who had been shot off his horse and severely wounded. "Well, I don't know that there is any reason for my going there," Sedgwick replied.

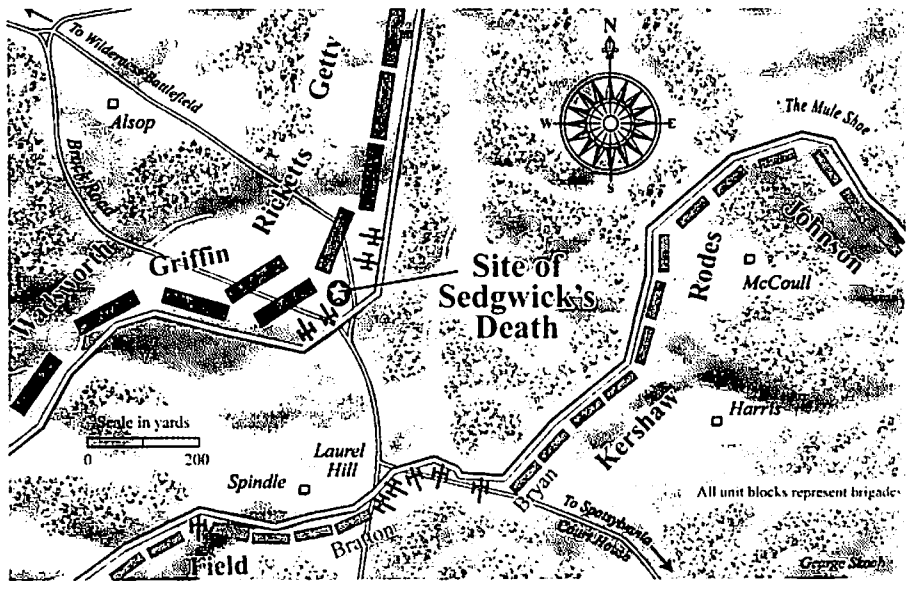
An hour later, however, smarting under the unceasing hail of lead, he ordered his own skirmish line to move farther out and sent McMahon up to supervise. A line of infantrymen soon filed into position near the point of the angle. "That is wrong," said Sedgwick. "Those troops must be moved farther to the right; I don't wish them to overlap that battery."

"Uncle John," as his men affectionately called him, joined his chief of staff near the guns to oversee the deployment, forgetting his promise of an hour before. On the brow of a low hill 500 yards away, a Confederate rifleman, probably from Lt. Gen. James Longstreet's First Corps sharpshooter detachment, noted how the others deferred to two men who had just arrived. He adjusted the sights of his Whitworth rifle and began gently squeezing the trigger.

All this Federal movement drew "a sprinkling fire" from their opponents. Mixed in with the popping of the service Enfields, however, was "a long shrill whistle" of another type of round. Although no one was hit, some of the men instinctively dodged. "What! What! men, dodging this way for single bullets!" said Sedgwick, laughing. "What will you do when they open fire along the whole line? I am ashamed of you. They couldn't hit an elephant at this distance." Another of the whistling rounds passed close by, even as the general prodded one of the men with his boot. "Why, my man, I am ashamed of you, dodging that way," he said. He repeated that "they couldn't hit an elephant at this distance." The soldier defended his actions: "General, I dodged a shell once, and if I hadn't, it would have taken my head off. I believe in dodging." Sedgwick, who was in a genial mood, chuckled and said, "All right, my man; go to your place." The sharpshooter, now sure of the range, touched the trigger once more.

John Sedgwick was born in Cornwall Hollow, Conn., in 1813. After a short stint as a teacher, he attended West Point, graduating 24th in his class in 1837, after which he began his military service as an artillery officer. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Sedgwick gained plenty of combat experience prior to the Civil War, serving in the Seminole War and in Mexico, where he earned two brevets for gallantry. Transferring to the cavalry, he participated in various campaigns against the Indians in the West and in the Mormon Expedition.

In April 1861, Sedgwick was promoted to colonel and took over the 1st Cavalry when his commander, Robert E. Lee,



resigned. Like many professional soldiers he saw the war as an opportunity to advance quickly through the ranks. By August, he had been appointed brigadier general of volunteers and had been given command of a brigade. That fall he took over a division in the Army of the Potomac after its commander, Charles P. Stone, was arrested, and as such took part in Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan's Peninsula campaign of 1862. Wounded at Glendale, he received a second star that summer. At Antietam Sedgwick tangled with Stonewall Jackson in the West Wood and came off second best. His division was cut to pieces, and Sedgwick himself, hit by three bullets, was carried unconscious from the field. "If I am ever hit again," he said, "I hope it will settle me at once. I want no more wounds."

When Sedgwick returned to duty late that year he was rewarded with a corps command. After a month at the helm of the II Corps, followed by three weeks in command of the IX Corps, he took control of the body of men that he was to be most identified with, the VI Corps, on February 4, 1863. Although he was a stout fighter and a consummate military professional, as a field commander Sedgwick tended toward caution. Given an independent mission at Chancellorsville the next spring, Sedgwick forced Marye's Heights against Jubal Early but failed to effectively threaten Lee's rear. Blocked by a single Confederate division at Salem Church, the VI Corps ended up having to ignominiously retreat across the Rappahannock the next night.

Still, Sedgwick's professionalism, modesty and agreeable demeanor won him many loyal friends in an army often beset with ambitious intrigues and personal feuds. Although he was nominally a Democrat and a McClellan man, his low-key approach to both Army and national politics endeared him to the Lincoln administration, which kept him in command of a considerably enlarged VI Corps when it reorganized five small corps of the Army of the Potomac into three large ones in the spring of 1864.

A lifelong bachelor who often amused himself with marathon bouts of solitaire, Sedgwick cared deeply for his men, who reciprocated with their undying affection and the title of "Uncle John." In a move typical of the man, he made a brigadier general move his headquarters to accommodate a recently arrived brigade that would otherwise have had to bivouac in a muddy field. Unlike many of the Army's glittering leaders, his personal appearance—"broad-shouldered, heavy-framed, with a full, brown, tangled beard"—was distinctly plebian. "Had it not been for his military surroundings," said one of his men, "he would have been mistaken for a rough backwoodsman." Soldiers in the VI Corps accepted Sedgwick's strict discipline because he treated them fairly, handled them competently if not brilliantly and did not waste their lives.

The Overland campaign of 1864 began on May 4, when the Army of the Potomac crossed the Rapidan and clashed with the Army of Northern Virginia in the tangled thickets of the Wilderness for two bloody days on May 5 and 6. Posted at the right end of the Union line, the VI Corps' campaign debut was not particularly auspicious. Late in the afternoon of May 6, Confederate Brig. Gen. John Gordon had discovered an open flank and launched a devastating attack, scattering two brigades and shaking the entire corps. Darkness and confusion ended the fighting, and on May 7 both armies rested.

That evening Grant began shifting his army eastward toward the crossroads at Spotsylvania. The VI Corps, at the end of the line, had the longest march and did not close up behind the already-engaged Union V Corps on Brock Road until the next morning. The Confederates had narrowly won the race to Laurel Hill, the terrain dominating the crossroads, and had beaten off a series of poorly coordinated Union attacks on May 8. The VI Corps had been relegated to a supporting role, but by the next morning, Sedgwick was busy moving his men up to relieve the exhausted V Corps units. The Federal position straddled a fork of the Brock Road near the Alsop farm, with an

'THEY COULDN'T HIT AN ELEPHANT AT THIS DISTANCE.'

artillery battery at the angle where the line changed direction.

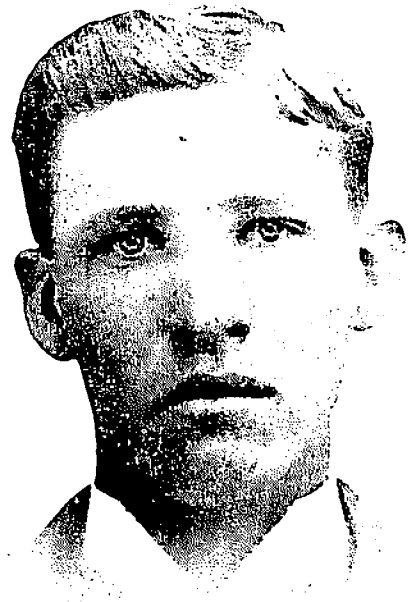
The Confederate defenses, roughly 500 yards away on a low knoll, bristled with artillery and sharpshooters, whose slightly elevated position allowed them to rain bullets down on their opponents. The lines here were manned mostly by South Carolinians belonging to Longstreet's First Corps. One brigade under Colonel John Henagan, part of Kershaw's Division, held the ground east of the road, while Colonel John Bratton, in command of Jenkins' Brigade from Field's Division, held the western side. Colonel Frank Huger's artillery battalion and Brig. Gen. Goode Bryan's Georgia brigade were sandwiched between them, and Brig. Gen. William Wofford's Georgia brigade lay in reserve. Just west of the knoll was the Spindle farm, where gray-clad sharpshooters waited in the charred ruins of the house and perched in the trees around it.

There, in the more open terrain near Spotsylvania, the new Confederate sharpshooter battalions began to demonstrate their effectiveness. Organized that spring, each of the Army of Northern Virginia's infantry brigades now boasted a battalion of 180-200 sharpshooters, every man of which had gone through an intensive marksmanship program. Although most were armed with the highly accurate .577 Enfield, one or two men in each battalion now carried the deadly .451-caliber Whitworth rifle, a state-of-the-art weapon (some with telescopic sights) with a range in excess of a thousand yards. It was these men, crouched on the knoll, whose "dropping fire," said one Union staff officer, "was making sad havoc with anything of ours in sight."

The next man to fall, unfortunately for the Federals, was Uncle John himself. "For a third time the same shrill whistle," said McMahon, "closing with a dull, heavy stroke, interrupted our talk." Just as McMahon started to resume their conversation, General Sedgwick began to slowly collapse, "blood spurting his left cheek under the eye in a steady stream." McMahon tried to catch him, and both men went down. A brigade surgeon, Dr. Emil Ohlenschlager, was nearby and quickly attended to Segdwick, but there was not much he could do but pour water from his canteen on the general's face, where "blood still poured upward in a little fountain." The soldiers, well aware of what was happening, watched silently from their nearby rifle pits. John Sedgwick's spirit fled swiftly, one more among thousands that summer, without disturbing the smile that remained on his face. McMahon, ever the good staffer, quickly sent word to the army's commander, Maj. Gen. George Meade, who appointed Maj. Gen. Horatio Wright to replace Sedgwick. The overall commander, Lt. Gen. Ulysses Grant, initially had a hard time with the unpleasant news, asking twice, "Is he really dead?"

The thoughts of the rank and file, however, quickly turned to revenge. The incensed Yankees sent infantry patrols to find the culprit and killed several Rebel riflemen in retaliation. Eventually they located nine Confederate marksmen in a tree and proceeded to do a little sharpshooting of their own with a rifled artillery piece. "The first shot," chortled a Union soldier, "cut the tree off about 40 feet from the ground & down came Mr. sharp shooter head first."

GRANT HAD A HARD TIME WITH THE UNPLEASANT NEWS, ASKING



Nevertheless, Confederate sharpshooters continued to make the day miserable for the Federals, sending a "ceaseless and deadly fire" toward anyone who exposed himself. This led to a number of minor but intense picket line actions in which the Federals tried to drive away their tormentors. When pressed, the Confederates would simply fall back, often firing from the woods as they did so. These efforts culminated with a couple of brigade-sized fights in late afternoon near the Spindle farm. However, in each case the result was the same: Having taken the position and driven off the gray-clad marksmen, the Federals would find that they were too exposed and far from their main line and would have to withdraw.

That evening, however, there was time for grief. "His Corps weeps,"

Ben Powell was one of several sharpshooters who might have delivered the fatal shot. His battalion commander, Major William Dunlop, gave him credit for the deed, and Powell took responsibility in a 1907 letter. But serious questions remain about the details of his and Dunlop's testimony and his location at the time (Above: Courtesy of Fred Ray; Opposite: *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War*).

wrote one officer in a typical comment. "He was our Uncle John and we shall never see his equal. His loss is irreparable."

Major General John Sedgwick was the highest-ranking officer to die during the Overland campaign in Virginia, and one of the highest-ranking of the war, a circumstance that generated significant controversy about who pulled the trigger for the fateful shot. No one made an immediate claim (it was, after all, in the middle of one of the bloodiest battles of the war), but several men came forward well afterward, while others were the source of speculation.

Before looking at individuals, however, we should first take a closer look at the Confederate sharpshooter units. As mentioned above, each infantry brigade now had a sharpshooter battalion armed primarily with Enfields, and at 500 yards the Union position was well within range of this less-powerful rifle. Most of the sharpshooters functioned not so much as snipers but as light infantrymen whose jobs included picketing, screening and scouting, and who thus stayed under tight tactical control. The Whitworth men, however, were given considerable leeway to roam the battlefield, subject only to general guidance from senior commanders. And while the general practice in Virginia was to leave the Whitworth shooters in the sharpshooter battalions, this seems to have not been the case in Longstreet's corps.

The First Corps had spent the previous fall and winter in the Western theater, participating in the campaigns at Chickamauga and in eastern Tennessee, and had evidently adopted a somewhat different organization based on that of the Army of Tennessee. There, influenced by Maj. Gen. Patrick Cleburne, the Whitworth sharpshooters had been grouped together in a separate company at division level. Thus in the spring of 1863 Cleburne had organized a "Corps of Whitworth Sharpshooters" 46 strong, to be deployed at his personal direction, and Longstreet appears to have formed a similar group of riflemen at corps level that fall. Just how strong this outfit was we don't know, but if it was allocated the same number of rifles as the rest of the Army of Northern Virginia (one or two Whitworths or the equivalent for each of its nine infantry brigades), then Longstreet's corps of sharpshooters may have had as many as 18 of these long-range rifles. Laurel Hill would have been the logical place to employ them, and it would explain the intense fire that the Federals found themselves under. Unfortunately, no roster and only a few references to this shadowy unit have survived, one being the 1901 account of Colonel A.J. McBride, an officer in the 10th Georgia (Bryan's Brigade), who described "a band of sharpshooters composed of the best shots in the [First] corps." McBride credited one of these men, "Kansas Tom" Johnson (who was himself killed a few days later), with shooting Sedgwick. McBride gives no details, but if Johnson was in such a "band," he probably had a Whitworth and would have been in the right area.

TWICE, 'IS HE REALLY DEAD?'

Another man said to have shot Sedgwick was Thomas Burgess of the 15th South Carolina (part of Jenkins' Brigade). In a 1908 article in *Confederate Veteran*, V.M. Fleming gave an accurate description of the terrain at Laurel Hill, where Jenkins' Brigade, commanded by Bratton, would have been on the left. Burgess, according to the account, was a picket who fired at a group of mounted men who rode out in front of the Federal lines, killing one of them. Burgess himself was always reluctant to claim having killed Sedgwick—like many other men in the 19th century, he regarded this method of warfare as something akin to murder. Burgess, whose weapon is unspecified, was certainly in the right place at the right time to have shot Sedgwick. However, the account is secondhand and the victim was a mounted man, which would fit for Brig. Gen. Morris but not Sedgwick, who was on foot.

The writer of the section on the 4th Georgia in Henry W. Thomas' 1903 *History of the Doles-Cook Brigade* gave credit to Sergeant Charles Grace of that regiment: "General Sedgewick [*sic*] was superintending the construction of some redoubts, and, as he was more than half a mile from our picket line, considered himself perfectly safe. Sergeant Grace was a fine shot and was armed with one of the few Whitworth rifles in our army, which made the deed not only practicable but simple." While there is ample evidence of Grace's service as a sharpshooter, his regiment was part of Doles' Brigade, which was with Rodes' Division of the Second Corps. On May 9, the Georgians were at the base of what came to be called the Mule Shoe, separated from Sedgwick's position by roughly a mile of densely wooded terrain. While a shot from a Whitworth might have accurately tra-

Sedgwick was the highest-ranking Union officer to be killed during the Overland, Petersburg and Appomattox campaigns, and one of only six major generals in blue (excluding brevets) to die in combat. He was buried in his hometown of Cornwall Hollow, Conn. (Picture Collection, The Branch Libraries, The New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox, and Tilden Foundations).

versed that distance, it seems unlikely that it could have avoided the trees.

A final claimant was Ben Powell, a sharpshooter with the 12th South Carolina in McGowan's Brigade. Powell's service as a sharpshooter is well attested to, as is the fact that he was one of the unit's two Whitworth marksmen. Powell made his claim personally in a 1907 letter to his wife, and both his fellow sharpshooter Berry Benson (in a 1917 article in *Confederate Veteran*) and the former commander of his sharpshooter battalion, Major William Dunlop, backed him up. In his 1899 book *Lee's Sharpshooters*, Dunlop described the incident:

> We discovered towards the right of the battalion, which brought a four gun battery with its infantry supports placed there for the defense of the salient, barely within reach of our long range rifles. And to these Ben Powell with his "Whitworth" and a few files on the right paid their respects. Presently an officer of rank with his staff approached the salient, and adjusting his field glasses began to take observations of the front. A few shots only had been fired at the group, when the ringing peal of Powell's "Whitworth" was heard some distance to the right; the officer was seen to stagger and fall; and the brilliant career of that gallant and distinguished soldier, Maj. Gen. Sedgwick, commandant of the fifth [VI] Federal army corps, was closed and closed forever.

A minor problem with this narrative is that Sedgwick was not using field glasses at the time; a very major one is that Dunlop's sharpshooter battalion was nowhere near the scene on May 9. Dunlop's battalion was part of McGowan's South Carolina brigade of Wilcox's Division, which was in turn part of the Confederate Third Corps. Its commander, Maj. Gen. Cadmus Wilcox, makes it clear in his report that the division marched past Laurel Hill to Spotsylvania Court House, then took up positions just east of it. This would have put Dunlop, Powell, et al. something over two miles from the site of Sedgwick's death. The sharpshooter battalions were integral to their parent brigades, provided for their security, and were seldom separated, and Wilcox makes no mention of this having been done.

Could Grace or Powell have gone to Laurel Hill on their own? Benson stated that the Whitworth-toting Powell and his comrade Oscar Cheatham "now became independent sharpshooters, to go where they pleased and carry on war at their own sweet will." Laurel Hill was after all the hottest sector on May 9, and Powell could have walked the distance in well under an hour, Grace in half that.

But the Whitworth sharpshooters were not so footloose as Benson makes it sound. It seems very unlikely that these two men would have been shifted all the way to another corps' area absent the kind of dire emergency that befell the Confederates during the heavy fighting on May 12. Thus, while Grace and Powell can't be entirely ruled out as Sedgwick's killer, they are less likely candidates than the men who were actually in the Laurel Hill sector.

It is also worth considering that all these claims were made 35 to 50 years after the fact, many were secondhand and none provide a clear picture of events that can be squared with Lt. Col. McMahon's eyewitness account, which appeared as part of the *Battles and Leaders* series in 1887. It is also quite possible that Sedgwick's shooter failed to survive the war or died soon after, as did "Kansas Tom" Johnson.

Then too, many men like Burgess were reluctant to boast about their exploits as sharpshooters, which went against Victorian attitudes about gallantry, or they may also have feared retribution after the war. Thus, unless new evidence comes to light, the shooter's identity cannot be established with any certainty.

Still, we can make some conclusions and educated guesses about who it might have been. Given the distinctive sound of the round, a Whitworth rifle probably killed Sedgwick (no autopsy seems to have been performed). If so, the shooter would have been in a group of about 75 men in the Army of Northern Virginia equipped with this rare weapon. Unfortunately, no rosters exist for these men, and information about them is mostly anecdotal. Since the Confederate First Corps covered the Laurel Hill area, and Lt. Gen. Longstreet seems to have had a separate corps of Whitworth sharpshooters, it is most likely that one of these men killed Sedgwick. If an ordinary Enfield did the job, then the suspects are the ordinary sharpshooters of Bratton's (Jenkins'), Bryan's or Kershaw's brigades, all of the First Corps.

Southern sharpshooters would continue to snuff out the lives of Union men high and low for the rest of the campaign. One of their last marks was Brig. Gen. Thomas Smyth, who died on the day of Lee's surrender after being mortally wounded at Farmville two days before.

After lying in state until dark on May 9 at Army of the Potomac headquarters in a makeshift bier, John Sedgwick began his journey back to Cornwall Hollow, where he was buried. Mourners included not only his comrades in blue but also men—enemies at that time—who had served with him in the old Army. One was his old friend J.E.B. Stuart, himself destined to die a few days later at Yellow Tavern, who confided to a staffer that he would willingly have shared his blanket and last crust of bread with Sedgwick. CWT

Fred L. Ray, who writes from Asheville, N.C., is the author of the recently released Shock Troops of the Confederacy: The Sharpshooters of the Army of Northern Virginia.