

AFTER ACTION REPORT: BRCWRT FALL TOUR TO COLD HARBOR

— submitted by Maureen Reigh Quinn



Kevin gives the overview for the tour at the Linkup Point, BRCWRT Fall Tour, 2 October, 2004

Promptly at 9:15 AM on Saturday, 2 October, 2004, 20 BRCWRT members arrived at the linkup point on I-95 to begin our Fall Tour of Cold Harbor. Kevin gave a brief overview of the day's stops and points of interest and we headed out on a beautiful, sunny, early fall day.

We learned early on that we were all pretty "caravan challenged", as those in the front would peel off to the destination while those in the back couldn't help but do a bit of sight-seeing, the scenery being what it is around there, and would, of course, miss the turn!

Stops on the tour included Nelson's Bridge, Enon Church (Haw's Shop), Bethesda Church, Beulah Church, the Garthright House and finally, the Cold Harbor battlefield.

During the morning portion, Kevin discussed troop movements and reconnoitering efforts by both sides from Nelson's Bridge to Enon Church. One of the highlights of this portion of the tour was the discussion of the large cavalry battle, 10,000+ cavalry troops, that took place around Haw's Shop, with losses from both sides totaling over 700.

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On to the swamps at Totopotomoy and then to Bethesda Church. Vicious fighting here resulted in casualties of over 800 total – and ravenous mosquitoes only added to the misery. The Union was victorious here, however, which gave Grant the notion that the Confederacy was wavering, beginning its final demise. This set up the action at Cold Harbor.

Beulah Church. Our discussion centered around two notable occurrences. 1) The switcheroo of troop positions, where each side flip-flops into the other's position and 2) The direct/redirect/mis-direct orders that sends (Baldy) Smith to Newcastle Ferry instead of to Cold Harbor, which leaves only cavalry at Cold Harbor – with the Confederates advancing. Though hasty defenses were prepared it was Sheridan who felt it was HIS troops who beat back the Confederates, giving his cavalry another great accomplishment. Well, maybe.

With mid-day upon us, the group stopped at the Garthright House location, where we continued to enjoy the wonderful weather and stopped to eat a picnic lunch. Discussion continued as we reviewed some of the morning's topics: from troop movement to management to morale, wrong assumptions, insufficient information, suffering in the swamps – just the regular topics during our lunchtime tour picnics.

The Cold Harbor battlefield. This battlefield is unique among battlefields, containing many still-visible, still-deep trench lines. Looking over these trenches, we were very aware of the meaning of these positions – and their ominous portent some fifty years hence.

Among the points Kevin discussed: the fact that troops remained in these trenches, under the hot sun, for some 13 days, constantly adding more zig-zag trench lines. He also pointed out the widespread feeling among the ranks that nobody was in charge, the case being that neither Meade nor Grant visited the front during this time, and this resulted in a great lack of understanding of the terrain and positions – not the best way to coordinate troops! Union attacks were never affective, losses for the Union were over 6,000 and for the Confederacy, 1,500.

The group hiked the short loop through the woods where we were able to view many more trenches,

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getting a very realistic feel for the desperate measures taken by forces on both sides. Seeing the size of some of the trenches (some well over 4 feet deep and 20 feet long) and knowing that any utensil available, no matter how small, was used as a digging tool, the group gained a greater appreciation for the ingenuity and creativity of these men – undernourished, under-rested, under-managed and under fire.

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Finishing our brief hike, we assembled one last time at the small Park Service building where we applauded Kevin for another informative, educational and well-planned tour. Kevin bid us farewell and the group departed. So ended another memorable BRCWRT Fall Tour.

Tour Participants

Mary Ahrens, Lyle Loveall, Ken Jones, Mike Shanon, Harlan & Sharon Lenius, Dom Bumbaca, Charlie Balch, Nancy Anwyll, Sandra Cox, Bev Regeimbal, Chris Soester, Janet Greentree, Bob Park, Fred Schmidtman, Bud Porter, Dan Lundeen, Mark Labeda, Keith Young, Maureen Quinn.

