

Match Of Wits: Lee And Grant Face Off At The North Anna River

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Review

MATCH OF WITS

Lee and Grant face off at the North Anna River

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Rhea, Gordon C. *To the North Anna River*. LSU Press, ISBN 807125350

For most who study Civil War military history, Grant's Overland campaign from May 1864 until the end of the War seems an inexorable and inevitable advance from Washington to Appomattox. Grant, called "the butcher" by some because of the devastating casualties sustained by his Army of the Potomac, has the reputation of a "bull-dozer" general who overcame enemies by dogged single-mindedness and overwhelming numbers.

But the campaign was much more complex than that, as author and attorney Gordon C. Rhea teaches us in his new work on the Overland campaign, **To the North Anna River**.

Believing that the 40 days of initial battles between Lee and Grant, from the Rapidan River to the James, was "the most exciting period in the Civil War," Rhea began this series of books with *The Battle of the Wilderness, May 5-6, 1864* (Louisiana State University Press, ISBN 0807118737, \$34.95 hardcover), and progressed through *The Battles for Spotsylvania Court House and the Road to Yellow Tavern, May 7-12, 1864* (Louisiana State University Press, ISBN 0807121363, \$34.95 hardcover) to this book on the North Anna campaign, perhaps the most interesting segment of the campaign.

Through Rhea's outstanding research, duplicating and even surpassing the efforts in his previous books, we learn far more about the high command of both armies than has ever been addressed in one place, from the friction in the command structure of the Army of the Potomac to the near-awe by Grant's officers of Lee's fighting prowess, from Lee's oft-demonstrated ability to seize the initiative and force the offensive to Grant's decision to change his bulldozer tactics and convert the conflict into a match of maneuver. Both sides, of course,

continued to inflict horrendous casualties on the other -- the difference was that Grant's losses could be, and were, replaced.

Rhea's style is at once readable and complex, allowing experienced readers and novices alike to understand the complexity of the two aggressive and able generals, who were beset by various problems including a command structure still mired in the 18th century.

As these two captains of war led their armies through a series of chess-like moves across Spotsylvania and Caroline counties until the forces found themselves staring at one another across the North Anna River, Lee forced Grant to split his army in half to get around the wedge-shaped formation of the Army of Northern Virginia. The writing on the crumbling gray wall continues: Rhea will complete the series with books on Cold Harbor, and the crossing of the James that began the race for Petersburg.

To the North Anna River is an excellent history of one segment of a much longer cam-paign, with impeccable research leading to some new conclusions. Those interested in the road to Appomattox will overlook this excellent series at their own peril -- and loss.

Jerry L. Russell is chairman of Civil War Round Table Associates, which he founded in 1968. A Little Rock political consultant, he has devoted the past 50 years to the study of Civil War history.