

## Mine Run Campaign

**Background:** After the defeat at Gettysburg on July -3, 1863, General Robert E. Lee and his command retreated back to Virginia behind the Rapidan line in Orange County. Union commander, General George Meade was criticized for failing to pursue Lee's army aggressively enough so he planned offensives for fall. The inconclusive Bristoe campaign was his first attempt to engage Lee. Mine Run followed.

**From Historian Phil Audibert:**



The description under the picture: “The only known image of the Mine Run Campaign comes to us from Federal artist Alfred Waud showing what Robertson’s Tavern looked like (today’s Locust Grove) at the time of the Civil War. This view looks to the west from the middle of the Orange Turnpike. Where the tavern is located in the drawing is today’s Locust Grove Town Center at Rt. 611.”<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Audibert, Phil. “Mine Run: Misteps, Mischief and Mayhem, The Campaign that History Forgot.” *Orange Review*, November 14, 2013, B1.

## **“The Campaign that History Forgot”**

“The day after Thanksgiving 150 years ago all hell was breaking loose just north of Locust Grove in eastern Orange County.

“The action centered around one of the few clearings here in the heart of the Wilderness, not far from today’s Zoar Baptist Church, a place called Payne’s Farm. Here a Confederate force, numbering roughly 6,000 men held off not one but two Federal corps, numbering 33,000 men. It was the only open engagement of the Mine Run Campaign, a little-known military expedition in late November 1863 was was snake-bit from the get-go.

“Reluctantly reacting to intense pressure from Washington to hit Robert E. Lee while he was still weak from his defeat at Gettysburg, Union Commander George Meade ordered the crossing of the Rapidan River into rebel territory on Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 26, 1863. The fact that the Federal army was one pontoon short of a span at Jacob’s Ford set the tone for things to come. The farce continued as Federal Commander, William French, got lost not once but twice in the forbidding Wilderness. Meade’s aide de camp, Theodore Lyman was sent to investigate and reported back that French was ‘comfortably drunk’ at the time.

“The next day, Confederates skirmished with Federals at Robertson’s Tavern, today’s Locust Grove, and along the Plank Road near New Hope Church. These Federals had crossed at Germanna and Culpeper Mine Fords Nov. 26. Approaching Robertson’s Tavern, a Union soldier, Thomas F. Galway described the scene in his account ‘The Valiant Hours: An Irishman in the Civil War.’

“On the crest to the left of the road was an old house with a woman at the door in a terrible fright. She hoped there would be no terrible goings on near her house. I told her to make haste to the rear. Just at this a few bullets began to whistle in our midst. Dropping down behind the fence we sent a well-directed fire into the enemy whose skirmishers were advancing towards us...’

“The Mine run Campaign was on.

“Reacting to the sound of gunfire, Confederate Commander, Edward Johnson, known as ‘Old Chubby,’ ran into French’s vastly superior force of Federals near the intersection of today’s Indiantown and Zoar roads. The action started with Federal artillery opening up on a convoy of Confederate ambulances. Johnson, with 5,300 men, including the remnants of the Stonewall Brigade, engaged the Federals in and around Payne’s Farm. They actually held off the 33,000 Federals until they were rescued by darkness.

“Among several interesting and sometimes amusing anecdotes surrounding this battle, comes the story of Captain John C. Johnson. Johnson, who was described as a ‘stout man,’ commanded Company A of the 50th Virginia Infantry Regiment. He issued a challenge, as described by a diarist.

“Thinking that some of his men were not doing as well as they ought [he] walked out to the brow of the hill, lay down on its top broadside to the enemy, and then called to some of his men to come up. If they were afraid, he said, they could use him as a breastwork. Several of them promptly accepted his challenge. They lay down behind him and fired steadily from this position until the fight was over...the gallant captain was not injured.’

“That night, Lee ordered his men to withdraw and dig in on the high ground on the west bank of Mine Run. Those earthworks can be seen to this day. The next morning, the Federals launched an attack on the now empty positions at Payne’s Farm, further compounding the farcical nature of this campaign.

“It turned from farce to tragedy when it started to rain, followed by temperatures plummeting into the single digits. The Federals dug in on the east side of Mine Run, while Union 2nd Corps Commander G.K. Warren bogged down in a nightmare march to flank Lee’s right. At one point, his men mistook the unfinished PF&P Railroad for rebel entrenchments.

“The mercury sank below zero. Pickets froze to death at their posts. Both sides spent Nov. 30 glaring at each other and shivering. Finally Meade, in one of his usual foul tempers, opted to withdraw back across the Rapidan, much to the relief of his men. A full-scale battle on the order of Chancellorsville had been averted, largely due to the weather and Lee’s strong unassailable defensive positions.

“The retreating Federals did not leave graciously, looting and pillaging their way back to Culpeper County. A tannery near where Johnson’s Funeral Home is today was burned to the ground. The library at Ellwood was thrown out into the yard. It was now Lee’s turn to be foul-tempered as he ordered an attack on the now empty Federal positions.

“ ‘Houses were torn down or rendered uninhabitable, furniture and farming implements broken or destroyed, and many families, most of them in humble circumstances, stripped of all they possessed and left without shelter and without food. I have never witnessed on any previous occasion such entire disregard of the usages of civilized warfare and the dictates of humanity,’ commented the Confederate commander.

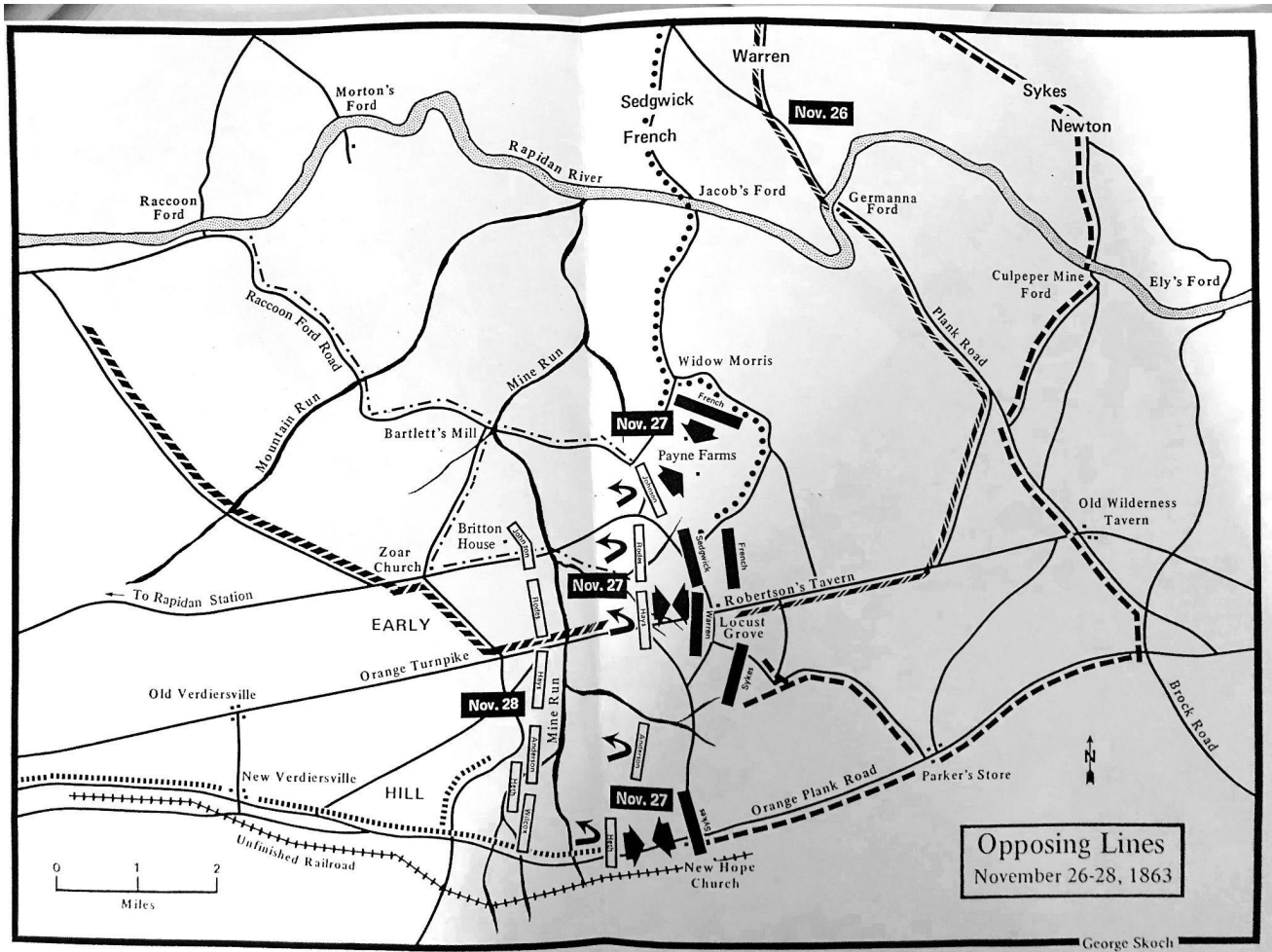
“And so the ill-fated Mine Run Campaign sputtered to a close as both armies went into winter quarters. They would engage each other next in the horrific Battle of the Wilderness, May 5-6, 1864, where the firepower was so intense it actually set the woods ablaze.

“In terms of casualties, Mine Run didn’t come close to the 27,000 killed, wounded or missing (captured prisoner) at Wilderness. Still, you might say the Confederates won at Mine Run with 812 casualties compared to 1,653 total Federal casualties. We should pause and reflect that 98 Confederates and 173 Federals took their last breath on Orange County soil and most are probably buried somewhere in our woods and fields. “<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

# Map of Opposing Lines, November 26-28, 1863



Drawn by George Skoch, the source of the map is unknown. A copy is on file at the Orange County Historical Society.