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Description
National Park Service Ranger Beth Parnicza tours the Chancellorsville Battlefield in Virginia and discusses the military leadership of Confederate General Robert E. Lee, which included General Stonewall Jackson's unorthodox flank attack on the Union Army that helped secure a victory for the South. This story is produced by NBC Learn in partnership with Pearson.

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Transcript

Robert E. Lee and the Battle of Chancellorsville

BETH PARNICZA (National Park Service): You can't help but walk and think about the soldiers who fought here, their sacrifice. Did they know what they signed up for? Were the causes that they were fighting for justified? Was there no other way?

My name is Beth Parnicza and I'm a National Park Service ranger. We're here today on the Chancellorsville battlefield and we're looking at different sites related to Robert E. Lee and his action here at the battle of Chancellorsville.

I realized that I wanted to be a historian in high school but one day I forgot my book, so I reached over and grabbed the nearest book, which happened to be the Civil War textbook, and I started reading it. It changed my life.

Chancellorsville is important because in many ways, it is a turning point of the war. It's also a pivotal point in Robert E. Lee's career and understanding how he operates as a general and as a human being. Robert E. Lee was born in Virginia he grows up as sort of a member of Virginia gentry society. He eventually becomes superintendent at West Point. He swore an oath to serve the United States of America. But when Virginia secedes, he then has a decision to make. He had been offered command of Union forces and he turns that down and he eventually decides to side with the Confederacy in order to protect his home state and protect his family, and he takes command of the Army of Northern Virginia.

Coming into Chancellorsville, he's just come off of the great victory at Fredericksburg, where he essentially takes up a defensive position and waits. Lee decides in a very unconventional way to split his forces and go ahead and defend Spotsylvania County and to fight for it.

If he can win this battle and destroy a large portion of the Union army, he can win the war in one fell swoop. And that's what he's looking to do here.

Here we're at what we refer to as the Lee-Jackson Bivouac where Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson
sat down in the evening of May 1st, 1863 to lay out their plans for the next day of fighting. Robert E. Lee asks Stonewall Jackson what he proposes to do. He proposes to take his men around the Union army to attack that flank. Jackson, taking the bulk of the army with him, is going to be leaving Lee in a pretty vulnerable position, but Lee simply says, “Well, go ahead, then.” To make that kind of a decision, Lee is truly risking his entire army. Splitting your forces in the face of a superior foe goes against all military doctrine.

Their last meeting actually will take place the next morning, on May 2nd, as Jackson is at the head of his troops about to head down the Furnace Road to begin his flank march. It is the last time he saw Jackson alive.

In 1863, this is the end of the line for the Union army. They are literally eating dinner, cooking up their rations when Jackson's attack hits. The Union army here is utterly surprised. You've got Confederates who are just running full bore out of the woods. They are able to push the Union army back about two-and-a-half miles down this way. Jackson turns the table on the Union forces. And at that point, he will halt his columns, allow fresh troops to come up, and that's when Jackson rides out on his reconnaissance and is accidentally shot by his own men.

He rode down this road here and he heard the Union forces cutting down trees. And so he rode back, until he got about right here, which is where his party came under fire. He's shot three times and he's removed from the field to a field hospital where his left arm was amputated and so he will die just a few days later, on May 10th.

The loss of Jackson here is staggering to Lee. He loses a very able subordinate officer. And as he puts it, Jackson has lost his left arm but I've lost my right arm. In losing Jackson, Lee has lost his right-hand man. We're at the Chancellorsville Inn site, the home of the Chancellor family. When Robert E. Lee rides into this clearing, the house, the former Federal headquarters, is on fire, his men let up this spontaneous cheer. That's where you're seeing Robert E. Lee at the absolute height of his triumph. He's beaten two-to-one odds. His men have realized what he's accomplished. They know that they've basically run circles around the Union army twice their size. And Robert E. Lee is a huge part of why they were able to do that.

Lee is very dissatisfied with Chancellorsville. It isn't a victory in northern soil, it's not going to bring about European recognition. It doesn't even bring the war home to northern civilians. Lee has lost twenty-two percent of his men, thirteen thousand men no longer in his army. Lee himself finds it to be a very hollow victory.

On the morning of May 3rd, for the first five hours of the day, you have one man killed, wounded or captured every second for five hours, so about eighteen thousand casualties. You have units that are losing forty percent, fifty percent casualty ratings. That means that you're walking in with your four best friends, two of them are not coming out with you. The more that you walk the fields and you know what happened there, you start to identify with the soldiers a little better, and you start to feel like you can do their stories more justice because you spent more time with them.