

By COL. JOHN RIPLEY:

The Ennobling Actions of Gallant Men

• The author, a Radford native and a Marine colonel, is the commanding officer of the Naval Reserve Officer Training Corps Unit at VMI. The following is the text of a letter he wrote after recently visiting, with VMI cadets, the battleground at Chancellorsville, where from May 1-3, 1863, North and South met in heroic combat.

— EDITOR.

AT A REMOTE road junction in a forgotten corner of a Northern Virginia battlefield, something took place 130 years ago that scarcely anyone reading these words can recall, or perhaps has ever heard of. In our busy lives we no longer think in terms of historical events or the tenuous meaning these once-important events may have in a present context. And yet this event, pathetically hopeless at the outset, had the effect then — as it has now — of ennobling a contingent of Georgians to themselves, but most especially to their countrymen.

On a spring morning — May 2, 1863 — Lieutenant General Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson began his famous flank march around the wing of General Joseph Hooker's army in the Virginia wilderness later to become famous as Chancellorsville. The battle stands today as a classic of a smaller force (Lee's 60,000) overwhelming one more than twice its size (Hooker's 130,000), and remains in the curriculum today at nearly all of the world's war colleges. It would be Jackson's last march, Hooker's last battle in command, and Lee's last major victory — as well as the last he would see of his indispensable "right arm," Stonewall Jackson.



Ripley



But the event we should remember is on a far smaller scale than this great battle. It took place in a now beautifully wooded glen known as "Catharine Furnace." One could hardly imagine anything unpleasant happening in such beauty. And yet. . .

'Hold This Ground'

Leaving in early morning, Jackson's column had marched less than an hour when spotted by Federal troops. Because the road there turned south, the Federals assumed Lee was retreating, and so they attacked — an appropriate move. But with no intention of stopping despite this very serious and unexpected turn of events, Jackson stripped a regiment from his leading brigade — telling its commander, "Colonel, you will hold this ground, sir, while the army passes." Very simple instructions — clearly given, quickly understood, and unhesitatingly obeyed. Colonel Emory Best moved his 23rd Georgia

Regiment immediately into line. Jackson and his army continued on.

To a Man

What took place during the rest of the day while Jackson's columns passed unmolested compares to the Spartans at Thermopylae and the Texans at the Alamo. In desperate, brutal fighting against a force perhaps 30 times larger than his own, Colonel Best held. He watched as his 23rd Georgia performed its hopeless rearguard throughout the day — men falling all around him.

At day's end the Georgians, their duty done, were to a man killed, severely wounded, or captured. Jackson's attack at 5 p.m. would achieve fame as the greatest tactical surprise yielding the greatest strategic results of the war. It was all made possible, however, by the extraordinary gallantry of these few simple Georgia men: men who put duty and self-sacrifice above their very lives, men who knew beyond

question that their last act in life would be this one of loyalty to their state and nation, and to one another.

No monument to Colonel Emory Best and his Georgians exists at this remote spot. Perhaps no monument to those gallant men exists anywhere except in the hearts of their loved ones.

Nevertheless we should go to this shaded grove where arching trees contain the beauty of the forest — its peaceable sounds, its vibrant life; where our ancestors gave their last full measure — where they fought and died desperately in a forlorn spot: pleasant, remote, and rarely visited. We should place flowers where their lives drained from them entering the history — and legend — of a nation. We should go to praise, to weep, to bond with simple men who were asked to do the impossible — and who by their efforts honored us all.

They gave their blood to the soil of Virginia, their lives for a cause they believed in, and their hearts to those they again would never see.