



Signal Knob



“...the whole view presented a magnificent natural picture.”

Geography

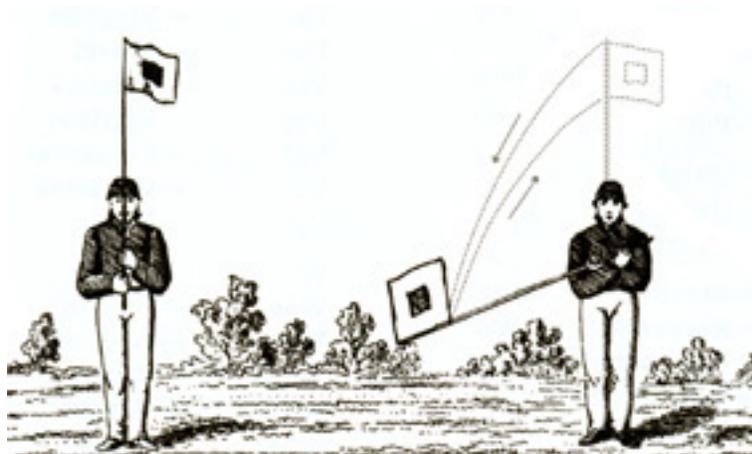
Located 1500 feet above the Valley floor, marking the northern end of the Massanutten Mountain Range, is Signal Knob. Marked today by a modern radio tower, the peak provides a breathtaking view of the entire Lower Shenandoah Valley. The Massanutten Mountain range extends southwest through the Shenandoah Valley from Strasburg

to Harrisonburg for some 50 miles. Bending around the northern base of Massanutten is the North Fork of the Shenandoah River. One of its tributaries is Cedar Creek, which joins with the Shenandoah at the base of the mountain.

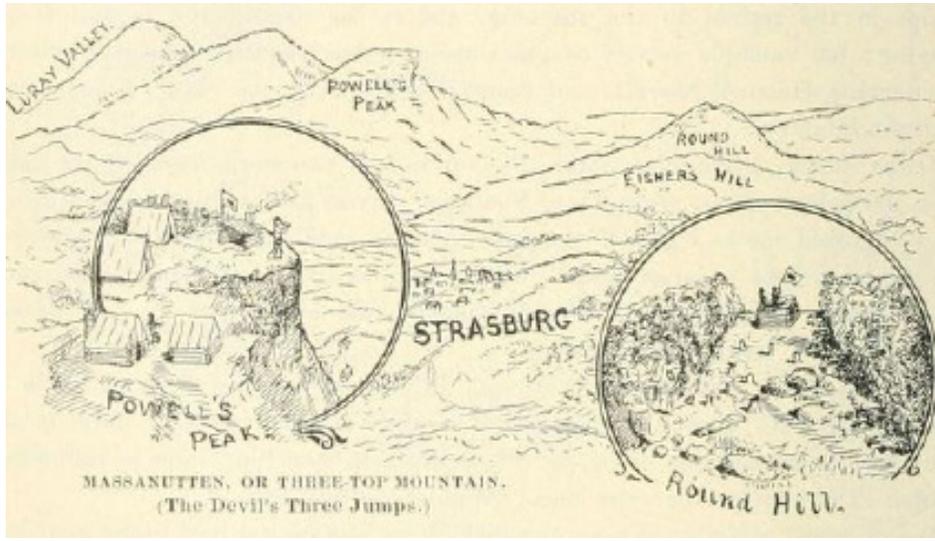
Summer 1864

This peak was crucial to the Confederate success in the Valley during the 1864 Valley campaign. Located at this knob throughout the war was a Confederate Signal Station that observed movements and sent messages via signaling. When Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan arrived in the Valley with 40,000 Union soldiers in the late summer 1864, he saw the Confederate signal corps at Signal Knob. Concerned all his movements would be observed, he ordered a detachment of West Virginians to

attack the knob on August 14th and 15th. After numerous failed attempts, the West Virginians could not dislodge the Confederate lookout, guarded by portions of the 61st Georgia. Jesse Strum of the 14th West Virginia recalled how strenuous this was, *“As we descended the mountain it was so steep in places that we had to hand the wounded from one set of men down to another. . . We crossed the river and the men drank water and vomited and drank more and did the same thing over.”*



Signal Corps flags, NPS



Sketch from The Signal Corps, U.S.A. in the War of Rebellion, J. Willard Brown

Throughout the fall of 1864 the Confederate Signal Corps witnessed Sheridan and Confederate Lt. Gen. Jubal Early duel each other from Winchester to Fisher's Hill, and beyond. However, despite the intelligence provided by these men, it was not enough to stop the defeat of Early's army. By the middle of October 1864, Sheridan's massive army, now numbering 32,000 men, was encamped on the banks of Cedar Creek. Early and his Army of the Valley, consisting of 14,000 men, appeared to be demoralized and beaten by Sheridan's forces. With all the odds against him, Early was still being urged by General Robert E. Lee to attack Sheridan's strong position.

Prelude to Cedar Creek

On October 17th, 1864, Confederate officers decided to take the initiative and figure out the best way to attack Union forces at Cedar Creek. To do this, they utilized the advantages provided by Signal Knob. Generals John B. Gordon and Clement Evans were accompanied by topographical engineer Jedediah Hotchkiss. After the strenuous hike that took the majority of the day, they reached the summit and the Confederate signal station.

Evans wrote home to his wife describing this trek, *"It was so steep that I had to travel on all fours, pulling along by the rocks and bushes. . . My strength was nearly exhausted when I reached the top."* The view these men had was extraordinary. On this clear, crisp, fall day, they not only saw Sheridan's army around Cedar Creek, but could easily pick out specific units and all of their positions towards Belle Grove.

"...easy range of our vision."



Gen. Gordon and Jedediah Hotchkiss at Signal Knob on October 17th. Sketch by James Taylor, courtesy Western Reserve Historical Society.

Maj. Gen. John B. Gordon described the scene, *"The abruptly curved and precipitous highlands bordering Cedar Creek, on which the army of Sheridan was strongly posted; the historic Shenandoah, into which Cedar Creek emptied at the foot of the towering peak on which we stood. . . the entire Union army - all seemed but a stone's throw away from us. . . Not only the general outline of Sheridan's breastworks, but every parapet where his heavy guns were mounted, and every piece of artillery and supporting lines of troops, were in easy range of our vision."*

The Battle Plan

With this sight, Gordon conceived a plan of attack. Gordon reasoned that if Confederate forces could get around the Union left at the base of Massanutten Mountain and launch a surprise attack, the Union line would crumble. Gordon pitched the plan to Early later that evening and the Confederate commander approved. On the night of October 18th,

the Confederates left Strasburg and marched silently towards their starting position. When the attack began on the morning of October 19th, 1864, Gordon's plan worked brilliantly. By 10:30 the Union army was routed north of Middletown. This plan would not have been possible if not for the strategic significance of Signal Knob.