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The Battle of Williamsburg:
Premonition of Greatness
The Battle of Williamsburg and Six Generals Who Fought There

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On a rainy and muddy field, on May 5, 1862, in Southeastern Virginia a vicious little American Civil War battle was fought. Among the numerous participants who fought at this battle were six men destined for greater things and a machine destined for the warehouse, a forgotten precursor of a weapon that would reshape the face of war nearly sixty years later. The Battle of Williamsburg was the watershed event in the Civil War career of Confederates James Longstreet, Daniel H. Hill and Jubal Early and Unionists Philip Kearny, Joseph Hooker and Winfield Scott Hancock and the Agor "Coffee Mill" machine gun. In studying the Battle of Williamsburg the qualities that these men displayed there were characteristic to their personalities. By studying their actions under fire in that battle it would be easier to understand their responses to similar occasions later in the war. The Agor "Coffee Mill" machine gun at Williamsburg proved an effective weapon, but could not live up to its inventors' promises, as such it was shelved soon thereafter by a reactionary Ordnance Department. In this manner the Battle of Williamsburg was far more important than the nearly 4,000 casualties who fell there or the minor gains both sides gained in this large scale skirmish.

The Battle of Williamsburg, although the first clash between the Union Army of the Potomac and the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, was not the very first battle in the Eastern Theater. To set the scene therefore some noticeable books, including Bruce Catton's Mr. Lincoln's Army, The Time-Life's Forward to Richmond from its Civil War Series and Stephen W. Sears' To the Gates of Richmond, were used. In describing the pasts of the primary characters many varieties of books were used. In the case of Joseph Hooker, for example, only one biography, Walter Herbert's Fighting Joe Hooker, was informative enough. The remainder of the information came from Ernest B. Ferguson's Chancellorsville, 1863 among other previously mentioned books. After a brief description of four of the officers' pasts and the events leading to McClellan's departure to the Peninsula, from both

sides of the combat lines, the paper introduced the remaining two generals, Daniel Hill and Winfield S. Hancock, and the Agor machine gun and their minor roles in the April 1862 siege of Yorktown, Virginia. The history of the Agor machine gun was described in Robert V. Bruce's Lincoln and the Tools of War, while its combat career was gleaned from regimental histories and a collection of newspapers of the time.

All the study of the men and machine come to realization in the battle itself. In describing the battle the characteristics of their pasts and futures become observable. Hooker's and Early's impetuousity, Kearny's courage and Longstreet's and Hancock's dependability were visible to those who fought for and against them. Using regimental histories and personal accounts, such as New Hampshire in the Great Rebellion 1861-1865(2 N.H.), History of the 1st Massachusetts Infantry and Gone for a Soldier(5 N.J.) the paper showed the feelings of the men in battle, for most their first, and the effect of these six officers had on their ability to fight in adverse conditions. In respect to the actual movements of regiments and the various commanders the Official Records of the War of Rebellion and Battles and Leaders of the Civil War were used to put these scattered accounts in their correct historical perspective. This would put the chaotic and confused Battle of Williamsburg in an understandable context.

After the description of the battle and its immediate results, discussion would center on the immediate futures of all the major participants, the advancements to higher commands and, for the machine gun, demotion and retirement. The accounts in biographies and other aforementioned works would show the characteristics displayed at other battles and answer questions as to why these men acted at other battles in a similar way as at Williamsburg. In this way the Battle of Williamsburg would be viewed as a proving ground for the Eastern Civil War armies and their respective generals.