

This Day in History... March 6, 1831

Birth of Philip Sheridan

General Philip Henry Sheridan was born on March 6, 1831 in Albany, New York.

Born the son of Irish immigrants, Sheridan was a relatively short man who stood 5'5" tall, earning him the nickname "Little Phil." He worked as a clerk and bookkeeper before his West Point appointment. After graduating 34th in a class of 52 cadets, Sheridan was stationed in Texas, California, and the Oregon Territory.

Sheridan was not called away from his assignment in Oregon until the fall of 1861, and then only to serve as a staff officer in St. Louis. Sheridan's first Civil War battle was at Pea Ridge in January 1862. That May, he was appointed colonel of the 2nd Michigan Cavalry.



Issued for the 100th anniversary of the Battle of the Wilderness.

A month later, Sheridan's men were unable to navigate through dense forests in the Battle of the Wilderness to prevent the Confederates from advancing. This failure allowed the Confederates to capture and control the vital crossroads of Spotsylvania Courthouse before the Union infantry could arrive.

Grant laid siege to Petersburg late in the summer of 1864. To distract him and harass Washington, DC, Jubal A. Early's forces began attacking Union troops and raiding Pennsylvania villages. Sheridan was sent to the Shenandoah Valley with a dual mission – defeat Early while destroying infrastructure and plundering the region's abundant agriculture. Grant specifically ordered Sheridan to destroy railroads and crops and to make it impossible to replant because "If the war is to last another year, we want the Shenandoah Valley to remain a barren waste." In what residents



Stamp from the National Parks issue

called "The Burning," Sheridan's troops defeated Early and destroyed nearly all food supplies along 400 miles of the fertile Shenandoah Valley, sparing only what belonged to widows, single women, and orphanages.

Sheridan then turned toward Petersburg and began his pursuit of Robert E. Lee in the Appomattox Campaign. On April 1, 1865, he forced Lee from Petersburg by cutting off his support line at Five Forks. Five days later, he captured one fifth of Lee's dwindling army at the Battle of Sayler's Creek. On April 9, Sheridan blocked Lee's escape following the Battle of Appomattox Courthouse and forced his surrender.

After the Civil War, Sheridan took part in Reconstruction, serving various posts in Texas and Louisiana. As president, Grant sent Sheridan to serve in the west during the Indian Wars and overseas to report on the Franco-Prussian War. He also dedicated much of his later life to the establishment and protection of Yellowstone National Park.

Shortly before his death, Sheridan was promoted to general of the Army of the United States, which is equal to that of a five-star general. He died on August 5, 1888.



Army and Navy stamp honoring William T. Sherman, Ulysses S. Grant, and Philip Sheridan

Within six months of service, Sheridan rose from captain to major general. Sheridan's leadership at the Battle of Booneville in July 1862 impressed his superior officers, who recommended his promotion to brigadier general. At the Battle of Stones River, his defensive strategy held the Confederates at bay until they ran out of ammunition and withdrew, giving the Union army time to rally. In November 1863, Sheridan led his men as they broke through Confederate lines at the Battle of Chattanooga and forced their retreat.

Once Ulysses S. Grant was promoted general-in-chief of the Union armies, he ordered Sheridan to the Eastern Theater. With the Overland Campaign about to begin, Sheridan was given command of the Army of the Potomac's Cavalry Corps in April 1864.



Stamp pictures an 1885 painting by French artist Paul Dominique Philippoteaux.

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