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Gettysburg Magazine, Number 57, July 2017, pp. 29-45 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/get.2017.0012>



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"It Made the Federal Cavalry"

The Emergence of the Union Cavalry during the Gettysburg Campaign

CHARLES W. MORRISON

By the summer of 1863, the Union cavalry of the Army of the Potomac was coming of age in its fight to reach combat parity with the Confederate cavalry of J. E. B. Stuart. Due to the early belief in a short war, Union organizers such as Simon Cameron and Winfield Scott did not plan for large scale use of cavalry due to the costs and time constraints associated with outfitting and training volunteer cavalry units. There was also the issue of tactics. Most military professionals in the United States prior to 1861 had studied Napoleonic tactics that called for the grand cavalry charges made successful during the Napoleonic Wars of the early 19th century. The broken terrain of North America, as well as improved accuracy of infantry weapons, had made such charges obsolete for the American Civil War.

While the North broke their cavalry regiments into small detachments for escort and picket duty, the Confederacy, with a ready population of horse- and firearm-enthusiasts, realized early on that the cavalry could and would have a decisive outcome in this modern war. The Confederacy massed its cavalry into division-size units and attached battery-size elements of horse artillery to give these forces more firepower. The end result was almost total domination on the battlefield during the first two years of the war. The Confederates almost always outnumbered and outfought their Union counterparts when cavalry met cavalry. Union forces also seemed unable to thwart Confederate raids behind enemy lines meant to disrupt Union logistics and gain valuable intelligence for Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia. The joke prevalent among

most Union infantrymen early in the war was "Whoever saw a dead Cavalryman?"¹

The cavalry aspects of the Gettysburg Campaign give any student of the Civil War an excellent opportunity to examine several significant developments in the fighting abilities, tactics, and leaders of the Union Cavalry. It also saw the first significant loss of confidence in the vaunted Confederate Cavalry. This paper will examine three significant cavalry events within the Gettysburg Campaign in order to show the reader the Union Cavalry's development as an outstanding fighting force and the first inklings of self-doubt within the Confederate high command with regards to its cavalry arm of the service. The engagements at Brandy Station and Upperville saw the innovation of new tactics as well as a resistance on the part of Stuart to accept and respond to this new threat. More importantly, Union cavalrymen gained the self-confidence in their own abilities during these engagements. Union Gen. John Buford's defense of key terrain on July 1 was significant for it showed another versatile use of cavalry and affected the outcome of the entire campaign, a first for the Union Cavalry. The Confederacy's lack of intelligence about Buford was also key on this day due in large part to Stuart's less than stellar raid into Hanover. Though Lee never actually blamed Stuart for the loss at Gettysburg, Lee did admit that better intelligence could have been available had more Confederate cavalry been with him during the first two days of the engagement.

¹ Edward G. Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg: A Tactical Study of Operations during the Civil War's Pivotal Campaign* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1993), 44–45.

To clearly understand the two opposing forces, one must study the task organization and leadership of the Confederate and Union forces in mid-June of 1863. For the Union Cavalry, major changes had taken place in organization and leadership when Joseph Hooker assumed command of the Army of the Potomac in January of 1863. In Hooker's General Orders No. 6, dated February, 5, 1863, he officially formed an Army of the Potomac Cavalry Corps under one unified commander who answered directly to the Army commander.² This was one of the most important developments for the Union cavalry. Up until this time, the North had still assigned various cavalry detachments, usually in squadron and regiment size throughout the entire army as escorts and screen elements for the grand divisions of George B. McClellan's design. These units had never been large enough to compete with the already formed Confederate cavalry brigades and divisions. Now all Army of the Potomac cavalry units would be called in to form three divisions of cavalry.

By June of 1863, Alfred Pleasonton had been placed in official charge of the new Cavalry Corps, having replaced the ailing George Stoneman just weeks before.³ Pleasonton was a graduate of the 1844 West Point class and a career army officer. Having been a captain in the regular cavalry at the beginning of the war, Pleasonton served as a regimental, brigade, and division-level commander prior to his appointment to head the cavalry corps. He seemed the logical choice to many observers, including Joe Hooker, in June of 1863. He had, however, several traits that made him often disliked and distrusted by those assigned to serve under him.⁴

Pleasonton was a very ambitious officer and let little stand in the way of his progress through the ranks. The cavalry commander became a close friend with one of his former subordinates, Republican Congressman Franklin Farnsworth, who also happened to be a strong supporter and friend of President Lincoln. In addition to strong political ties, Pleasonton was often guilty of self-promotion, even if it was at the expense of those under his command. Often writing for or surrounding him-

self with newspaper reporters, Pleasonton utilized the press to advance his own career and downplay the successes of his fellow officers and subordinates. A classic example of this type of behavior was his own efforts to exploit his defeat of a small Confederate brigade on the defeated Union right flank at the Battle of Chancellorsville. Despite the evidence, Pleasonton convinced Joe Hooker and several others that he had single handedly blocked Stonewall Jackson's entire corps from cutting off the Union Army's only line of retreat. At the same time, Pleasonton added his voice to the many others by decrying his superior, George Stoneman, on his absence during the battle while conducting a raid ordered by the army commander. Pleasonton was also not known for that virtue which distinguished many leaders of the Civil War. He was not much of a combat leader. There are very few accounts of Pleasonton actually leading troops into battle or exposing himself to fire in order to rally his troopers. This may explain the lack of combat aggressiveness he often showed as a commander as well. Both of the aforementioned traits led many of his subordinates to believe that this was a leader who was basing decisions not on sound tactical doctrine and concern for his troops but rather how large would the headline read the next day once his decision had been executed.⁵

Pleasonton however, did have a sound mind when it came to the employment of the cavalry and how it could be used effectively in the American Civil War. This is most evident in a memorandum he composed to the Union Army leadership in December of 1862. In this recommended course of action, Pleasonton suggested that the cavalry be combined into a corps under one commander. One corps was to be comprised of three divisions with subordinate brigades of cavalry supported by eight batteries of horse artillery. Though based entirely off the successful Confederate cavalry task organization, Pleasonton acknowledged this fact and argued that the Union cavalry could be even more effective than the Confederates if given the proper organization and leadership.⁶ Pleasonton was almost certainly not the only cavalry officer with this

² *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, DC: United States Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), 25.2:120.

³ OR, 25.2:513; Stephen Z. Starr, *The Union Cavalry in the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), I, 367-68.

⁴ Starr, *The Union Cavalry*, 313.

⁵ Paul Fatout, ed., *Letters of a Civil War Surgeon* (Lafayette, IN: Purdue Research Foundation, 1961), 152; Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *A Cycle of Adams Letters, 1861-1865* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1920), II, 8.

⁶ OR, 21:815.



Maj. Gen. Alfred Pleasonton. National Archives and Records Administration.

idea in late 1862, but it does show some true candor and adaptability on his part by placing these ideas in official correspondence to his superiors. It also recognized Pleasonton's ability to comprehend the value of task organization to overall employment of cavalry on a changing battlefield.

Pleasonton's new command consisted of three cavalry divisions and one horse artillery division. The First and Second Cavalry Divisions consisted of three brigades each while the Third Division consisted of two brigades. The horse artillery division included two brigades with a total of nine batteries. These batteries could be assigned to each division depending on the mission or situation but were under the overall control of Pleasonton for employment.⁷

To begin the Gettysburg Campaign, Pleasonton had two veteran regular army dragoons, John Buford and David M. Gregg, that commanded two

of his divisions and would offset his lack of combat aggressiveness. Born in Kentucky and educated at West Point, Buford was the more experienced of the two. Buford had seen extensive duty against plains Indians in the 1850s with the 1st U.S. Dragoons and had also served as John Pope's chief of cavalry during the Second Manassas Campaign. With hindsight, much of Buford's intelligence during this campaign was correct and had Pope used it, the outcome of that campaign might have been much different. Perhaps Buford's greatest strength however, was his ability to stress and train his troops in the art of fighting as a dragoon. To Buford, depending on the terrain, enemy and mission, it was just as important for a soldier to fight equally well be they mounted or dismounted.⁸ This training and eye for good terrain would serve Buford well in the coming campaign.

David M. Gregg was also a West Pointer who hailed from Pennsylvania. He had won the respect of several superiors commanding on the regimental and brigade level before assuming command from the wounded George Bayard. Unlike Pleasonton, Gregg shunned newspaper coverage and like Buford, did not cultivate relationships with reporters. Men who served under him considered him to be most calm and cool under fire. He was a commander who made decisions based on sound tactical judgement and his men respected that.⁹

The other two division commanders who would command at different times during the campaign were not leaders of the same caliber as Buford and Gregg. Col. Alfred Duffié and Brig. Gen. Judson Kilpatrick both had a fondness for reckless European-style cavalry charges. Duffié, a twenty-eight year old Frenchman with much European combat experience could not seem to adapt to the terrain and differences of combat in North America. His inability to deal with the American citizen soldier also made him a very unpopular commander. Pleasonton did not care for foreign officers and through Duffié's own mistakes, Duffié would soon be relieved and replaced as the Gettysburg Campaign progressed.¹⁰

⁸ Longacre, *Cavalry*, 49; Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Blue* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 52–53.

⁹ Warner, *Blue*, 187–88; Longacre, *Cavalry*, 50.

¹⁰ Longacre, *Cavalry*; Warner, *Blue*, 131–32.

Though not extremely important to this study is the appointment in late June 1863 of Judson Kilpatrick to command of the Third Division. A graduate of the 1861 class of West Point, Kilpatrick had risen from captain to colonel in just two short years. By all accounts an extremely brave and gallant leader in combat, his knack for ill-advised mounted charges earned him the nickname “Kil-Cavalry” by some of his troops. More than once during the Gettysburg campaign, as brigade commander, Kilpatrick’s ill-advised charges would cost the lives of many Union troopers.¹¹

By the summer of 1863, Confederate Maj. Gen. James Ewell Brown Stuart had commanded the Army of Northern Virginia’s cavalry division since its inception. Formed in July of 1862, Stuart had been able to dominate his opponents the first two years of the conflict due to the Confederate task organization, which had called for the formation of brigade strength cavalry units since the beginning of the war.¹² Stuart, a native of Virginia, graduated from West Point in 1854 and served subsequent assignments on the plains of the frontier United States as a Regular Army lieutenant of cavalry. Stuart was involved in everything from the “Bloody Kansas” disputes to the Indian Wars of the 1850s. While home on leave in 1859, Stuart participated in the capture of John Brown under the command of



Col. Alfred N. Duffié. Library of Congress.

then Col. Robert E. Lee. Wounded twice in his short career, it was a veteran cavalry captain who was given a regiment of Confederate Cavalry to command in May of 1861. This twenty-eight-year old colonel would soon make a name for himself with daring raids and crucial intelligence reporting that would become vital to eastern theater Confederate battlefield successes in 1861 and 1862.¹³

Stuart was able to understand early in the war that cavalry would be the major player in reconnaissance gathering and screening. Even though he had

been taught Napoleonic tactics at West Point, Stuart knew the days of the massed cavalry charge against infantry were over. Cavalry’s main mission, in Stuart’s eyes, was to find out the commander’s critical information requirements as well as keeping the enemy’s commander blind as to the real intentions of the army he was protecting.¹⁴ Stuart’s raids brought back valuable intelligence that enabled Lee to gain a valuable upper hand on his Union foes more than once. Stuart’s ride around the Army of the Potomac during the Seven Days had pinpointed the vulnerability of the isolated Union right flank. His Catlett’s Station raid in August of 1862 enabled Lee to know the precise strength of John Pope’s army and convinced him to try and defeat this army at Second Manassas.¹⁵ However, these raids made huge headlines not for the intelligence they produced, but for

¹¹ Starr, *Cavalry*, 417.

¹² Emory M. Thomas, *Bold Dragoon: The Life of J.E.B. Stuart* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999), 31–32.

¹³ Thomas, *Bold Dragoon*, 33–69.

¹⁴ Thomas, *Bold Dragoon*, 74.

¹⁵ *OR*, 22.3:940–42.

the daring exploits and personal aura created by the general who led them. Stuart became enamored with the fame and adulation he received during the first two years of the war. The one fear that Stuart had above all others was failure. When he did fail, he never could admit it. One of his most trusted staff officers, Henry McClellan, stated that Stuart had only one fault: He could never admit that he “had been worsted in an engagement.”¹⁶

Stuart, as evident by his raids, preferred to fight mounted and paid little attention to

arming his men properly for dismounted fighting. He emphasized the saber and close quarter combat skills, which emulated the light cavalry of Napoleonic Europe. This attitude would create cavalry within the Confederate ranks who specialized as either mounted infantry or light cavalry. None became adept at both types of fighting.¹⁷ Unfortunately for Stuart, the Gettysburg Campaign would prove to be a string of setbacks for his vaunted Confederate cavaliers as the Federal cavalry began to become proficient at mounted and dismounted warfare.

Stuart’s normal task organization within his division consisted of three brigades totaling about 6,000 effectives.¹⁸ Stuart’s three brigade commanders—Wade Hampton, Fitzhugh Lee and Rooney Lee—were all trusted and handpicked by Stuart when forming his first division of cavalry



Maj. Gen. James Ewell Brown Stuart. National Archives and Records Administration.

and had served him through several of his previous successful raids and campaigns. The senior brigade commander was a South Carolina planter, Wade Hampton. Hampton, reputed to be the largest slaveholder in the South, had arrived in Richmond in 1861 at the head of “Hampton’s Legion,” a unit comprised of infantry, cavalry, and artillery, all outfitted at Hampton’s own expense. After participating in First Manassas and the Seven Days Campaign as a brigadier, Hampton accepted a brigade command under Stuart while

recovering from wounds received during the Seven Days.¹⁹ Hampton and Stuart developed a tense but workable relationship. Hampton, with no military training, distrusted the West Point educated Stuart and his Virginia roots, with Hampton being the only non-Virginian among his peers in the division and much older than Stuart and the other brigadiers. Thus, Hampton, though he always performed well, often felt shunned and Stuart did little to make him feel otherwise when selecting brigades for high profile raids.²⁰

Stuart had a much closer relationship to the cousin Lees, Rooney, and Fitzhugh. Fitzhugh “Fitz” Lee was a nephew of Robert E. Lee and fellow West Point classmate of Stuart. Though Lee was a solid tactician and commander, he lacked strategic vision but still remained one of Stuart’s most trusted

¹⁶ Thomas, *Bold Dragoon*, 256–57.

¹⁷ Longacre, *Cavalry*, 34–35.

¹⁸ *OR*, 25.2:823.

¹⁹ Ezra J. Warner, *Generals in Gray* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 122–23; Longacre, *Cavalry*, 27–28.

²⁰ Thomas, *Bold Dragoon*, 139, 201–02.



Maj. Gen. Wade Hampton. National Archives and Records Administration.

subordinates. Unfortunately for Stuart, Lee would not be available during much of the coming campaign due to inflammatory rheumatism that surfaced in May of 1863.²¹ In Fitz Lee's place would be Col. Thomas T. Munford, a graduate of the Virginia Military Institute and native of the Old Dominion. Munford had served as a commander of mounted infantry under Stonewall Jackson in his Valley Campaign and had served reliably under Stuart since the Peninsula Campaign. His past service had proved him a leader on the regimental level, this would be his first test in brigade command.²²

Rooney Lee, Stuart's third brigade commander, was the second son of Gen. Robert E. Lee. Unlike his cousin and father, Rooney had attended Harvard where he had excelled at athletics. Upon graduating, he served two years as a dragoon on the frontier until taking up farming back in his native Virginia. Lee had proven he had strong tactical skills as a brigadier and was dependable in combat. He had further distinguished himself under both

²¹ Longacre, *Cavalry*, 28; Warner, *Gray*, 178.

²² Longacre, *Cavalry*, 28–29.



Brig. Gen. Fitzhugh Lee. National Archives and Records Administration.

Stuart and Hampton during raids conducted near the end of 1862.²³

To augment Stuart for the coming campaign, Lee had ordered that four more brigades of cavalry operating in the eastern theater be placed with the Army of Northern Virginia. Joe Hooker's reorganization of the Federal cavalry had greatly increased the odds against the Confederate troopers and had been a cause for concern in the Confederate high command. The combined strength of Stuart's new cavalry division would now reach close to 10,000 effectives.²⁴ The downside to this rise in strength was that Stuart did not hold any of the commanders of the four brigades in very high regard. One in fact, Gen. Beverly H. Robertson, had once commanded under Stuart and not met expectations. Robertson was seen as an excellent organizer and trainer of troops but slow to act when faced with tough decisions in combat. Stuart had also served with Robertson in the Regular Army and may have harbored ill feelings towards Robertson for courting his wife in their regular army days. Since his relief

²³ Longacre, *Cavalry*, 29; Warner, *Gray*, 184.

²⁴ OR, 25.2:782–83, 788–89.

from commanding what was now Rooney Lee's Brigade, Robertson had been detailed to assist in the defense of North Carolina until called up by Lee to assist with the invasion of the North.²⁵

The other three brigades would all be drawn from the Shenandoah Valley in Virginia. All of these units were more mounted infantry than the light cavalry practiced by Stuart and his troopers.

Brig. Gen. William "Grumble"

Jones who commanded the "Laurel Brigade" was an 1848 West Point graduate and much more suited to independent command because of his inability to cooperate with others.²⁶

Two pre-war attorneys commanded the remaining brigades. Brig. Gens. Albert Jenkins and John Imboden did not rank high in respect from Stuart or Lee because of the lax discipline and unreliability of their commands. Much to Stuart's relief, Imboden would serve as an independent command throughout the campaign and Jenkins would command the vanguard of Ewell's Corps as they crossed into Maryland.²⁷

The Confederate Cavalry assigned to the Army of Northern Virginia now consisted of six brigades of cavalry belonging to Stuart's division and one cavalry brigade listed as an independent command under John Imboden. Five batteries of horse artillery boasting four cannons each were also at Stuart's disposal to employ as needed.²⁸ As Stuart gathered



Brig. Gen. W. H. F. "Rooney" Lee. Library of Congress.

his new forces, he could not resist the temptation to give a grand review near his new headquarters at Brandy Station. The Union Cavalry had orders of its own to find Stuart and expose the Confederate Army's intentions. The end result on June 9, 1863, would be the largest cavalry engagement ever fought in North America.

Reports of massed Confederate cavalry in Culpepper County, Virginia began to worry Joseph

Hooker in early June of 1863. There were strong debates among his staff and subordinates as to the true intentions of this force that Robert E. Lee had so recently reinforced. Stuart's large cavalry force could be used for an independent raid north or as a screening force for large amounts of infantry moving west of the Blue Ridge along a route to invade the north. Hooker ordered Pleasonton to take his cavalry corps across the Rappahannock River into Culpepper County and disperse the Confederate Cavalry if practical.²⁹ An implied task for Pleasonton in this order was to determine the true intentions of the enemy cavalry force.

Despite doubts as to the validity of reports that placed the Confederate strength at 20,000, Hooker assigned the two veteran brigades of Brig. Gens. Adlebert Ames and David Russell to Pleasonton to reinforce him on this important mission.³⁰ Pleasonton decided to divide his force into two commands under his most veteran division commanders. John Buford would command his First Division and the

²⁵ Warner, *Gray*, 259–60; Thomas, *Bold Dragoon*, 91–92; Longacre, *Cavalry*, 31.

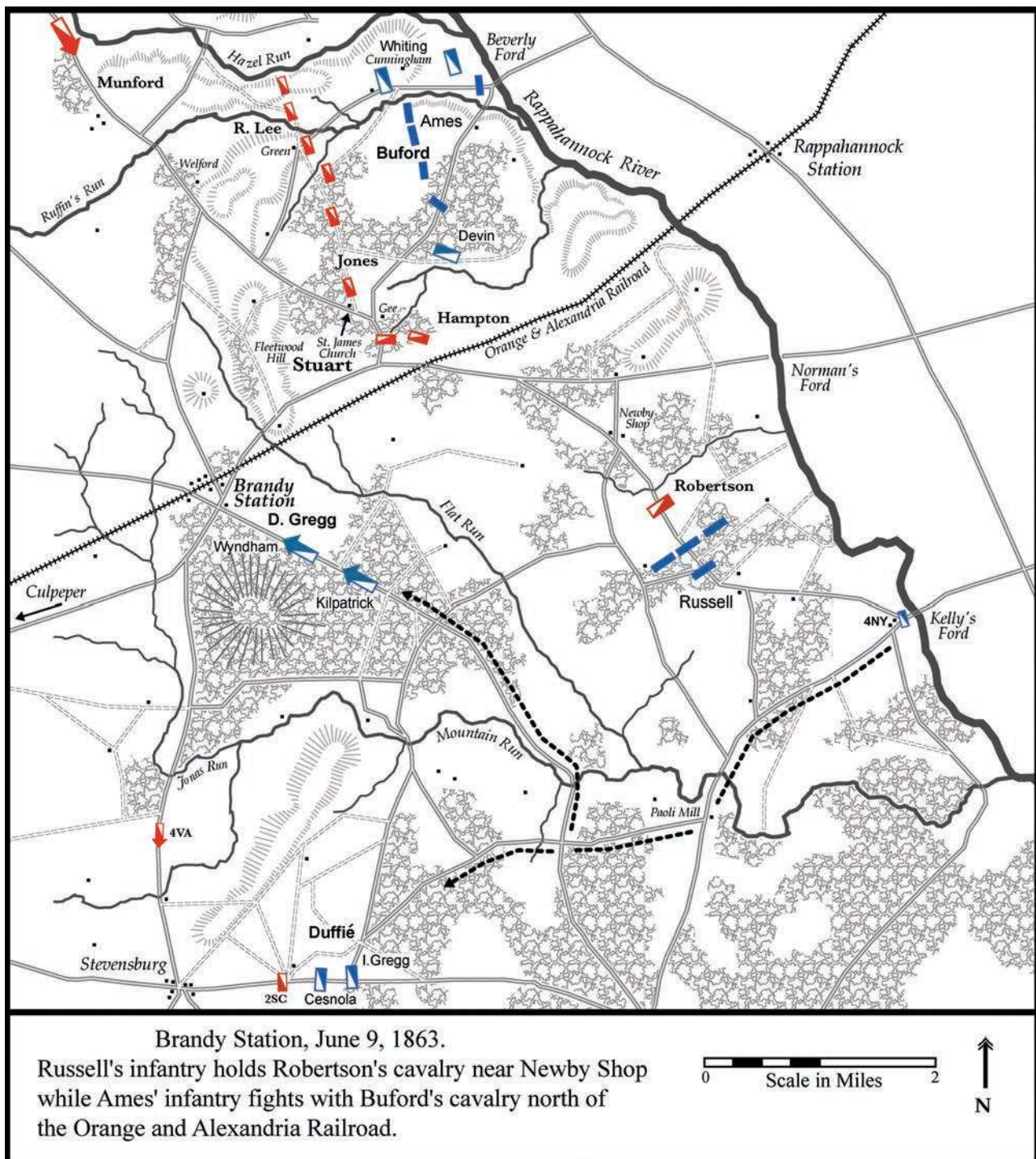
²⁶ Longacre, *Cavalry*, 30; Warner, *Gray*, 166–67.

²⁷ Warner, *Gray*, 147, 154; Longacre, *Cavalry*, 30–31.

²⁸ Longacre, *Cavalry*, 17–18.

²⁹ OR, 27:3:8.

³⁰ OR, 27:3:27–28.



The Battle of Brandy Station, June 9, 1863. Phil Laino.

Reserve Brigade as well as Ames's infantry crossing the Rappahannock at Beverly Ford. Further downstream at Kelly's Ford, David Gregg would cross with the Second and Third Divisions and Russell's infantry. Once across, both forces would take parallel routes to Brandy Station, consolidate and

move forward towards Culpepper Courthouse. The Confederates were expected to be between the two towns.³¹ Pleasonton, despite such a through plan, had not reconnoitered his objective.

³¹ Starr, *Cavalry*, I, 376–77.

The Confederates were now concentrated at Brandy Station and what would result was a battle that lacked coordination and effective command and control due to dispersion of the Union forces. Despite these factors, the Union troopers achieved surprise and showed the Confederate cavalry that they had greatly improved their mounted fighting skills. Buford was the first Union commander to achieve surprise early on the morning of June 9. After crossing Beverly Ford, Buford drove in the Confederate pickets coming close to capturing an entire battery of Stuart's horse artillery. Only through

tenacious charges by individual Confederate regiments was Buford's advance halted long enough to save the South Carolina battery.³² This running engagement began to take shape as battle lines formed around St. James Church, northeast of Brandy Station. Stuart, still groggy with sleep and surprised by the Union advance, ordered Rooney Lee's, Fitz Lee's (commanded by Munford), and Hampton's brigades to reinforce Grumble Jones's brigade already in place to face Buford's advance. Fearing a move on his rear and flank by reports of additional Union forces, Beverly Robertson's brigade was directed to thwart any movement by the Union to flank

³² Longacre, *Cavalry*, 66–67.



Col. Percy Wyndham. National Archives and Records Administration.

the Confederates on their right and rear. Though later accounts criticize Stuart for his lack of concern over his right flank and the key terrain at Fleetwood Hill, Buford's advance did require every available trooper he had nearby. Stuart placed Major McClellan, his trusted adjutant, on the hill in order to report any further developments on that exposed position.³³

By mid-morning, the action around St. James Church was beginning to stall as attack and counterattack yielded neither side much advantage. Pleasonton also seemed to be unsure of himself during this period of the battle

sending reports to Hooker at midday stating estimated numbers of Confederates possibly at 30,000. Pleasonton had also been unable to gain contact with Gregg's column until well after noon. Thus, the engagement around St. James Church grew strangely quiet.³⁴

Gregg's command, led over Kelly's Ford by Alfred Duffie's division, was severely delayed by Duffie's inability to move his troops with vigor on the morning of the ninth. As Duffie's force proceeded down towards Stevensburg on its mission to guard the left flank of the Union force, Gregg proceeded to Bran-

³³ OR, 27.2:679–85.

³⁴ OR, 27.2:903.

dy Station. It was at this time that Gregg made the important decision to bypass Beverly Robertson's 1,500-man Confederate brigade and take a route that was four miles longer to Brandy Station.³⁵ Though later criticized for this action and his decision to leave the Union infantry of Russell in front of Robertson's Confederates, Gregg was most certainly aware that Robertson's force could delay him for several hours while the extra four mile route would only take an hour. By occupying Robertson's force with the Union infantry he not only kept Robertson out of the fight raging at Brandy Station, he also kept his line of retreat secure.

As Gregg neared Fleetwood Hill, just east of Brandy Station on the Orange and Alexandria Railroad, he was finally contacted by Pleasonton and summoned to headquarters for a commanders conference. Assuming the command at this time was Gregg's senior brigade commander, Col. Percy Wyndham, a British officer who had come to America to serve in the Civil War. Wyndham, seeing an artillery piece being rolled into position on the ridgeline feared further artillery support nearby.³⁶

Wyndham's assessment of the situation at Fleetwood was dead wrong. What he was witnessing



Brig. Gen. David M. Gregg. National Archives and Records Administration.

through his field glasses was an elegant ruse executed by Maj. H. B. McClellan, the adjutant who had been assigned to stay at Fleetwood when Stuart left to command the fighting at St. James Church. Though Stuart's after action report denies it, it is clear from McClellan's and other Confederate commander's accounts that he gave no serious credence to threats reported to him by Robertson and Jones as to Federal activity near his exposed right flank. McClellan, recognizing the danger, ordered a nearby orderly away to warn Stuart and then called forward an artillery piece that had

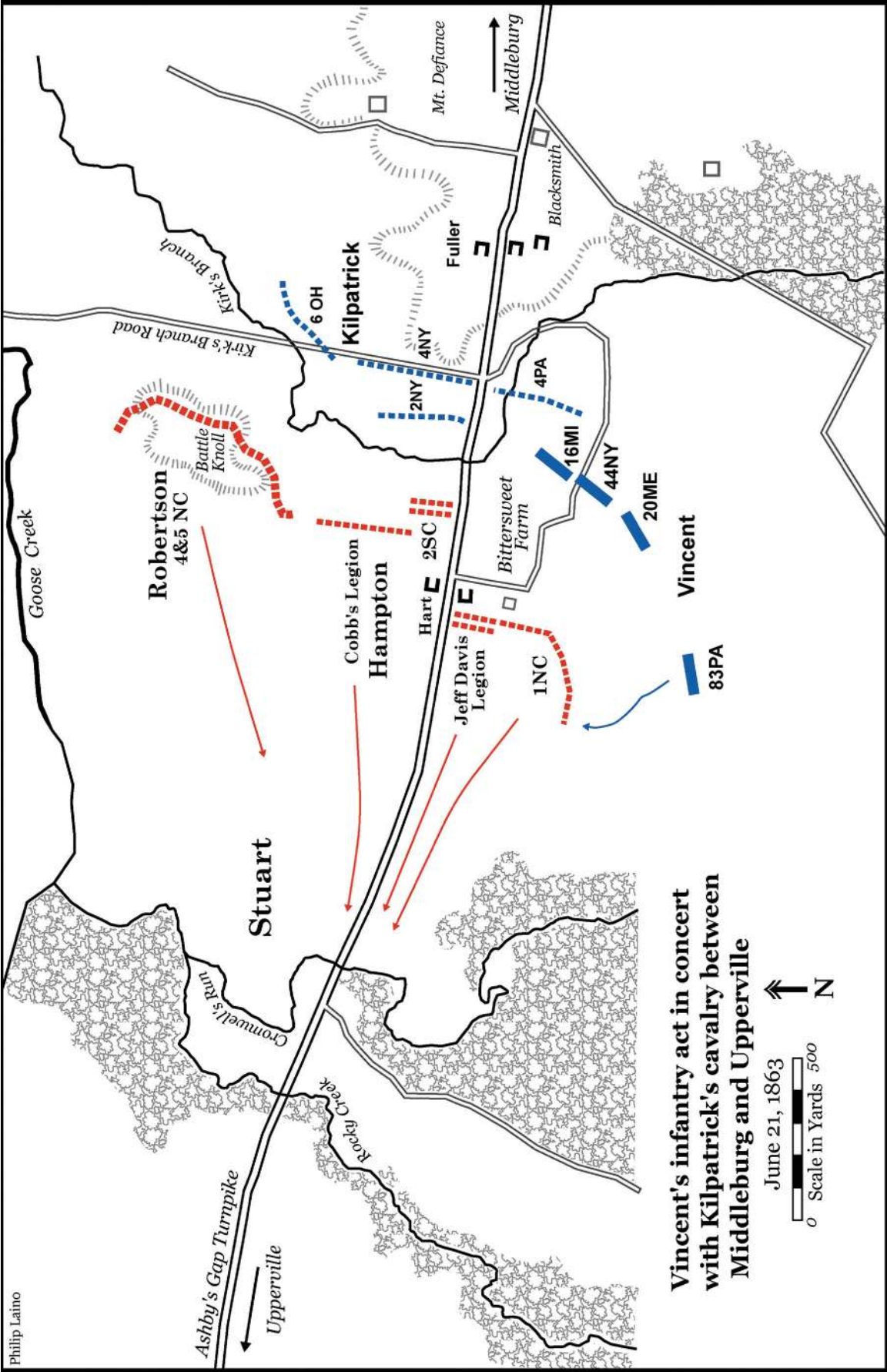
been retired to Fleetwood due to being low on ammunition. With a slow deliberate fire, the lone Confederate gun and Major McClellan were able to convince Gregg's Federals to deploy skirmishers which gave Stuart the important time he needed to arrive on the scene and assess the situation for himself.³⁷

Seeing the dire circumstances his force was now in, Stuart reacted quickly and calmly. Assured that no attack was imminent from Buford, he ordered Jones, Hampton, and Robertson to assemble their brigades towards Fleetwood, and Rooney Lee to reconstitute the battle position facing Buford near St.

³⁵ Starr, *Cavalry*, 380–81.

³⁶ Longacre, *Cavalry*, 74–75; OR, 27.1:965, 1024, 1053.

³⁷ OR, 27.1:729, 772; Starr, *Cavalry*, 384–85; Henry B. McClellan, *I Rode with J.E.B. Stuart: The Life and Campaigns of Major General J.E.B. Stuart* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), 269–70.



Skirmish between Middleburg and Upperville, June 21, 1863. Phil Laino.

James Church. These orders, acting in concert with Gregg's ordered assaults on Fleetwood at the same time, produced the largest clash of mounted cavalry during the war. Mounted brigades, regiments, and squadrons made charge after charge making the battle for Fleetwood one of close quarter combat, pistols and sabers, weapons of choice. Finally, the Confederates prevailed when Wade Hampton broke the back of the Union effort by leading a counterattack consisting of men from his and Jones's command. Having no other reserve to commit to the fight, Gregg decided to call it quits.³⁸

Shortly after Gregg's last assault was repulsed, Buford moved forward to secure his line of retreat by attacking the Confederate left under Rooney Lee. Repulsed but secure in the damage he had done to the enemy cavalry and cautious of reports of Confederate infantry, Pleasonton decided to withdraw back across the Rappahannock. Duffie's division arrived too late on the scene to assist the Union cause as did Beverly Robertson's brigade to help the Confederate effort. Both officers would be heavily criticized later in after actions reports.³⁹

The distinct benefit for the Union Cavalry in this battle was the much-needed confidence they gained in their ability to fight and win against the vaunted Confederate cavalymen of Stuart's command. Though Stuart did not mention at length the fighting prowess of the Union troopers that day, many of his subordinates did. Perhaps the most enduring compliment came from one of the Confederate heroes that day, Maj. H. B. McClellan. In his post war book on Stuart, McClellan wrote that the battle of Brandy Station "made the Federal Cavalry." Another lower ranking cavalryman from the 6th Virginia thought the Union troopers had made "wonderful improvement in skill, confidence and tenacity."⁴⁰

Though Pleasonton had failed in his attempt to destroy the Confederate Cavalry and identify its true intentions, his soldiers had performed remarkably well. Pleasonton felt assured that he had thwarted a major cavalry raid planned for Maryland and had identified "some infantry" nearby in support. Actually outnumbered in terms of mounted forces on the field and lacking in artillery as

well, the Union forces had held their own despite Pleasonton's lack of battlefield coordination and aggressiveness.⁴¹

For Stuart's Confederate cavalry, Brandy Station had been the hardest fight of their careers. Rarely surprised or upstaged by Federal Cavalry, the events at Brandy Station must have had a strong effect on the famed *Beau Sabreur* or "handsome swordsman." As already mentioned above, several Confederates in his command documented the hard-fought battle and shared much admiration for the Federal cavalry. Yet Stuart's lengthy report of the engagement mentions nothing of his surprise or his mistakes in interpreting the valuable intelligence brought to him concerning the Union threat to his right and rear. Stuart, as revealed by his report, would rather gloss over his mistakes rather than to learn from them.⁴² Despite escaping criticism from his superior, Robert E. Lee, Stuart was heavily hurt and damaged by several newspapers which had months before lauded his raids and campaigns as genius. Both editors and private citizens wrote that Stuart had neglected his duties and should be punished, or worse yet, removed from command.⁴³ It was in this environment, with so many calling for Stuart to redeem himself, that he embarked on perhaps the most important campaign of his life.

The next sharp engagements fought by the Union and Confederate cavalry came during June 17, 19, and 21, 1863, at Aldie, Middleburg, and most importantly, Upperville, Virginia. All these engagements had occurred due to Pleasonton's continued efforts, strongly encouraged by Hooker, to discover the intentions of the Confederates. Though at first convinced that Stuart was still trying to raid with just his cavalry into Maryland, Pleasonton was actually continually probing a screen. This screen was part of Robert E. Lee's plan to send out Stuart's men east of the Blue Ridge Mountains which were hiding the massing Army of Northern Virginia that was preparing and in some cases already slowly moving North. During the next series of engagements, Pleasonton would finally realize Lee's true intentions and severely test the limits of the Confederate cavalry.

38 OR, 27.2:679-85, 949-52, 1044-46; Starr, *Cavalry*, 385-87.

39 OR, 27.2:387-88, 679-685 and Pt 1, 1045.

40 McClellan, *Stuart*, 292-94; John N. Opie, *A Rebel Cavalryman with Lee, Stuart and Jackson* (Dayton: Morningside Book Shop, 1972), 137.

41 OR, 27.1:903-04, 1045.

42 OR, 27.2:679-85.

43 Longacre, *Cavalry*, 87-89.

To achieve Hooker's intent, Pleasonton realized that he must penetrate the Blue Ridge Mountains by utilizing one of the various gaps and road systems already in place. Each time the Union cavalry had done so, they had met resistance at Middleburg and Aldie. Despite some setbacks, the Union cavalry kept searching for a hole in the Confederate screen. At Upperville, Pleasonton found an extremely innovative way to drive the Confederate troopers back.

Faced with wooded and fenced terrain that favored the defender, Stuart in this case, Pleasonton decided that he must find a better way to dislodge the dismounted Confederates. Having been reinforced with a division of infantry the night of June 20, Pleasonton set out the next morning with Kilpatrick's brigade of cavalry and one brigade of infantry under Colonel Strong Vincent to dislodge the rebels from Upperville.⁴⁴ Using Vincent's infantry as a flanking element and then a mounted frontal charge from Kilpatrick's command, Pleasonton drove the Rebels back through Upperville and beyond. The Union commander had just tested and developed a new combined arms operation. This tactic utilized both the strengths of infantry and cavalry to defeat



Brig. Gen. Judson Kilpatrick. National Archives and Records Administration.

an enemy force based on the type of enemy faced and the terrain it was defending on. Phillip Sheridan would utilize this tactic to great advantage in 1864.

Once again, Confederate troopers were very impressed with the improved fighting abilities of the Union cavalry at Upperville. Another of Stuart's staff, W. W. Blackford, noted that the improvements of the Federal cavalry "became painfully apparent in the fights around Upperville."⁴⁵ Though many of Stuart's

own staff were recognizing these improvements in the enemy's abilities, Stuart's own reports continued to exhibit a lack of realism in dealing with his forces being outmatched on the field of battle. His report of the Upperville engagement is tinged with what seemed to him to be the unfair tactics of Pleasonton by using dismounted troops so effectively in a cavalry engagement. Evidence even seems to suggest that Stuart's men fled the field in panic and disorder, something which Stuart's report flatly denied.⁴⁶

A key point brought out by the fight at Upperville was the Union cavalry's success in defeating the Confederates with innovative tactics even when the terrain favored the defender. It is also inter-

⁴⁴ Starr, *Cavalry*, 407-09.

⁴⁵ William W. Blackford, *War Years with J.E.B. Stuart* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1945), 221.

⁴⁶ OR, 27.2:690 and OR, 27.1:614.

esting to note that Stuart, as he had at Brandy Station, was once again unable to accept that the paradigm was shifting to his foes. In military circles there is a saying, you must adapt and overcome. Stuart was in danger of being eclipsed and defeated by a force that was learning to compete with his own mounted soldiers. Now the advantage of a dismounted cavalry who could fight as well as infantry would become clearly apparent when John Buford's depleted division rode into Gettysburg in June of 1863.



Col. Thomas C. Devin. National Archives and Records Administration.

When Brig. Gen. John Buford rode into Gettysburg on June 30, 1863, the veteran dragoon immediately set about surveying the terrain for a military advantage. The small town of Gettysburg was like many others in southern Pennsylvania with one notable difference; the town had a radius of roads extending from it. This gave it a military advantage in the sense that large forces could be easily concentrated there. More importantly for the Confederates it gave access to the important industrial regions of the North. The terrain around Gettysburg was also favorable for giving battle if needed. The terrain rose considerably west of the town into a series of ridges and was anchored by two hills, Culp's Hill to the north, and Little Round Top to the south. East of town was also favorable terrain for defense known as McPherson's Ridge and Seminary Ridge. Buford knew his dismounted cavalry could utilize the terrain to delay Confederate infantry and bolster the chances for a Union victory.⁴⁷ As an old dragoon, he had trained

these men to be as proficient in the saddle as they were on the ground.

Buford's intelligence gathering was ongoing and by that evening he was convinced that a large force of Confederate infantry would converge upon his position in the early morning. His assessment of the situation in dispatches sent to Pleasonton and Maj. Gen. John Reynolds, commander of the First Corps, for whom Buford was scouting, were clear and concise as to the disposition of the Confederate forces. Buford reported that A. P. Hill's corps had

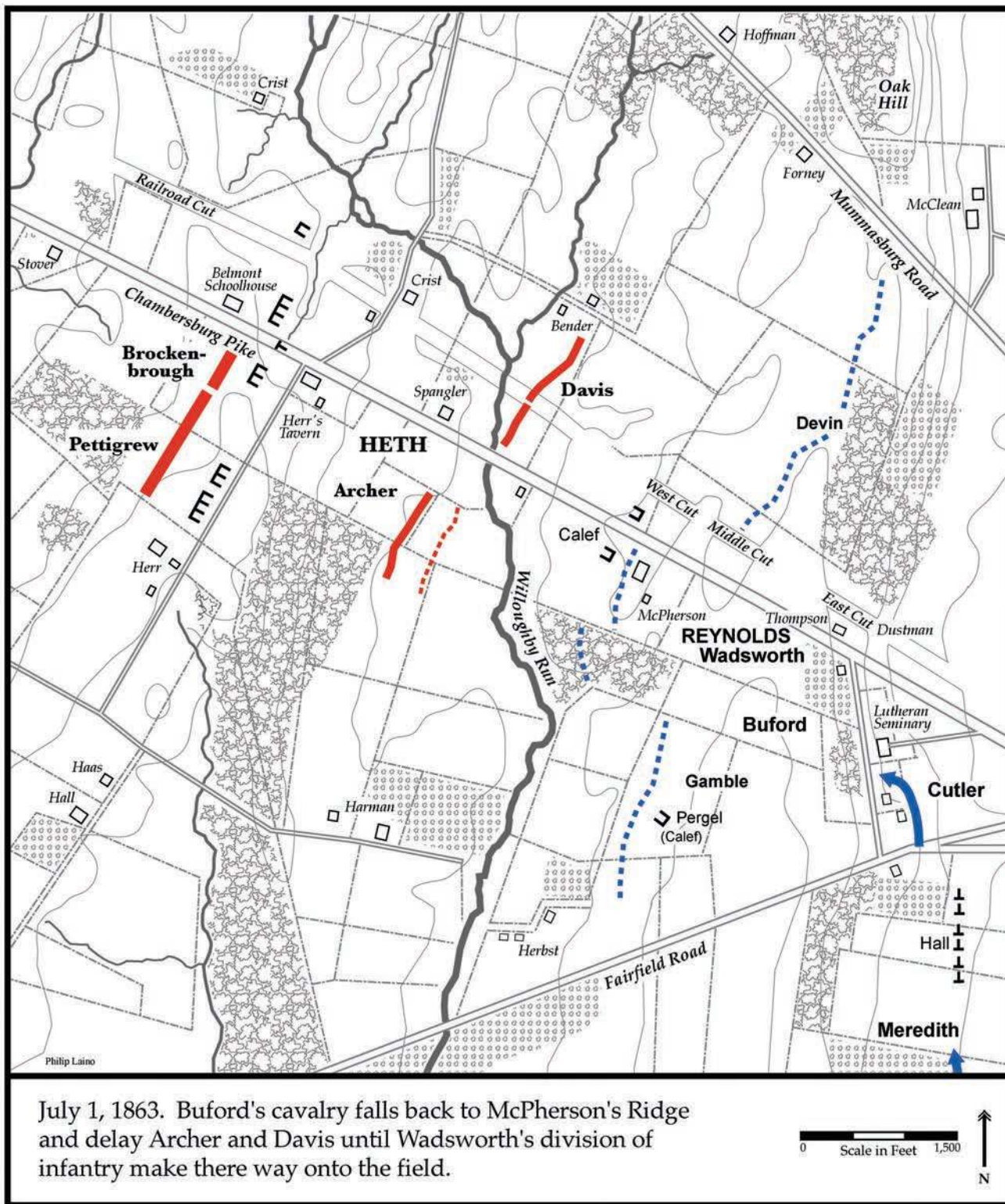
massed his forces near Cashtown just nine miles west of Gettysburg while elements of Ewell's corps was rumored near Carlisle and headed his way.⁴⁸ His report was, as historian Stephen Starr put it, "cavalry scouting and reporting at its best, a model of precision and accuracy, with fact carefully separated from rumor."⁴⁹

Having decided to fight in Gettysburg, Buford now began placing his brigades. With only two now at his disposal he had limited choices. Col. William Gamble's brigade was placed west of Seminary Ridge at a point known as McPherson's Ridge along the Chambersburg Pike where A. P. Hill's corps was expected to advance in the morning. His other brigade, under Col. Thomas C. Devin, was placed from the unfinished Gettysburg and Hanover Rail Line to the Mummasburg Road. Devin, in this position, could guard the North and right flank of Buford's position. Devin could also respond to threats

⁴⁸ OR, 27:1:924.

⁴⁹ Starr, *Cavalry*, 423.

⁴⁷ Longacre, *Cavalry*, 180-83.



Buford's Defense of McPherson Ridge, July 1, 1863. Phil Laino.

from Ewell's corps should rumor become reality. On the extreme right, along the Carlisle Road, Buford placed his six gun battery under Lt. John Calef and on Seminary Ridge he also kept a reserve from Gamble's Brigade.⁵⁰

Near dawn on July 1, Maj. Gen. Henry Heth's division of A. P. Hill's corps appeared advancing along the Chambersburg Pike towards Gamble's position. Heth had no clear idea of what lay in front of him. He and most of his brigade commanders believed some mounted militia had moved into Gettysburg overnight. Lee believed that Stuart would have notified him if a large Federal force were converging on Gettysburg. Lee's infantry was now moving blind towards its designated rally point. Lee had designated Gettysburg as a convergence to regroup his army before a battle was joined with the Army of the Potomac.⁵¹

As Heth confidently advanced, Buford quickly strengthened his picket lines and ordered Calef's battery to redeploy astride the Chambersburg Pike. The determined resistance by these pickets, now supported with artillery, convinced Heath to deploy his division into the line of battle. It was not until 8:00 a.m. that the Confederates were ready to advance again. This was some three hours after Heth had begun his initial advance.

Gamble held on to his initial position as long as possible and then moved under covering fire to McPherson's Ridge, a supplementary position designated by Buford. This gained the Union army another valuable hour and-a-half. By 10:15 a.m. the situation was growing more serious. Gamble was now facing multiple brigades of Heth's division and was about to be enveloped by the overwhelming numbers.⁵²

Devin's position to the north was in an even worse predicament. Not only was he facing a brigade of Heth's division trying to outflank Gamble's position, he was now facing Rodes's division of Ewell's corps coming down from the north upon his right flank.⁵³

Luckily for Buford's two overextended brigades, the First Division of Reynolds's First Corps arrived and relieved Gamble, which in turn allowed Devin



Col. William Gamble. National Archives and Records Administration.

to focus on Rodes's division to the north of Gettysburg. Devin would continue this fight for another two hours fighting a retrograde movement in order to gain more time. His effort paid off and delayed now two divisions of Ewell's corps long enough for Howard's Eleventh Union Corps to arrive and set up a line of battle north of Gettysburg that secured the right flank and rear of Reynolds's First Corps.⁵⁴

By nightfall, the Union occupied the high ground west of Gettysburg that Buford's men had fought valiantly to protect. In doing so, Buford had proven that cavalry, when effectively trained to fight dismounted, could delay superior enemy forces long enough to gain key terrain that could alter the outcome of a larger and more decisive engagement. Buford had fought a classic defense in depth to accomplish this and thus proved another valuable tool that the cavalry could play in the American Civil War.

The lack of intelligence that the Confederates had on July 1 definitely contributed to the time delays that Buford was able to use to his advantage.

⁵⁴ Longacre, *Cavalry*, 190.

⁵⁰ OR, 27:1:927, 934, 938; Longacre, *Cavalry*, 183.

⁵¹ OR, 27:2:637, 307, 444.

⁵² OR, 27:1:1030-31; Longacre, *Cavalry*, 187-88.

⁵³ OR, 27:1:939 and Pt 2, 649.

With no effective cavalry screen to thwart him, Buford had gained a clear picture of the enemy situation and conveyed that to his commander. In concert with Buford's delaying action, this enabled the Union to give battle on its own terms and on ground that was good for defensive operations.

The cavalry operations discussed in this study encompass just a few of the numerous engagements and operations conducted by both sides during the Gettysburg Campaign. This study was not

meant to be an overview of the entire campaign, but rather a look at the commanders, operations, and developments that most clearly demonstrated the shift of dominance in cavalry operations from one of complete Confederate dominance to one of parity with the Union. The ability of the mounted Union cavalryman to fight as an equal against his Confederate counterpart was demonstrated at Brandy Station and again during the engagements at Aldie, Middleburg, and Upperville.

Additionally at Upperville, the Union showed its prowess at developing new tactics and roles for cavalry in a classic, combined-arms operation that proved successful against strong defensive positions manned by veteran Confederate troopers. The Union's ability to fight both dismounted and



Brig. Gen. John Buford. National Archives and Records Administration.

mounted equally helped develop new roles for cavalry that was evident in Buford's defense on July 1, 1863.

The one unanswered question this paper poses and one that may deserve more research is that of J. E. B. Stuart's ability to adapt and overcome the challenges he was to face as the Union cavalry became a better and larger fighting force. The reports Stuart submitted after this campaign often overlook glaring errors on his part and a refusal to accept defeat. Is this indicative of a larger problem? Certainly Stuart's

dislike for dismounted operations would have hurt him tremendously had he lived past May of 1864. One thing is clear; by the late summer of 1863 the Union cavalry was enjoying a new feeling, one of victory and respect among their peers. No longer did cavalrymen hear the joke "whoever saw a dead cavalryman?" The Union cavalryman had come of age and with that was receiving the newfound respect of friend and foe alike.

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