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Gettysburg Magazine, Number 57, July 2017, pp. 84-92 (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/get.2017.0015>

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First Shot, Not Shot, Last Shot

Sgt. Jim Gambrell at Gettysburg

ROBERT W. SLEDGE

"I was in it at
Gettysburg from
the first shot to
the last."

—The Rev. Dr. James Bruton Gambrell¹

Sgt. Jim Gambrell of the 2nd Mississippi Infantry Regiment claimed to have fired the *first* shot of the Battle of Gettysburg on July 1, a signal to his band of scouts that the enemy had been sighted.² That may indeed be so, though numerous other claims of the first shot have been made.³ A more likely claim is that the *last* shot of the Gettysburg campaign was fired at him at Falling Waters on July 14. And in between, he twice managed to bluff his way out of being shot.

1 James B. Gambrell, "Scout Life in the Confederate Army," *Kind Words*, November 10, 1912, 5. After the war, J. B. Gambrell became a Baptist preacher in Mississippi. While pastor at Oxford, Mississippi, he took courses and earned a degree from the University of Mississippi. In 1877, he became editor of the state Baptist newspaper. He was tapped as president of Mercer University in Georgia in 1893. Moving to Texas in 1896, Gambrell served as an administrator for Baptist causes in the state. After 1910, he became editor of the *Texas Baptist Standard* and taught at the seminary in Fort Worth. He capped his career by being elected president of the Southern Baptist Convention for four one-year terms. Dr. Gambrell died in 1921.

2 James B. Gambrell, "The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It", 1, in "Recollections of Confederate Scout Service Written Half a Century Later," microfilm manuscript at Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee. The document of over two hundred pages is not paginated consecutively, but by sections. The work is an edited typescript originally intended for publication as a book. (See James B. Gambrell to I.J. Van Ness, December 9, 1911, in the files of Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archive, Nashville, Tennessee.) The manuscript will be cited hereafter as Gambrell, "Recollections," followed by the appropriate section title and page. Other elements of the projected book were published in anecdotal form in a series of eleven articles in *Kind Words*, a Southern Baptist periodical for young people, in the fall of 1912.

3 See, for example, J. David Petruzzi, "Battle of Gettysburg: Who Really Fired the First Shot?" www.historynet.com/battle-of-gettysburg-who-really-fired-the-first-shot.htm, accessed August 9, 2016. Petruzzi made no mention of possible Confederate claims to the "honor."

The Scout

Jim Gambrell and his brother Ira were students in Pontotoc County, Mississippi, when the Civil War began. Like most young men of the time, they and their classmates rushed to the colors, ready to defend their state, though not necessarily to defend slavery. Jim was nineteen, Ira twenty-one. They joined with others from Pontotoc County to form a company that called itself the "Cherry Creek Rifles." A few days later, the unit moved north to Corinth, where it was folded into the 2nd Mississippi Volunteer Infantry as Company I and dispatched east to join other new regiments at Harper's Ferry, Virginia.

In the next eighteen months, the men of the 2nd Mississippi saw action at First Bull Run, Seven Pines, Gaines Mill, Second Bull Run, South Mountain, and Antietam, among other encounters. In November 1862, their brigade was given a short restful assignment in North Carolina before moving into southeastern Virginia to participate in the "siege of Suffolk" in the early winter of 1863. This deployment caused them to miss the battles of Fredericksburg and Chancellorsville, but they were summoned north to rejoin the Army of Northern Virginia for Lee's invasion of Pennsylvania in June 1863.

Both Gambrell boys distinguished themselves in the early stages of the war. Ira was elected lieutenant and Jim was promoted to sergeant. Jim, in his words, "drifted" into scouting. Sometime in 1862, Gen. A. P. Hill rode past the troops and called for a volunteer to scout ahead of the Army of Northern Virginia and seek out the whereabouts of the enemy. "That was an appeal that turned the course of a

The only known photo of James Bruton Gambrell taken ca. 1920. Wikimedia Commons.

human life,” and Jim stepped forward.⁴ He ventured forth cautiously into unknown territory, finally spotted the lead elements of the Union army, and returned with the requested intelligence about enemy locations.

Gen. Hill then decided he wanted to see for himself, and ordered Gambrell to go back and take him along. Hill saw for himself all right. The general’s indifference to Federal sharpshooters (bravery or bravado?) nearly got them both killed. The shared experience “made General Hill my friend,” he recalled. “I had made the acquaintance and won the friendship of one of the chief generals of that almost incomparable army.”⁵

As a result, Gambrell now saw himself in a new role. “I had, somewhat, discovered myself. . . . This first experience, which ended so happily, fired my

imagination and ambition. It started a careful study of rules and habits of armies. It was readily learned that both armies had the same general system in camp and field; that their guard regulations were the same. So that, understanding the Confederate Army, we could understand the Federal Army. Day and night I studied how to take men at a disadvantage. It soon became clear that army regulations afforded next to no protection against a small body of cool, calculating, courageous men, out without baggage and unhindered by orders from headquarters, free to act instantly on their own initiative, to fight or not fight at will.”⁶

Gambrell selected three companions, Privates Bill Nooner (Company B), Emory Hooker (Company H), and Albert Richey (Company B), and began to practice infiltration techniques on the Confederate guards. Sometimes Lt. Ira Gambrell and others joined in, but the core group consisted of Jim Gambrell, Nooner, Hooker, and Richey. The team became very active behind enemy lines, especially during the siege of Suffolk, gathering information, kidnapping enemy soldiers, stealing horses, and performing acts of sabotage. On one such mission, Lt. Ira Gambrell, still hobbled by an Antietam wound, could not scramble up a creek bank quickly enough and was killed.⁷

When Lee moved north after Chancellorsville, he charged A.P. Hill to hold Union Gen. Joe Hooker’s Army of the Potomac at Fredericksburg. To fulfill this task, Hill called the 2nd Mississippi and other units up from Suffolk to come by foot and rail to join his force. On June 14, Hill found that Gen. Hooker had left, so he and his command took off after Lee’s army, marching hard to catch up.⁸ Hill’s Corps left “the Mississippi Scouts,” as they had become known, behind to mop up and check the few remaining Yankees.⁹ Once they had finished, the scout team hurried north on horseback and caught up with their regiment before it crossed the Potomac.

⁶ Gambrell, “Scout Life,” *Kind Words*, November 24, 1912, 5.

⁷ Gambrell, “Scout Life,” *Kind Words*, November 24, 1912, 5.

⁸ James I. Robertson Jr., *General A.P. Hill: The Story of a Confederate Warrior*, (New York: Random House, 1987), p. 200; Andrew Brown, ed. *Civil War Diary of Augustus L.P. Vairin*, <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~mscivilw/vairindiary.htm>; George W. Bynum, diary extracts, *Confederate Veteran*, XXXIII (1925), 9–10.

⁹ Vairin, *Diary*, 56.

⁴ James B. Gambrell, “Scout Life in the Confederate Army,” *Kind Words*, November 10, 1912, 5.

⁵ Gambrell, “Scout Life,” November 10, 1912, 5.

The First Shot

After entering enemy territory, the Mississippi Scouts went ahead to find horses in Maryland and Pennsylvania; the artillery needed reliable spares. Gambrell now expanded his team of Richey, Noonan, and Hooker to include W. Clifford Nowlin (Company G), Isaac Luna (Company F), Martin W. Andrews (Company I) and a few others. These young daredevils were all in their early twenties except Richey, maybe the bravest of them all, who was twenty-six. Exploring through the unfamiliar forests of the South Mountain range, the scout team discovered a herd of some forty horses hidden in a cove. They chose the eight best steeds and escorted them back to the advancing Confederate army.¹⁰

The following morning, July 1, Gambrell and his augmented scout party left Cashtown toward Gettysburg, patrolling in advance of the division of Maj. Gen. Henry Heth,¹¹ groping for the Federal army. Gambrell recalled the experience in his unpublished memoir:

For two or three days, my party had been in the front, feeling the way and occasionally making a capture. Just how far the enemy was ahead was not known. With about fifteen men, all of us now mounted on horses captured from the Federals,¹² we advanced, deployed five paces apart. I believe I could take you to within fifty steps of where the first shot in the battle of Gettysburg was fired.

As my party was ascending a gentle slope,¹³ there drifted over the crest of the hill something like an even number of Federals¹⁴ deployed in like fashion and evidently engaged in the same kind of business we were in. Each was feeling out for the lines of the other. We were more than a mile in advance of our army when the Federals came within eighty or a hundred yards. I fired my pis-

tol as a signal for my men to open fire. The firing was desultory and the Federals quickly fell back over the hill, while we advanced cautiously.¹⁵

The Federal horsemen withdrew and the Rebel regiments spread out in line of battle.

As the Confederates were deploying into battle formation, a Union artillery battery came up and "greatly annoyed" the oncoming infantry.

General A. P. Hill came to the front, for he was in command of the corps, and asked if there was any way to relieve the situation. I went around the hill, keeping the crest of it between me and the Federal battery. Fortunately for us there was a way possible to carry a battery around the ridge. Two batteries were sent to silence this one Federal battery. One went around the ridge, the other stopping nearer. The ridge resembled the half closed hand. One went around to the tip of the finger and the other stopped at the wrist. . . . In less than a minute after the crack of the first Confederate gun, their caissons exploded. Their horses were killed and their men either killed or wounded. . . . This was a fine piece of work and it greatly relieved the situation.¹⁶

Not Shot

Then, seeking further intelligence about Federal formations, Gambrell went ahead over some ridges until he crested a rise and popped up about fifty paces from a Federal infantry brigade. The Yankee soldiers cocked their rifles and he could hear the click, click, click of their locks. Surrender or be killed, he considered, or . . . perhaps brazen it out? Since he was wearing a dust-covered blue-gray uniform, he quickly chose to bluff his way through, and rode toward the unit, which was calling out "Who are you?" Swallowing his Sunday school abhorrence of lying, he yelled back, "Union, Union." The Federals did not fire and in a moment he was among them, turning his horse to parallel behind the advancing line "and over the hill and away. I felt a good deal better when I got over the hill; I had found out what I was looking for; I knew where the

¹⁰ Martin W. Andrews, "Memoirs of War between States," in M.W. Andrews Papers, Mississippi State University Mitchell Library, Special Collections; Data on each soldier are taken from the individual records of the men of the 2nd Mississippi, which was found at <http://www.2ndmississippi.org/> under the button Rosters. Subsequent references of this sort are gleaned from the company rosters noted there. The site has since been discontinued due to domain problems.

¹¹ Including the brigade of Brig. Gen. Joseph Davis, of which the 2nd Mississippi was a veteran part.

¹² Vairin, *Diary*, 57, and Samuel Hanks, "The Simple Story of a Soldier" in *Confederate Veteran* XXI, (1913), 114. Hanks said of Gambrell, "now a noted Baptist divine in Texas," that "no braver man ever lived."

¹³ Probably Herr Ridge, a few hundred yards west of Oak Hill.

¹⁴ The vedettes of Col. William Gamble's brigade of John Buford's cavalry division.

¹⁵ Gambrell, "Recollections," "The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It," 1.

¹⁶ Gambrell, "Recollections," "The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It," 2-3. While something like this must have happened, A.P. Hill was still at Cashtown during this action. This might have been Gen. Heth or Gen. Davis.

Federals were.”¹⁷ This was likely Brig. Gen. Lysander Cutler’s Second Brigade of the First Division of the First Corps, the tip of the spear that was the on-coming Army of the Potomac.

Looping north around Cutler’s men, Gambrell returned to his own lines and reported. The battle began in earnest, with Henry Heth and his staff afoot among the regiments. When the attack seemed to falter, “General Heth seized the standard and said, ‘Follow me!’ The Confederates, with that indescribable yell¹⁸ that sent terror to many hearts, dashed to the front. A minute later a ball struck General Heth on the forehead, taking the skin off. The concussion doubled him up and he fell like a dead man. Mr. Hooker, one of my scouts, took his handkerchief and bound up the General’s head. Afterward, he sent this handkerchief to one of his lady friends in Eastern Virginia.”¹⁹ Two days before the battle, Heth had discarded his worn out hat and replaced it with one from a captured cache of headwear. All the hats in the sample were too large, but Heth’s clerk arranged for one to fit by stuffing the liner with several layers of paper. Heth believed that this impromptu helmet saved his life. But the general was out of action for several days as a result.²⁰

Then the two infantry lines clashed north of the Cashtown Road, and the well-mounted Gambrell observed the encounter from a distance. Stricken men were falling on both sides. The Mississippians were actively engaged with the 56th Pennsylvania in the fields north of the railroad cut, when one Federal infantryman suddenly leaped up and fled, seized “by a case of heart failure, a trouble which affected both armies.” The fleeing man did not bother to throw away his rifle and other gear, he simply ran out from under them, leaving everything hanging in mid-air. In the midst of all the death, this comical sight so amused one of the Mississippi riflemen that he called out across the field, “Write to me.”²¹

From the same vantage point, Gambrell watched the encounter at the railroad cut where over a hundred of his comrades were taken prisoner, among them his former teacher, Capt. R.M. Leavell.²²

The sergeant did not have long to ponder the fate of his regiment; he was working for the generals. One of them, probably A.P. Hill by this time, dispatched him north toward Oak Hill to make contact with elements of Gen. Richard S. Ewell’s forces coming south to join the fight. “I was sent with all possible speed to direct the Confederate corps, which was hastening to join us in the battle from the direction of Harrisburg. I had to go over some of the grounds that we had been over earlier.”²³

Though he thought he knew the terrain, the battle lines had shifted.

I particularly knew the contour of the ridge where we had knocked the Federal batteries to pieces earlier in this day and meant to keep that just to my left, supposing that I would be well within Confederate lines. There were rock fences then in that country. Briars and bushes grew up among the rocks . . . making these fences impassible except where the bushes and vines had been cut or the rocks torn down. I had to cross a road with a rock fence, as described, on each side. Finding a place that had been opened for the passage of horses, I leaped my horse over (into the lane) to find in front of me, forty steps away, a Federal General with his staff of twenty to thirty men. I would know that General’s picture if I saw it today. . . . I could not turn without revealing my identity. Close to him was another opening in the rock fence so I turned my horse in the direction of the General and quickened my pace. Of course, pistols were out and there was a challenge. I meant to do what I had done earlier in the morning—get out on a doubt.²⁴

The general told his men not to shoot and the daring Rebel in dusty gray escaped once again, racing away from trouble.

17 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It,” 3–4.

18 “We could always know when the Confederates were getting the best of it by the rebel yell, and when the other side was getting the best of it by the measured ‘Huzza! Huzza!’” Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It,” 7.

19 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It,” 4–5.

20 James L. Morrison, Jr., ed. *The Memoirs of Henry Heth* (Westport CN: Greenwood Press, 1974), 174–76. Gambrell misremembered the timing of Heth’s wound, which was later in the battle.

21 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It,” 5–6. Many years later, Gambrell lived near a former member of the 56th Pennsylvania, and very charitably observed that he was sure his neighbor was not that man.

22 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It,” 6. See Robert W. Sledge, “The Railroad Cut Reconsidered” in *Gettysburg Magazine*, January, 2015.

23 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It,” 6.

24 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It,” 6–7. “I suspect it is a matter of doubt with [the general] yet, if he is living, whether I was on his side or the other.”

Continuing on his mission over the ground just contested, Gambrell came across a fallen comrade, obviously dying.

The dreadful charge had been made and the field was swept by the men of gray. As I rode rapidly to carry an order, taking pains that my horse did not trample on the dead and wounded, I heard a faint voice call my name. Hurriedly I dismounted. It was John. He pulled his blouse open and showed me the deadly wound, and said in a voice little more than a whisper: 'I am going, Jim. Tell them at home about it. Go on.' I had to go, for heavy brigades were needed to sustain the advance. Actual war gives little time for those soft and ennobling ministries which the heart prompts, even in the hour of carnage. Brother must leave brother dying on the field of battle, often without a parting word.²⁵

This was a painful act; the culture of the time emphasized that one should not die alone. But at least Gambrell could tell his family of John Leavell's "good death," bearing up under the crisis and urging his comrade to complete his mission.²⁶ And so, with great reluctance, the courier rode off to do his duty. He reminded himself that "I was the bearer of an important message from one part of the army to another and could not remain."²⁷ "I went on and touched the advance guard of those coming to join us²⁸ and lengthen our lines to the left. By this time, there was a great deal of fighting, with advantage generally on the side of the Confederates."²⁹

The Probe

The indefatigable scout's day was not done. After he completed contact with Ewell's men, he returned to Hill's headquarters for further instructions. As darkness fell on July 1, Union troops seemed to have abandoned the town of Gettysburg and withdrawn somewhere to the south. Sgt. Jim Gambrell and an-

other scout, still serving as the eyes of the Army of Northern Virginia, were sent east into Gettysburg, this time probing through the town, seeking the outposts of the Union army. Others were probably doing the same.

Moving deep through the streets into the south part of Gettysburg, they found no trace of the Union army. In the gathering dimness, the hungry pair spied a chicken roosting in a tree, and Gambrell shot it down. Immediately, two shots replied out of the twilight, and Gambrell knew he had found the Federal outposts. He also knew he was hungry, so he scooped up the dead chicken, and the two scouts retreated to a safer part of town. They found a hastily abandoned Union cooking pot, still filled with boiling water, and they cooked the hen and feasted "without anything in the world to go with her except our appetites. . . . I owe some good woman in Gettysburg for that hen yet."³⁰ Satisfied, Gambrell reported back to Hill with his information.

The Fatal Field

Heth's brigade was withdrawn from action for most of July 2, refitting and reorganizing. Gambrell's memoirs made no mention of his activities that day, but it is likely that he was employed in observing and assessing Union dispositions on the north end of the line while the battle raged at the Round Tops and Culp's Hill.

"The most picturesque part of the great battle occurred . . . on the third day," he recalled. "Stonewall Jackson's old corps was to the left, Hill in the middle, and Longstreet to our right. I went with General A.P. Hill up on the Lutheran Seminary to make observations. From that elevation, it was easy to see across the valley through the General's field glasses. I could even see the buttons on the officers' coats. Long lines of Federals were pouring in on the field, seemingly in countless numbers, not one line but many, coming in from the rear and taking up position on our front."³¹ He continued, "then began that terrible cannonading, I suppose the greatest of the war, until smoke enveloped the valley. With the field glass, I could see the effect of the Confeder-

²⁵ This was his classmate and good friend, Sgt. John Leavell, brother of the just-captured captain of Company I. *Kind Words*, October 16, 1912, 5; Gambrell, "Recollections," "The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It," 7-8.

²⁶ Drew Gilpin Faust, *This Republic of Suffering: Death and the American Civil War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 9. "Soldiers and their families struggled . . . to construct a Good Death even amid chaos. . . . Perhaps the most distressing aspect of death for many Civil War Americans was that thousands of young men were dying away from home."

²⁷ Gambrell, "Recollections," "The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It," 7-8.

²⁸ Robert Rodes's division of Richard S. Ewell's corps.

²⁹ Gambrell, "Recollections," "The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It," 7.

³⁰ Gambrell, "Recollections," "The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It," 8-9.

³¹ Gambrell, "Recollections," "The Battle of Gettysburg as I Saw It," p. 1. This vivid account does not entirely square with the known activities of A.P. Hill that day. Again the story probably gets confused by the blur of events and the deceptions of memory.

ate shot and shell. A shell would strike the Federals and plough through the line lengthwise, sometimes exploding, sometimes not, but doing immense damage. Notwithstanding the rain of shell, those lines came on and on. The Federal line getting into position that day must have been immense, as it appeared from my point of view.”³²

Eventually, the smoke of the guns obscured the scene, and Gambrell left the seminary cupola to rejoin his unit farther south on Seminary Ridge. He reported to Gen. J.J. Pettigrew, who was now in command of the remains of Heth’s division. “General Pettigrew was a young officer with military education, very gallant. He, with Generals Lee and Hill and their retinues, agonizingly awaited Longstreet’s attack on the federal left. Courier after courier was sent to urge haste. The waiting was one of the most trying experiences any one ever went through.” Lee commented that if it failed, “I will despair of success.”³³

George Pickett’s division of Longstreet’s corps was the best one remaining in the Confederate army. Lee’s plan was for Pickett to attack the Union left and for Pettigrew to join him with the remnant of Heth against the right. “I do not know how others felt, but it seemed to me a physical impossibility to take the Federal position.” Gambrell recalled. He had just seen the whole field from the seminary and calculated that the individual Rebel infantryman had only one chance in ten of surviving.³⁴

Rejoining his surviving comrades of the 2nd Mississippi, Sgt. Gambrell went in afoot with the charge against Cemetery Ridge. The regiment was already pitifully depleted, numbering less than a hundred men. “As we reached a point, perhaps half way, we stopped to straighten the line and General Pettigrew, who with his staff was on foot, called attention to the fact that shells were plying our ranks almost lengthwise from the left and from the right and from every angle in front, but on that column went!”³⁵ The Mississippians were near the left flank of the Confederate charge and were enfiladed with devastating results by Union troops of the 128th New York and the gun battery of Lt. George Woodruff, all sent by Gen. Alexander Hays to curl around

the north end of the charging Confederate line. As a result of the deluge of lead, “we were thinned to a skirmish line in a minute or so. Then the mere fragments of that heroic command began to retreat. No one ran. We were still under that rain of shot and shell. I have no idea how long the charge lasted. A sense of time was obliterated, but the remnant of the two divisions went to their place.”³⁶ Gambrell was one of the few men of his regiment to emerge unscathed.

Exhausted, fought out, their numbers badly diminished, the survivors nevertheless sheltered in the trees on Seminary Ridge and prepared to receive a Union counterattack, an attack that never came.

Exact numbers cannot be known, but the 2nd Mississippi was a shell of its former self. In the battles of July 1 and 3, fifty-four men were killed outright, with more to die later. About 180 were captured in the two days. A number of others were wounded, many to be captured between July 4 and 14, making a grand total of about 400 casualties for the campaign by the time Jim Gambrell swam the Potomac as the last escapee. That represented a casualty figure of about 80 percent in two weeks.³⁷

The 2nd Mississippi, or what was left of it, was virtually decapitated. Col. John M. Stone, though shot on July 1, was hobbling around trying to command the regiment. He had narrowly escaped capture when the wagon train of the wounded was hit by Union cavalry at Cunningham’s Crossroads just north of Williamsport. The regimental chaplain and the commissary officer were seized in that attack and were in Union hands at Mercersburg. The body of Lt. Col. David Humphries lay dead on the field of Pickett’s charge. Maj. John Blair was on his way to a Union prison camp. The ranks of the company-grade officers were severely depleted—seven captains, eighteen lieutenants, and five first sergeants were either dead, incapacitated, or captured. Company F, Company H, and Company C were totally bereft of officers, though Company C at least still had its first sergeant.³⁸ Company E counted forty-six effectives on June 30; of that number, only two,

32 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Gettysburg to a Finish,” 1.

33 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Gettysburg to a Finish,” 2.

34 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Gettysburg to a Finish,” 3.

35 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Gettysburg to a Finish,” 3–4.

36 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Gettysburg to a Finish,” 4.

37 These numbers were calculated, man by man, from the roster of the regiment. In months to come, some of the wounded would recover and rejoin the ranks, and some of the prisoners would be exchanged, but the regiment would be only a shadow of its former self from then on.

38 Gleaned from regimental roster.

Pvts. Rufus Jones and Samuel B. Scott, escaped back across the river uninjured.³⁹

The Last Shot—Falling Waters

Surveying the failure of Pickett's charge, Robert E. Lee had a decision to make, whether to retreat after the debacle or to hold fast in a good defensive position on Seminary Ridge and hope that Meade would attack. All through the day on July 4th the Confederates waited in pouring rain, wishing for a Union assault across that bloody field. But Meade made no moves, so, late in the day, Lee ordered a withdrawal back to the Potomac. "It was a sullen retreat. The Confederates had lost thousands and the Federals had lost some ten thousand more. They were in no condition to severely press their victory, so General Lee's retreat was in order and without any great haste. There was still a great deal of fight in the Confederate army after it left Gettysburg."⁴⁰ The comment about the leisurely withdrawal did not apply to the fleeing Confederate wagon train carrying the wounded south on the western slopes of South Mountain. There the retreat was frantic, harassed at every turn by Federal horsemen, experiencing terrible weather and suffering unbearable anguish, but Gambrell had no notion of that.

The main body of the Army of Northern Virginia made its way along the east face of South Mountain back to the Potomac, expecting to slip across into the relative safety of Virginia. But Union cavalry destroyed the pontoon bridge that was the pathway to safety for the infantry. The rains of the previous fortnight caused a rise in the river, closing the ford above Williamsport that the Southern cavalry hoped to use. So, with the Union army closing in on them, the Rebels crowded themselves into a foothold on the north bank of the river around and east of Williamsport, prepared to fight for their very existence. Aggressive Union cavalry poured down the Cumberland Valley from the northwest and challenged the embattled defenders. With other officers, the wounded Col. Stone distinguished himself in cobbling together a successful defense of Williamsport from teamsters, the walking wounded, stray infan-

trymen, and anyone else he could lay his hands on, but it was touch-and-go and only temporary.

In the nick of time, Confederate engineers managed to build a makeshift pontoon bridge near Falling Waters, a few miles below Williamsport, while the river above Williamsport finally subsided enough for the cavalry to ford. On the evening of July 13, Lee's infantry and artillery began to cross. His cavalry got to the south bank relatively uncontested, but Union forces crowded in on the infantry holding the pontoon bridgehead, aiming to cut off as many Rebels as possible.

Henry Heth's division, co-commanded for the moment by Pettigrew because of Heth's wound, served as Lee's rear guard. The Confederate unit that had opened the battle of Gettysburg was now the unit that would end the campaign. Heth's troops were exhausted beyond measure. "Our supplies were meagre; our equipment weak; the horses were worn; many of the soldiers were bare-footed. The night before . . . we had tramped, tramped, tramped all night."⁴¹ Before dawn on the 14th, the rear guard arrived at a ridgeline a mile above the bridge. Heth's men dropped to ground where they stood and fell instantly asleep. Gambrell and his fellow scouts left their sleeping comrades and moved a short distance to the north to a vantage point with a half-mile field of view toward the Union army, presumed to be still several miles away. Gambrell set his emaciated horse to grazing, gathered a few shocks of standing wheat for a bed, and fell asleep himself. "After a while, Scout [Emory] Hooker came and woke me up. He was always alert." Hooker said, "There are some men coming. We don't know who they are. You had better get up and come into line."⁴²

Sgt. Gambrell roused himself and joined a headquarters party at the nearby home and barn owned by a Marylander named J.B. Downey.⁴³ In the group were General Heth, along with Pettigrew and his staff, and the scouts. By this time, Heth was sufficiently recovered from his Gettysburg wound to resume command but kept Pettigrew close by. No one was quite able to discern in the misty dawn the identity of the approaching band of horsemen. "We

39 Samuel Hankins, "The Simple Story of a Soldier" in *Confederate Veteran* XXI, (1913), 115.

40 Gambrell, "Recollections," "The Battle of Gettysburg to a Finish," 4-5.

41 Gambrell, "Recollections," "The Battle of Falling Waters," 5.

42 Gambrell, "Recollections," "The Battle of Falling Waters," 5-6.

43 Kent Masterson Brown, *Retreat from Gettysburg: Lee, Logistics and the Pennsylvania Campaign* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press), 2005, 343-49.

could not determine whether their uniforms were blue with the dust beaten into them by rain, or only blue-gray. They had a flag, but it was wound around the flag staff so that we could just see one corner of it fluttering in the breeze.”⁴⁴ The view was further obscured by the patchy morning fog. Heth ordered his troops to hold fire, assuming they were the Confederate cavalymen screening the retreat.⁴⁵

They were not; they were two companies of the 6th Michigan Cavalry who charged pell-mell into the unprepared Confederates, most of them sound asleep. Heth discovered his mistake, but the oncoming horsemen were among them, slashing with their sabers and firing their pistols. Gen. Pettigrew was struck by a pistol shot, a wound that would prove fatal a few days later. The cavalry swept through the barnyard, shouting and shooting. Gambrell’s fellow scout Emory Hooker “took his position at the corner of the barn and as the men passed, . . . he shot three of them off their horses with his pistol.”⁴⁶ The aroused southerners managed to inflict heavy losses on the intruders and to evict the survivors from the lines. Gambrell was deeply impressed by the courage of the attacking Wolverine horsemen. “There was nothing in the war more thoroughly sacrificing than the conduct of that hundred and twenty five Federals.”⁴⁷ Prisoner interrogations told Gambrell that this was a feint to distract the defenders from Buford’s cavalry division charging in from the northeast. “I went immediately with this information . . . to see about the men coming up the river”⁴⁸ and found them. We . . . had no difficulty in heading them off and holding the bridge until our men were over.”⁴⁹ The defenders in that sector were Joe Davis’s brigade, including the pitiful remnant of the 2nd Mississippi.

Heth’s rear guard fell back toward the bridge, having gained the time necessary for Lee’s army to escape. Sgt. Gambrell was among the last to cross. Once safe on the south bank, Gambrell watched as the engineers prepared to cut the pontoons loose from the north bank. However, some of the last stragglers across informed the watching Robert E.

Lee that there were several hundred men left behind, unable to find their way through the rough and wooded terrain to the bridge. “I volunteered to General Lee to go and bring these men out if the bridge was not cut.” Gambrell rode back across the bridge, “found the soldiers and rushed them over the bridge.”⁵⁰ He returned to his search a second and a third time and found still others, herding them to safety. Finally, the only Confederates left north of the river were too exhausted to make any more effort and Gambrell rode back to the bridge to ride it to safety himself.

But the engineers did not wait for him. When he arrived at the riverbank, with pursuing Federals not far behind, he discovered that the line had been cut loose from the Maryland bank and the bridge was now some twenty yards into the stream, receding with the current. Fearing that his exhausted horse would never leap from the bank to follow, Gambrell stationed the beast as close to the edge as he could, took a running start, and slammed his shoulder into his mount’s side, knocking him into the river. The horse took off swimming, following the bridge. “The thing was perfectly successful and I followed him in and swam. By this time, the Federals had reached the hills overlooking the bridge and began sharp shooting. I got into the boat and lay down close to the side so as to be thoroughly protected, having, however, gotten my horse by the bridle. I held his head up and we floated around and got out all right.”⁵¹

“When I reached General Lee, dripping, I received his personal congratulations.”⁵² One of the rounds fired at the escaping Gambrell was probably the last shot of the Gettysburg campaign.⁵³

A Parting Shot

Gambrell’s exploits had not escaped notice in the highest circles. A month after Falling Waters, President Jefferson Davis summoned his fellow Mississippian to Richmond. Davis had in hand a report

44 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Falling Waters,” 6.

45 Morrison, *Memoirs of Henry Heth*, 178–79.

46 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Falling Waters,” 6.

47 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Falling Waters,” 7.

48 Buford’s division.

49 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Falling Waters,” 7.

50 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Falling Waters,” 8.

51 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Falling Waters,” 8.

52 Gambrell, “Recollections,” “The Battle of Falling Waters,” 8.

53 But see Kent Brown, *Retreat from Gettysburg*, 351. Brown says that after the bridge was withdrawn to the southern shore, skirmishers from the 4th Alabama, the rear of the rear guard, appeared on the Maryland bank shouting for help. Some of their comrades, who were helping with the bridge, detached a pontoon and rowed across to rescue them. According to Brown, “those skirmishers of the Fourth Alabama were, in fact, the last Confederates to cross the Potomac River.”

from Henry Heth recommending that Gambrell be commissioned. Heth was an eyewitness to the dramatic action at Falling Waters. Gambrell, he said, volunteered to try to rescue the stragglers. "He did so successfully, crossing in rear of the enemy's lines and successfully piloting across 150 men who had given up all hopes of crossing the river. This was done under fire of the enemy's sharpshooters. Sergt. Gambrell's uniform courage and gallantry, his correct habits, and liberal education are strong reasons for urging his promotion."⁵⁴ Davis concurred and commissioned the scout and sent him west to Mississippi to operate behind enemy lines with a company of his own recruitment. Despite many

⁵⁴ The letter, dated July 28, 1863, is included in James B. Gambrell's personnel file at the Department of Defense. The reference to liberal education spoke to Gambrell's love of books. He normally carried with him a Bible and an edition of Shakespeare.

close calls in Mississippi and Tennessee, he emerged from the war alive and ready to embark on a distinguished career as a Baptist minister, editor, and administrator. His military duties were not the only activities that occupied his mind. At his side from 1864 on was his new wife, Mary Corbell, whom he had met, wooed, and wed while scouting on the Suffolk front.

But that's another story.

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