

Horse Soldiers

James H. Hillestad, Member No. 6, chronicles the pivotal role of the Union Cavalry at Gettysburg

“They will attack you in the morning ... You will have to fight like the devil until support arrives.”

-Gen. Jon Buford



headquarters duty. This, however, was found to be a waste of energy and produced little, if any, benefit. By 1863, the concept of large formations (full brigades and corps) came into being. These were sent off on destructive raids into enemy territory, creating havoc, destroying railroad bridges and demoralizing the Southern population.

Recruitment went well. Not diminishing their patriotic motives, cavalry recruits naively believed that their military duties would be easier than in the infantry, and that they would ride to war instead of having to walk.

The quote above was attributed to Gen. John Buford, commanding the First Division of the Cavalry Corps, Army of the Potomac, on the eve of the battle of Gettysburg.

The Background

The Union cavalry had come a long way since the beginning of the conflict. At the war's onset, the Federal cavalry had been hobbled by the shortsighted, fossilized thinking of such notables as the 75-year-old Commanding Gen. Winfield Scott and Simon Cameron, the Secretary of War. They believed that cavalry was too expensive to organize and equip

on a large scale. They also felt that the battleground of Virginia was too broken and wooded to permit the large-scale operations associated with European conflicts.

Manpower

In 1860, the regular U.S. Army counted only five mounted regiments, each with a strength of about 1,000 officers and men.

By the summer of 1863, the number had grown to 175 cavalry regiments. This phenomenal growth mirrored the cavalry's new role as an independent striking force.

Early in the war, cavalry were fragmented into small units, and employed primarily in picket or



ABOVE
Union cavalrymen defend the Chambersburg Road

LEFT
Union Cavalry Guidon Bearer Dismounted No.1, No.31071

RIGHT
Union Cavalry Corporal Dismounted Firing Pistol No.1, No.31057

Acceptance into the cavalry was subject to a physical exam, a weight limitation of 160 pounds, and a natural fondness for horses, along with experience in handling them. It is therefore not surprising that most recruits came from farming backgrounds. Officers, on the other hand, drawn by the glamour of being perceived as a cavalier swashbuckler, were from the higher social classes.

Weapons

While sabers were widely issued, the pistol was a more popular weapon, even though they were accurate only at very short range. Troopers favored the .44 caliber Colt revolver.

The most useful weapon was the 0.52 caliber breech-loading Sharps carbine. While the carbine was not effective at over 100 yards, its breech-loading capability gave it far superior firepower at close ranges. Troopers with a breech-loader could fire twice as fast as infantry with muzzle-loading muskets.

Tactics

When riding in column formation, Union cavalrymen rode four abreast. When maneuvering to attack, the four-man units wheeled into a single line.

Most fighting, however, was done while dismounted. The four-man unit was retained, but the fourth man would hold his horse and those of the other three behind the lines, while the other three fought on foot.

Dismounted fighting was never popular with the Southern trooper, who felt that he was only "half a man" when separated from his horse. The Federal cavalry, on the other hand, acted in the belief that "one carbine in the hands of a dismounted man under cover is worth half a dozen in the hands of men on horseback."





A memorial marking the "first shot" at Gettysburg.

The Battle is Joined

Three cavalry actions distinguished the battle of Gettysburg. Two contributed to the Union victory. The third resulted in a futile sacrifice of 65 troopers and the mortal wounding of their highly regarded brigade commander.

The first involvement was that of Gen. John Buford and occurred on Day One of the battle. With two brigades of cavalry (2,900 men) and six cannon, Buford opposed Confederate Gen. Harry Heth's Division of 3,500 seasoned veterans and 20 cannon, along the Chambersburg Road, two miles west of Gettysburg.

The disparity in numbers increased with the addition of 3,500 Confederates soon after the battle began. Buford was thus outnumbered by better than two to one -- but thanks to his men being armed with breech-loading carbines, his cavalrymen had the firepower of almost 6,000 men.

The first shot of the battle was fired by Lt. Marcellus E. Jones, 8th Illinois, who "took Serg't Shafer's

carbine, rested it across a fence-rail and fired at the commanding officer as the column of rebel infantry came across the Marsh Creek bridge ..." A memorial marker, suitably inscribed with the heading "First Shot at Gettysburg, July 1, 1863, 7:30 a.m.," can be found a half-mile west of Herr Ridge, just off the Chambersburg Road.

Facing a relentless attack, the Union troops pulled back to McPherson's Ridge, where a defensive line had been established, supported by a six-gun battery of three-inch Ordnance rifles under the command of Lt. John H. Calif, Battery A, 2nd U.S. Artillery. Calif's battery was a "horse battery," the first of its kind in the army, and was popularly called "flying artillery." Because it supported fast-moving cavalry, the gunners rode on horses, unlike those in standard field artillery batteries who either rode on limbers and caisson chests, or walked. Calif's Ordnance rifles were lighter and more maneuverable than the

Union Cavalry
Trooper Dismounted
Kneeling Firing No.1,
No.31061



Did you know?

There are seven equestrian statues at Gettysburg, all of infantry commanders. It is ironic that the most prominent Union cavalry commander is memorialized on foot!



At the base of Buford's statue are four artillery tubes. Looking at the above photo, the one in the left foreground is from the cannon that fired the first Union artillery shot in the battle. It bears a bronze plaque to that effect.



Dismounted Union
Cavalry Officer
1861-1865,
No.50015C
W. Britain Collector
Club figure



Union Gen. John
Buford, No.31068

army's heavier Napoleons and ten-pounder Parrott rifles. They were mounted on light-weight carriages and had an extreme range of 4,000 yards.

Facing a superior force firing long-range rifles, and outgunned in artillery, Buford still managed to buy nearly three hours at the price of 130 casualties. Wing commander Gen. John Reynolds arrived with the First Corps just in time to relieve the exhausted cavalrymen. The battle continued and eventually the Union troops took up a fall-back position on Cemetery Ridge.

The second significant cavalry action occurred on Day Three of the battle, when Union cavalry commanded by Gen. David Gregg



Cupola atop the Lutheran Theological Seminary used by Buford as an observation post.

blunted the "end run" of Jeb Stuart, as he attempted to attack the rear of the Union lines on Cemetery Ridge. During the melee, the legendary George Armstrong Custer led his Michigan "Wolverines" in a full-scale mounted charge that broke up the Confederate foray. The article "Custer -- The Man Who Saved the Union" in the May 2006 issue of *The Standard* offers more on this cavalry encounter.

The third cavalry action also took place on Day Three on the Union left flank, but was disastrous for the Union, due to the incompetence of a cavalry commander by the name of Gen. H. Judson Kilpatrick. Kilpatrick had won the nickname "Kill-cavalry" for his insensitive attitude toward his men and their mounts. Kilpatrick ordered his brigade commander, John F. Farnsworth, to take his mounted brigade across an uneven field of large rocks, fences and stone walls, and attack two fresh regiments of Alabama infantry supported

by artillery. Farnsworth vigorously protested, but to no avail.

The "charge" failed -- Farnsworth and 65 troopers were recklessly sacrificed.

The men of the Cavalry Corps Army of the Potomac exhibited at the battle of Gettysburg qualities that were not evident in the first two years of the war: speed, strength, endurance and imagination. Regrettably, their leadership on occasion fell short -- Kilpatrick was a prime example.

Nevertheless, the cavalry emerged as a potent fighting force, worthy of respect. ■

Jim Hillestad operates under the name The Toy Soldier Museum. His museum, containing more than 35,000 figures and a large collection of militaria, is located in the Pocono Mountains of northeastern Pennsylvania. For directions and hours, call him at 570/629-7227, or visit his new website:

www.the-toy-soldier.com