ESSENTIAL CIVIL WAR CURRICULUM

The Evolution of the Union Cavalry 1861-1865

By **Laurence D. Schiller**

The story of the Federal cavalry during the Civil War is not only the story of the development of raw recruits and officers from difficult beginnings to a finely honed and feared machine, but also the story of the evolution of an arm of the U.S. military that had been neglected before 1861. Unlike the infantry or artillery, where manuals existed to teach new recruits how to drill and fight in a pre-existing system, cavalry leaders had to figure out precisely what their role would be in a war that was completely unlike the European wars of the past 100 years and the conflicts against Native Americans. There was no American cavalry manual to guide them nor was the military establishment itself very clear on what cavalry was supposed to do in a war where the terrain was often heavily wooded and against opponents who were equivalently trained and equipped. So those who became the commanders of Union cavalry had to figure out not only how to train their troopers and officers, but to determine exactly what their role and missions would be, what tactics would be needed to carry those tasks out, how cavalry would relate to the other two arms both in support and combat, and what their role would be in the overall strategic scheme for winning the war. In short, they had to answer the question, why do we need cavalry? Over the course of the war Federal commanders came up with a solution to the problem. An American Dragoon was created, able to both fight dismounted with a multi-shot carbine and to mount a sabre charge, but, most importantly, able to combine both tactics at the brigade level which allowed the Union cavalry to not only support an infantry army, but to be a cavalry army unto itself. By the end of the war, Major General James Harrison Wilson was able to write of his cavalry corps to Union Commander in Chief Lt. General Ulysses S. Grant that, "I regard this corps to-day as the model for modern cavalry in organization, equipment, armament, and discipline, and hazard nothing in saying that it embodies more of the virtues of the three arms, without any sacrifice of those of cavalry, than any similar number of men in the world." [1]

[1] United States War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1880-1901), Series I, volume 49, part 2, p. 663 (hereafter cited as *O.R.*, I, 49, pt. 2, 663).

Nineteenth century European military theory gave cavalry set tasks to perform. In short, they were:

> 1) Reconnaissance - locating and maintaining contact with the enemy.
> 2) Screening - covering and concealing the movements of your own army from the enemy's reconnaissance attempts.
> 3) Covering the flanks and rear of your army in battle and threatening those of your enemy.
> 4) Shock charges against the enemy to break them, to produce a rout, or, when your own army is withdrawing, to delay the pursuit.
> 5) Picketing, orderly, and provost duty.
> 6) Long distance raids designed to attack the supply lines of the enemy. This type of raid was frequently used in the American Civil War [2]

With the missions of cavalry set out, the initial task of Union cavalry leaders was to develop appropriate tactics and mold raw recruits into veteran troopers to carry them out. But what made the American dragoon unique, and indeed made Wilson glow over his corps, was not just that the cavalry could perform these missions, but that the Federal cavalryman, confronted with a foe whose mounted troops initially were often better trained in fighting and riding than he was and, while operating in generally difficult terrain, responded to these challenges by combining traditional European cavalry tactics with dismounted tactics developed in the American West to present a more flexible capability. The true dragoon that resulted had the flexibility to use either or both of these tactics against the Confederate foe. Indeed, the sabre charge was emphatically not just a remnant of an earlier age but an integral part of the cavalryman's tactical arsenal and, when used in conjunction with dismounted troopers using rapid fire carbines, Federal cavalry was fearsome and effective. Major General Phillip Henry Sheridan recognized that it was the combination of these two features that made it unique. [3] Cavalry actions affected the course of battle at Gettysburg and Chickamauga and the cavalry's success in delaying the advance of Confederate infantry in the initial phase of each battle led to the acceptance by the Federal high command that cavalry could perform more than their traditional tasks.

To give credit where it is due, Jeb Stuart's Confederate cavalry of the Army of Northern Virginia utilized these tactics in the first years of the war before the Federals were well enough trained to do so. Like his Federal colleagues, he too was a West Point graduate and had gained practical experience in the American West. But he had the initial advantage of a culture where the cavalry came from the class of society where riding was natural and expected. However, the South was unable to provide the technological capability nor the continuous supplies of horses and men that the north could, and by

[2] Leroy Eltinge. *Notes on Cavalry*, Lecture delivered Feb. 14, 1917 (Fort Leavenworth, KS: Army Service Schools Press, 1917), 8; Moses Harris, "The Union Cavalry," in Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States, (hereafter cited a MOLLUS)—Wisconsin *War Papers*, 1:356. Milwaukee: Burdick, Armitage & Allen, 1891.
[3] Harris, in Mollus, 1:371.

mid-1863 the southern cavalry was in decline while the Federal was evolving to new heights.

This essay deals with the development of front line Union cavalry units in the eastern and western theatres. Rear echelon units did not always obtain the same proficiency as these fighting regiments. In addition, the Trans-Mississippi theatre presented its own special problems. There were no large infantry armies as there were further east, and the geographical scope of the fighting inclined both sides to create both true cavalry and mounted infantry units on both sides, using different tactics and performing different tasks, sometimes independently and sometimes in conjunction with infantry. Supply problems affected Union and Confederate alike, impacting their potential development, and rare was the cavalry unit that fought in this region that had been trained further east. Both contemporary and secondary sources tend to lump them all together as 'cavalry', disregarding their tactics and missions, but that is an incorrect characterization.

The Roots of American Cavalry

By the nineteenth century, European warfare had developed into an affair of close-order infantry armed with muzzle loading muskets, supported by artillery and several types of cavalry. In the Napoleonic wars, the star of this latter arm was the heavy cavalry, the shock troops whose legendary massed sabre charges against enemy infantry left its imprint on the imagination of European military minds for most of the nineteenth century, even as advances in weaponry made such charges more and more perilous. European cavalry manuals preserved the romance and spirit of the charge of Napoleon's heavy cavalry against the British infantry squares at Waterloo and failed to adapt to new technology.

Napoleonic era commanders also utilized light cavalry and dragoons. The former was lightly armed and expected to scout, man outposts, closely support infantry in battle, and pursue a beaten enemy. The latter was a hybrid between light cavalry and an infantryman. Armed with a sabre, pistol, and carbine, he was supposed to be able to act as a scout or screener, but also dismount and fight as light infantry. In practice, the dragoon was the ugly duckling of European cavalry as there was no consistency as to how he was used. Some units acted mostly as light cavalry and others, in effect, as mounted infantry able to move quickly around the battlefield. Ironically, it was the ugly duckling, not the star, that would serve as the model for the development of Union cavalry.

Although there had been mounted units on both sides in the Revolutionary War, these were mostly irregulars. There had been no place for heavy cavalry in the woods and swamps of the American colonies. With the war over and the army discharged, the founding fathers' aversion to standing armies would dominate American thinking even as the need to protect the western frontier forced the creation of regular army units as early as 1791. The mounted arm, though, received little attention until pressure from westward moving settlers prompted Congress to authorize the 1st Dragoons in 1833. Followed by a

sister regiment, the 2nd Dragoons in 1836, these two regiments had to depend on the practical school of experience to teach them tactics as they were spread in small detachments over the western plains and swamps of Florida. Neither Scott's Tactics, (1834), nor Poinsett's, (February 1841) essentially a translation of the Napoleonic based French cavalry manual ("System of Cavalry Tactics"), were of much practical use. [4]

In 1846 a regiment of mounted riflemen was authorized followed by two regiments of cavalry in 1855, just two years after Poinsett's was finally added to West Point's curriculum. Effectively, though, these five units were indistinguishable, performing similar tasks fighting Native Americans. They operated in small formations, generally pursuing and then dismounting to skirmish against Native Americans, against whom a massed sabre charge would have been ridiculous, as it so proved the one time it was actually tried. French cavalry theory firmly planted the supremacy of the sabre and spurs into the minds of American officers such as Major Generals James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart and George Brinton McClellan, but had little application to the Indian wars. In the official mind, just what these mounted troops were supposed to be remained murky. They had been directed to be cavalry or dragoons, but in practice tended to be poorly armed and badly used mounted infantrymen. Unfortunately, no American cavalry strategist arose to systematize their experience nor to think how it might apply against a foe similarly armed and organized. Thus, as the Civil War approached, the men who were to lead the cavalry carried the mixed concepts of the cavalryman as a sabre-swinging horseman with the reality of their experience as mounted infantry, a muddled mixture of lessons from the western plains combined with European cavalry ideas and tactics.

A Difficult Birth: Green Men, Green Horses, and Bad Equipment

When Fort Sumter was fired upon in April 1861, the United States had just five mounted regiments scattered at posts all over the West. Many of their officers had, or would shortly, resign to take commissions in the new Southern Confederacy, although most of the rank and file, primarily immigrants from the north, remained loyal. Joined by a sixth regiment in May, they were renumbered by date of organization as the 1st to 6th U.S. cavalry, usually referred to as the Regulars. This, at least, was an attempt to recognize that whatever their previous designation, all the regular mounted troops had developed on the same lines, dictated largely by the nature of the West and their Native

[4] Winfield Scott, President of the Board, *A System of Tactics or Rules for the Exercises and Maneuvers of the Cavalry and Light Infantry and Riflemen of the United States* (By Authority of the Department of War, Washington: Francis Preston Blair, 1834), also known as *Scott's Tactics*; J. R. Poinsett, 3 vols. *Cavalry Tactics, First Part, School of the Trooper—of the Platoon—and of the Squadron—Mounted, Cavalry Tactics, Second Part, School of the Trooper—of the Platoon—and of the Squadron—Dismounted, Cavalry Tactics, Third Part—Evolutions of a Regiment* (Printed by Order of the War Department, Washington: J. and G. S. Gideon, Printers, 1841), also known as *Poinsett's. Poinsett's* was republished, with little revision as *Cavalry Tactics. In Three Parts. School of the Trooper, of the Platoon, of the Squadron, and the Evolutions of a Regiment* (Printed by Order of the War Department, Washington: Government Printing Office, 1864.

American opponents. However, considering the scope of the war that had just erupted, it was nearly like having no cavalry at all. That was fine with Brevet Lieutenant General Winfield Scott, General-In-Chief of the Federal forces, who saw no use for mounted troops in the coming war. Virginia, his immediate concern, was too full of uneven ground, woods, and fences to allow European cavalry tactics. Besides, he reasoned, the war was undoubtedly going to be short, cavalry was expensive, took years to train, and the government, having never stockpiled any cavalry equipment, had nothing to give them anyway. Volunteer regiments were only being raised for 90 days, far too short to train cavalry, so Scott saw no reason to authorize any volunteer mounted units.

The July Federal rout at First Bull Run, caused President Abraham Lincoln to overrule Scott and by December there were fifty regiments of cavalry being raised. Unfortunately, neither Scott nor his successor, Major General George B. McClellan, did much to push the War Department to adequately equip or train cavalry, giving the South a real advantage as the Federal government struggled to create an effective cavalry arm.

Much of the problem, in fact, was philosophical. Not having really determined what the mounted arm was supposed to do before the war, there was no clear voice dictating how new cavalry units should be trained, armed, and utilized. The War Department needed to decide, first, which of the missions of cavalry this mounted force was to perform? Second, given the answer to that question, what type of cavalry and tactics were appropriate to accomplishing those missions? That, in turn, dictated whether heavy or light cavalry or dragoons were to be created. How would these men be equipped, given their missions and factors such as the terrain they would be operating in? Would they be used in small units under the command of infantry commanders, or in massed formations under their own commanders? Finally, and practically, the last issue for the War Department was simple logistics. How to get raw men and horses trained and equipped so as to make them an effective force?

Unfortunately, there was no one in the War Department who was any clearer on what needed to be done in 1861 then there had been before the war. It took well over a year for the Federal cavalry to be of much use and while part of the problem was logistical in nature (equipping and training raw recruits and horses), a significant part was simply the unpreparedness of the War Department on the philosophical and tactical level. Having never fought in a war against a similarly armed foe there was, in fact, no agreement as to how cavalry should be used. They had learned French theory at West Point and practical lessons in the West, but few seemed to have considered how the role of cavalry would now change in support of large modern armies. In the first two years of the war, the Federals would learn what would not work by hard example as they were often pummeled by Rebel cavalry. But slowly they developed a tactical sense of how to accomplish their missions, a process that incorporated the long taught but little used sabre charge with the dismounted skirmish tactics learned in the forests and plains of North America. If we are to understand how Union cavalry became the overwhelming force it was in 1865, we have to bear in mind that the evolution of the Federal cavalry was a

process and as such, involved changes in mission, training, equipment, and tactics as ideas about the function of mounted troops changed.

Although there were six regiments of regulars who could have acted as a small training cadre, they were not provided as instructors to the volunteers, so there were literally tens of thousands of volunteers across the north training in state camps led by officers who were likewise green, elevated to high rank because they were influential men or had helped raise the regiment, not because they actually knew anything about cavalry. Most of the new recruits had never ridden a horse or fired a gun, much less made a sabre charge. As one veteran observed after the war, "It seems as if each recruit for the cavalry thought the especial requirement for that branch of the service was that he could neither ride, saddle, nor groom a horse." [5] Horses were likewise green and often unfit, while horse equipage and decent arms were scarce.

Conventional wisdom held that it took two years to train a cavalryman and his horse, but the Union army had to get armies into the field more quickly than that. The volunteers slowly learned the elements of dismounted and mounted drill which would serve them well in the future, but by the beginning of 1862, they were sent off to the front literally and figuratively ill-equipped. Typical was the experience of the 7th Pennsylvania Cavalry, a regiment that had been trained in Harrisburg and then shipped west to Louisville with three Pennsylvania infantry regiments. Departing south towards Bardstown in early January 1862, one writer recorded,

> Our regiment was very glad to obey marching orders from this "Muddy Camp" ... During the first few months there was considerable lamentation for fear we should be compelled to return home without delivering a shot or a sabre-stroke...
>
> The work of packing had to be done in a hurry. Most of our company (The Independent Dragoons) were excellent horsemen, accustomed to the saddle; but how to pack bed and board, household goods and three days provender on horseback, was a mystery yet to be solved. To leave anything behind was not once thought of; the castaway clothing of other regiments had to be gathered and lugged, that nothing be lost.
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> Two woolen (sic) blankets and a coverlet brought from home were hurriedly rolled into a bundle two feet long and a foot thick, which was strapped on the saddle behind; the rubber dolman overcoat, carpet sack with several suits of underclothing, shaving-tools, shoe-brush and blacking, and perhaps a sheep-skin, had to be packed in front. The side-

[5] D. M. Gilmore, "Cavalry: Its Use and Value as Illustrated by Reference to the Engagements of Kelly's Ford and Gettysburg," in MOLLUS—Minnesota Commandery, Chaplain Edward D. Neill, D.D., ed., *Glimpses of the Nation's Struggle*, *Second Series*. St. Paul, MN: St. Paul Book and Stationary Company, 1890), 38-51, 39.

> pockets, or saddle-bags, were filled with crackers and forty rounds of ammunition.
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> The dragoon then girded himself with a heavy cavalry sword; on one shoulder hung a monstrous shooting-iron (soon replaced by the carbine), and on the other a haversack holding three days' rations. Thus equipped, the horses were led into line, each with a nose-bag dangling on his neck containing a feed of oats, and a weight of one hundred and fifty pounds on his back. The command is given. "Attention: Prepare to mount: Mount!"
>
> Each trooper was expected to obey the command with his accustomed agility. The scrambling to get into the saddle was highly amusing to a disinterested spectator. Some sat astride the stern of the ship, but how to get over the rear bundle was the difficulty. Short-legged men had to lead their horses to the nearest fence, and from the top rail drop down amidships. When once mounted, it was only a question of time as to how we should dismount. The inconvenience and discomfort arising from so extensive a barricade in front and rear, was compensated in part by the sense of security one felt in the presence of an enemy with small shot. (They crossed the river and the command given to "close up"). The first company that crossed the river was a mile in advance, and it was necessary to make a cavalry charge to overtake them. As soon as the horses began to gallop, the rigging of the ship and the passenger on the upper deck began to slide backward, notwithstanding the pilot held on to rein and mane for dear life. The sight was indeed ludicrous to the multitudes of spectators lining the streets on either side...
>
> Now and then a saddle would turn earthward toward the centre of gravity, leaving the rider and his bundles, mud-splashed, in the middle of the road...This first bloodless charge will never be forgotten by those of our boys who were under the painful necessity of casting anchor in the middle of the street for repairs, at high noon on that memorable Sunday. [6]

Green regiments such as departed for the seat of war and gained valuable, if sometimes painful, lessons on when to use what tactics. However, these were generally learned in company or battalion (four companies) sized actions because early army commanders, such as McClellan, Major General Don Carlos Buell, and Major General John C. Frémont, did not conceive of cavalry as an independent fighting force, but rather as only having use in escort, orderly, picket, and provost duty. McClellan had written before the war that the value of cavalry lay in its shock value, the spurs and sabre but as Commander of the Army of the Potomac, he broke them up into small detachments. Far from keeping them together in numbers sufficient for an effective mass charge, McClellan attached these small groups of cavalry to infantry brigades and divisions,

[6] T. F. Dornblaser, *Sabre Strokes of the Pennsylvania Dragoons* (Philadelphia, PA: Lutheran Publication Society, 1884), 39-41.

putting them in the hands of generals without any mounted experience and with scant interest in the use of the arm as a striking force. The same was true out west.

Although ineffectively used for the most part, eastern cavalry units got a good dose of combat accompanying McClellan's drive up the Peninsula in May and June 1862. Skirmishing on picket duty taught the men how to use their weapons effectively. When Confederate General Robert E. Lee hit back at McClellan in the Seven Days battles, the cavalry learned that they could use their carbines to hold back infantry. But they also learned some hard lessons. At Gaines Mill, five companies of the 5th US Cavalry were needlessly slaughtered trying to stop a Confederate infantry advance with a sabre charge. While the Regulars galloped down a hill and crossed a space of 250-275 yards, the unshaken Confederate infantry simply stopped, aimed carefully, and tore the charge apart. This frontal sabre charge resulted in 150 casualties out of a force of 250. There were clearly times when mounted cavalry might charge and run down infantry, but charging against massed confidant infantry with adequate time to form and fire was nearly always doomed to failure. With the increased range of the rifled musket, infantry fire would cut down men and horses before the cavalry could get close enough to use their sabres. [7]

The cavalry in the West had similar experiences in the spring and summer of 1862. In Middle Tennessee, they fought with Confederates Colonel Joseph Wheeler, Colonel John Hunt Morgan, and Brigadier General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the latter two employing their own unconventional tactics. In early May, part of the 7th Pennsylvania and 1st Kentucky (U.S.) charged through Lebanon and quickly discovered two things. One group found that charging down the main street where Morgan had posted his men in the surrounding buildings was not a particularly good idea. So they dismounted and exchanged fire with the Southerners and drove them out of the houses. Meanwhile, the rest of the Federals, coming upon 300 of Morgan's men on horseback beyond town, fired their carbines and then mounted a sabre charge, breaking the Confederate line and causing a rout which went down in history as the 'Lebanon races'. Two tactical lessons learned.

On August 11, infantry Brigadier General Richard Woodhouse Johnson went after Morgan near Gallatin with a brigade of cavalry. The lead elements under Colonel George Campbell Wynkoop of the 7th made contact and immediately deployed dismounted skirmishers, pushing the Confederates on the flanks and front. As they began to break, Wynkoop ordered a sabre charge to take advantage. This was sound tactics, but just then Johnson came up, countermanded the order, withdrew a short distance, allowing Morgan time to regroup, advance, and envelop the Federals. When Johnson decided to surrender, Wynkoop and Lieutenant Colonel Robert Kline of the 3rd Indiana cut their way out with a determined sabre charge. While these two had clearly learned something of cavalry tactics during that year, Johnson clearly had not. Nor had his superior Don Carlos Buell

[7] Steven Z. Starr, *The Union Cavalry in The Civil War*, 3 vols. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979), 3:275-6.

who kept his cavalry divided into small units, preventing them from being an effective force. 1862 saw the Federal cavalrymen turn into veterans with a good sense of tactics, but they continued to suffer from poor leadership at the highest levels. In October, Buell would fail to use his cavalry at the battle of Perryville, but his successor, Major General William Starke Rosecrans would start the process of putting the cavalry back together under the leadership of generals who could, and would, use it.

After the disastrous Peninsula campaign, Lincoln brought Major General John Pope east to command troops in northern Virginia. Pope, unlike McClellan, actually understood that cavalry needed to be massed and began to reassemble the various cavalry regiments under his command. Although Pope failed at Second Manassas, the eastern Union cavalry, like those in the West, also began to show that they had learned their skills. McClellan, true to form, failed to use them at Antietam, but regiments such as the 8th Illinois, showed in actions before and after that campaign that they had learned to use both dismounted and mounted tactics effectively. On November 5, at Barbee's Crossroads, Virginia, the brigades of Brigadier Generals Alfred Pleasonton and William Woods Averell, to whom the 8th Illinois was now attached, clashed with Confederate Brigadier Generals Wade Hampton and Fitzhugh Lee's brigades under the command of Major General James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart. Benjamin Franklin 'Grimes' Davis, Colonel of the 8th New York, (Averell's brigade) met a charge of the Rebel horsemen by dismounting part of his regiment behind a stone wall. Their carbine volleys ripped apart the Confederate column and threw it into confusion. As the men in gray reeled back in disorder, Grimes sent in the rest of his regiment, mounted, and drove them off the field. This was a classic example of the new tactics being applied and illustrated how the Federal cavalry was beginning to understand how to handle the Confederate cavalry.

1863: The Federal Cavalry Comes of Age

By the spring of 1863, the Federal cavalry had overcome their inexperience, equipment issues, and tactical ignorance to become a competent veteran force. This was the critical year for the evolution of the Federal cavalry because it was in this year's campaigns that they were able to demonstrate not only technical and tactical expertise, but their ability to be an integral striking force of the army. As the campaign season opened in Virginia, Tennessee, and Mississippi, the men had developed into competent dragoons who now had the skills necessary to ride, shoot, and wield a sabre. They had been given commanders who were willing to reunite the cavalry as regiments, brigades, and divisions, thus allowing the cavalry to be more efficiently used in reconnaissance and screening the flanks of the army. More importantly, 1863 saw their commanders constructing a larger role for the cavalry. At Brandy Station, Gettysburg, and Chickamauga they showed they could delay and pursue infantry as well as cavalry, demonstrating a striking power that had not been anticipated. This was also reflected in the mounted raid as a Federal strategy, striking at Confederate communications and supply. Jeb Stuart, Forrest, and Major General Earl van Dorn, of course, had already introduced the Federals to the effects of such raids, cutting railroads and destroying vast amounts of supplies at rear area depots. Stuart rode around McClellan and Pope and

destroyed millions of dollars of supplies in Virginia. Van Dorn, by destroying Grant's supply depot at Holly Springs, Mississippi literally caused the withdrawal of Grant's first thrust at capturing Vicksburg. Union cavalry leaders, such as Major General George Stoneman, now pushed the high command of the Army to allow the Federal cavalry carry out similar feats and in the spring of 1863 were finally given that mission. While these raids rarely produced any long-term effects, they allowed the cavalry to show what they could do as an independent command, laying the foundation for James Wilson and Phil Sheridan's use of cavalry in later in the war.

On January 25t, Major General Joseph Hooker replaced Major General Ambrose Everett Burnside as the commander of the Army of the Potomac. Hooker completed Pope's reorganization of the cavalry by creating a corps comprised of three divisions and a reserve brigade. As part of his task to revive the army's morale after the terrible December defeat at Fredericksburg, Hooker removed the cavalry from the control of infantry commanders and provided them the opportunity for a series of small confidence boosting victories. One such early victory was at Kelly's Ford (March 17, 1863) where Federal sabres drove back Virginia pistols in one of the war's classic all mounted cavalry battles. [8] The result at Kelly's Ford bolstered the confidence of the entire corps. In early May, Hooker sent Stoneman on a raid around Lee's army, thus allowing a Federal cavalry command to operate for the first time as an independent weapon against not only the enemy's cavalry but his communications and supply lines. This new mission was made possible by the confidence of the new Federal dragoons in their mastery of mounted and dismounted tactics.

One of the true leaders that emerged in the eastern cavalry was Brigadier General John Buford. As fine a cavalry commander as any on either side, he led his 1st Division during the spring and summer of 1863 in a series of actions culminating in the Gettysburg campaign that showcased how the Union cavalry had evolved, both in tactics and in defining and carrying out its missions. From May through July 1863, Buford and his division carried out all the missions of dragoon cavalry including, screening, reconnaissance, protecting the army's flanks while threatening the enemy's, and shock charges. Equally important, they showed their value as a striking force when they demonstrated their ability to protect a position for their army by holding up masses of Confederate infantry west of Gettysburg on July 1. In a sense, this built off of the mounted raid, where masses of cavalry operated as an independent command, willing to both attack and defend against all types of enemy troops.

The Gettysburg campaign began with the largest cavalry battle in American history, the June 9 battle of Brandy Station. Seeking to discover what Lee's intentions might be, Hooker directed his Cavalry Corps commander, Alfred Pleasonton, to feel out the Army of Northern Virginia. Pleasanton, intending to catch Stuart by surprise from three directions, directed Buford's Division, supported by infantry, to open the attack.

[8] Starr, *Union Cavalry*, 1:327-50.

The following account by Dr. Abner Hard of the 8th Illinois shows how well the troopers had mastered the combined tactics of dismounted fighting with mounted attacks,

> The First Division and reserve brigade were to cross the Rappahannock at Beverly Ford, the Second Division at Kelly's Ford, and the Third Division at Rappahannock station.... We marched that night to within a mile or two of the fords, and awaited the approach of dawn. Scarcely had the golden sunlight cast its rays upon the silver clouds that skirted the eastern horizon, when "boots and saddles" were sounded...The march was commenced for the ford... in the following order: Eighth New York, Eighth Illinois, and Third Indiana...The Ford was deep and the banks abrupt, and two could only cross abreast. A staff officer of Colonel Davis was stationed at the river and as each company officer came through the stream, he received the order to "draw sabres," which was obeyed. Between the river and the woods in front was an open space across which one squadron of the Eighth New York, led by colonel Davis in person, moved rapidly; but at the edge of the woods they came upon a barricade of rails which the enemy had constructed to impede their progress. Here the pickets poured into the Eighth New York a deadly fire. Several were killed and several mortally wounded, among whom was the gallant Colonel Davis. Nothing daunted, they rushed upon the rebels with drawn sabres, and drove them for a considerable distance into the woods, where, meeting re-inforcements, the rebels poured into their ranks a fire they could not withstand, and they fell back in confusion. On reaching the woods the Eighth Illinois returned their sabres, and drew their revolvers; and hastening forward a part of the regiment received the enemy, who were pressing hard upon the Eighth New York, with a yell accompanied by volleys of lead, so well directed as to turn the tide of battle, driving the enemy through the woods into the open fields beyond, where they had a battery encamped which barely escaped falling into our hands. [9]

Later the 8th would be dismounted and sent out to flank the enemy, but, being driven back by Virginia and North Carolina units, Buford sent in a mounted charge by his Reserve Brigade to relieve the pressure. Brandy Station has been called the largest and most classic cavalry fight of the war. But, amidst the swirling sabre charge and counter charge, it should not be forgotten that the cavalry also utilized dismounted tactics in appropriate situations and terrain. Buford demonstrated that these tactics could be used in support of each other in a concerted and calculated way. Jeb Stuart, Lee's premier cavalryman, was decidedly embarrassed even if he held the field after the battle. As Lee moved north, the Federals would have a series of fights each demonstrating their command of these tactics, combining dismounted skirmishers and artillery to hold the enemy and then charging as the enemy broke.

[9] Abner Hard, *History of the Eighth Cavalry Regiment Illinois Volunteers, During the Great Rebellion*, Morningside Books 1996 ed. (Aurora, IL: 1868), 242-3.

On July 1, west of Gettysburg, Buford again demonstrated the cavalry's new-found power by engaging Major General Henry Heth's Confederate infantry division. His defensive firepower and dismounted tactics, combined with mounted retreats to new lines of defense on successive ridges and excellent deployment of the six guns of Lieutenant John Haskell Calef's battery, forced Heth to deploy his division and delayed him for some two hours, long enough to allow the Federal 1st Corps to come up in support. Although Lee eventually overwhelmed the two Union infantry Corps on the field that day, the conscious use by Buford, with the consent of the Federal commander Major General John Fulton Reynolds, of his vastly outnumbered division to engage Heth helped to deny the high ground south and east of Gettysburg to the Army of Northern Virginia, the retention of which was the real strategic object for the Union forces that day. This affected the ultimate course of the battle and was an impressive display of the new power of cavalry, used in large formations with horse artillery attached, as an integral part of the striking force of the army.

In the West, the reorganization of the cavalry began in October 1862 when General Rosecrans relieved Buell and took over the newly created Department of the Cumberland. Like Hooker in the East, he recognized the poor condition of his cavalry and ordered Brigadier General David Sloane Stanley to detach the cavalry commands from the infantry and begin the process of refitting and concentration. Stanley, who had served on the plains with the dragoons and cavalry, insisted that his cavalry sharpen their sabres. To him, the use of the sabre represented an attitude, a confidence that he felt the Federal cavalry needed. He did not, however, ignore the firepower of the cavalry and insisted on repeating rifles for his new command. By December, a significant portion of his command had them, a technological development that would provide a real edge to the Federals. The cavalry participated in the chaotic battle of Stones River at the end of December, but like the cavalry in the East, it wasn't until later in 1863 that they began to come into their own. The 7th Pennsylvania was kept busy screening the army of the Cumberland and feeling for Confederate General Braxton Bragg's army of Tennessee. Their brigade under Colonel Robert Horatio George Minty made spectacular sabre charges at places such as Rover and Unionville east of Murfreesboro, Spring Hill, and McMinnville, Tennessee. Rosecrans designated them the Sabre Brigade.

By June, the cavalry had honed its skills and was an integral element of Rosecrans' Tullahoma campaign that feinted Bragg out of his Middle Tennessee position. He used his cavalry to hold Bragg's attention on the Confederate left, while the Union infantry moved around his right. As Rosecrans shifted the army to his left, it fell to Stanley's cavalry to drive the enemy out of Guy's Gap and Shelbyville on the Confederate left to prevent the Southern troops from falling into the right and rear of the moving Federals. Guy's Gap lay on the Shelbyville road, west of the town, and Wheeler's cavalry had barricaded the pike going through the Gap. Stanley approached the Gap with the 1st Cavalry Division, under Brigadier General Robert Byington Mitchell, and Minty's brigade of the Second Division, about 5,000 strong. Using tactics that were now routine for the Federal cavalry, a two-mile line of dismounted skirmishers was advanced towards Wheeler's position followed by two thousand mounted men in

columns of attack. The 1st Division began the attack, but got bogged down, and after two hours, Stanley sent for Minty's Brigade. Receiving permission to make an assault upon the entrenchments, Minty dismounted the 3rd Battalion of the 7th, threw the 4th US to the left of the pike, the rest of the 7th to the right, and had the 4th Michigan move around to the far right in a flanking movement. The 3rd Indiana was held in mounted reserve. As the enemy was being flanked, the mounted battalions of the 7th charged down the Pike at the trenches. "The enemy's line wavered, the men huddled like sheep, broke and went at full speed towards Shelbyville." [10] Pursuing the foe, Minty launched a sabre attack, took the entrenchments before Shelbyville, and then charged again, through a battery until literally driving Wheeler into the Duck River.

> Colonel Minty gave orders for the Seventh Pennsylvania to again charge the artillery...Colonel Sipes replied: "If I must make the charge I'll take the artillery and drive them into the Duck River" ...Two pieces of Captain Newell's Ohio battery were placed on the right and left of the pike. As they belched forth fire, smoke and shell, our bugler, John Cole, sounded the charge. Through the smoke, down the hill went the little band, yelling like mad. We were on the dead run. Half the distance between the mile post and the confederate battery was passed in safety. Two shots had screamed over our heads, but the third shot hit Company G... but onward we ran. A ravine was reached a few hundred feet from the artillery. Fortunately, we were below their point-blank range. As we reached the slight rise going into Shelbyville we saw the Confederate cavalry waver and break. The artillery limbered up and joined the fleeing cavalry. The two hundred pushed onward with the yell revoiced. The last piece of artillery turned the corner of a street as the two hundred began to sabre the cannoniers. Then the riders were cut off the horses. One piece was ours in two minutes.... At that moment Gen. Wheeler led his escort in a counter charge. He delivered one volley and broke, caused by the Third Indiana coming down on our left flank... (a number of men were shot) Still we hardly stopped to look, cutting right cuts, left cuts, front cuts, and rear cuts, making thrusts right, left, and front---dealing death at every blow, until the Duck River was reached. [11]

It was an absolute classic demonstration of dragoon tactics at work, which when combined with pluck and confidence, made the Union cavalry feel they could accomplish anything.

Now, like Buford at Gettysburg, Minty would have a chance to show how effective he could be against Confederate infantry. On September 18, as Bragg's army confronted the left wing of Rosecrans' army around Chickamauga Creek, Georgia, Minty

[10] George Steahlin, "Stanley's Cavalry. Colonel Minty's Sabre Brigade at Guy's Gap. Gallant Charge of the Seventh Pennsylvania Cavalry at Shelbyville, Tennessee, on the 27th of June 1863," *National Tribune*, May 27, 1882.
[11] Ibid.

was screening the extreme left flank of the Federals when a division commanded by Brigadier General Bushrod Johnson tried to move around Rosecrans' flank. Rosecrans had spread his army corps too far apart and Bragg was trying to catch him and destroy him piecemeal. Minty was now in a position similar to that which had faced Buford. Having met a large force of enemy infantry, he needed to delay them until his own army could assume adequate defensive positions. Bragg's general assault depended on Johnson to begin the attack but, Johnson, like Heth, was moving without a cavalry screen and, not knowing what was in front of him, moved very cautiously. What followed was an excellent use of mounted and dismounted tactics to force the infantry to go on line and delay their advance for some seven hours. Like Buford, Minty took advantage of the terrain to delay and fall back, then utilized his battery of artillery to force the enemy back. Unlike Buford, Minty unleashed a desperate sabre attack by the 7th Pennsylvania and 4th Michigan throwing the Confederate infantry into confusion. Like Buford, though, 973 cavalrymen couldn't persevere forever against 4 brigades of infantry, but the delay completely disordered Bragg's plan of attack and materially affected the course of the battle of Chickamauga.

In 1863, the Federal cavalry in both the Eastern and Western theatres, showcased the skills of the American Dragoon. While there was no overall coordination of development from Washington, the common West Point training and experience in the pre-war army on the plains of the West by its senior commanders, plus their advances in equipment, especially firepower, plus a similar foe, pushed them in the same direction. The totality of their success that year proved the point that the cavalry, using defensive firepower and mounted charges, could be effective in delaying infantry. Instead of saddling up and leaving when infantry was detected, the cavalry could now expect to be an integral part of the striking force of the whole army. This was indeed a step beyond Napoleonic thinking.

Masses of Cavalry and Independent Command: The Union Cavalry Becomes the Best in the World.

By the end of 1863 the Federal cavalry were veteran and skilled dragoons who were as comfortable making mounted and dismounted attacks as standing behind a stone wall breaking the charge of the enemy. The missions of cavalry in support of infantry and artillery were now fairly clear as was the type of troops needed to perform them—dragoons armed with breech loading carbines (preferably multiple shot Spencers or Henrys), 6 shot revolvers, and sabres. That the Federal cavalry became efficient after a year and a half is neither surprising nor terribly significant. What is significant is that the emergence of the Federal dragoon, armed with better firepower and appropriate tactics enabled the evolution of cavalry's mission to include massed mounted raids as independent commands. Increased infantry and artillery firepower had reduced the cavalry in Europe to adjuncts to the main strike force. But making the American trooper into an effective dragoon, in which multiple shot carbines and pistols were a critical development, along with adding light horse artillery which were assigned to their formations, resulted in the creation of cavalry armies, masses of cavalry operating in

either close coordination with the infantry, as in the Shenandoah Valley (1864), or in independent commands, as in Wilson's Selma Raid (1865). The mounted raids of 1863 and 1864 were a beginning in that direction, but were limited in scope and objective. The cavalry army tended to exercise more autonomy and act more like an infantry command, being given basic orders and objectives leaving the commanders themselves to devise the best way to carry them out. Wilson's raid into Alabama exemplifies this very well. Significantly, too, while there was no intent for these cavalry armies to confront large masses of enemy infantry, their mission did not dictate that they shy away from such forces. Neither Sheridan nor Wilson hesitated to attack any enemy forces in their front, regardless of type, given the right circumstance. The expectation was that the new cavalryman/dragoon could handle any opposition within reason.

There were a number of large cavalry raids both in the Virginia and Atlanta theatres of war in the campaign season of 1864, and these set the stage for the final step in the evolution of Union cavalry. This was Major General James Wilson's huge thrust into Alabama in April 1865. Wilson had been with Phil Sheridan in the Shenandoah Valley campaign of 1864 and Grant sent him west that October to command the cavalry corps that Sherman had decided to leave behind when he made his march through Georgia. Wilson was not content to be just an adjunct to Major General George Henry Thomas' army around Nashville, he wanted to be an offensive force. "Cavalry is useless for defense; its only power is in a vigorous offensive; therefore, I urge its concentration south of the Tennessee and hurling it into the bowels of the South in masses that the enemy cannot drive back." [12] He appreciated the sabre but felt that the Spencer repeating carbine was also necessary to the cavalryman's success. "...The true plan of action was a heavy dismounted skirmish line corresponding to the infantry line of battle, with a mounted force to charge the enemy's flanks and cut in upon his rear as opportunity offered." [13] This in fact was how cavalry tactics had been developing as shown by many actions of the front-line Union cavalry both east and west.

With Lieutenant General John Bell Hood's Army of Tennessee smashed at Nashville in December, Wilson gathered all his cavalry units together, refitted them, and marched on March 22, 1865 from Gravelly Springs, Alabama with 12,500 mounted and 1,500 dismounted men, to be mounted when possible. He moved off towards his main objective, Selma, with the largest cavalry force ever seen on the continent. After several brushes with Forrest and related commands, Wilson approached Selma on April 1. Forrest was waiting with 2,000 men at Plantersville, some 20 miles from Selma. At 4:00 p.m. Wilson deployed Brigadier General Eli Long's 2nd Division in a heavy dismounted line which fronted the Confederate line, while sending two mounted regiments to turn the flank. Forrest's line crumbled under the assault and his men fled towards Selma. The 17th Indiana made a sabre charge in this attack and "drove the enemy behind his barricades,

[12] *O.R.* I, 39, pt. 3, 443.
[13] James Wilson, *Under The Old Flag*, 2 vols. (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1912), 2:219.

charged against his main line, broke through it, rode over his guns, and turning left about, they cut their way out." [14] Forrest escaped but not without several sabre wounds. [15]

Now, confronted with 7,000 Confederates holed up in the defenses of Selma, an elaborate array of trenches, abatis, and palisades with loop holes, bristling with batteries, Wilson would show what a cavalry army could do. Dismounting his men, he attacked from front and flanks. His confident men dashed forward, reached the works, and with volleys from their Spencers, routed the Confederates. As they broke, Wilson, in his excitement, made a charge with his escort of the 4th Regulars, the only mounted action of the fight. The Southerners either surrendered or fled. Cavalry wasn't supposed to mount an attack such as this, and had this not been the sad remnants of Forrest and Hood's men, he might not have attempted it. But Wilson showed how the cavalry had now become an independent army, foreshadowing what armored columns, which would replace cavalry armies, would be able to do in the twentieth century. The mission of strike force was now an accepted part of the Union cavalry's repertoire.

Over the four years of the American Civil War, the Federal Cavalryman developed from rank amateur to effective dragoon. The cavalry, at the same time, developed a strong sense of mission which involved not only the conventional light cavalry tasks of screening, pursuit, reconnaissance, and so on, but revived some of the sense of the hitting force of the heavy cavalry. More than just a question of acquiring skills, this was an evolution beyond the European tradition. The men gained tactical skill, mounted and dismounted, through the practical experience of doing their duty. By the time they became efficient dragoons, their mission became more defined and they had the tools to accomplish it. By then, the veterans understood the type of enemy they were dealing with, had learned basic skills with sabres and firearms, and had a good idea of which to use and when. At the same time, their generals realized that if the cavalry was going to be of any use, it would have to be taken away from the infantry commanders and concentrated. The benefits of this wise policy immediately showed themselves as the Union cavalry not only began to better accomplish their tasks, but to hold sway over their Confederate opponents.

It is not just that the Federal Cavalryman became an efficient dragoon, although that contradicts those that see him as only mounted infantry. The real significance is that use of cavalry was evolving towards independent cavalry armies. At Gettysburg and Chickamauga. the cavalry successfully attacked and delayed regular infantry, demonstrating their potential as a striking force. The availability of greater firepower gave cavalry an ability that European theory did not envision for light cavalry, or even dragoons. Not only could it delay infantry, but in the Shenandoah, at Nashville, and at Selma, it showed that it could attack infantry forces and be successful. By the end of the war, Wilson took that striking capability and showed that the cavalry could be the independent strike force, a whole new mobile army that could materially aid the cause of

[14] Dornblaser, *Sabre Strokes*, 208.
[15] Edward Longacre, *Mounted Raids of the Civil War* (South Brunswick, NJ: A. S. Barnes, 1975), 316.

the main armies fighting miles away. It was not an army of mounted infantrymen, however, but of dragoons who still relied on the sabre charge in the proper situation and who fought in cavalry, not infantry, formations.

In 1865, this was probably the most formidable dragoon force in the World. But the volunteer cavalry would soon be discharged and the wars against Native Americans would not be appropriate for sabre charges or mass invasions. By the time the United States was involved in another major war, the era of cavalry had passed and the horse replaced by motorized and airborne vehicles. There would never again be a need for masses of cavalry thrown against the territory of the enemy.

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