

The Cavalry at Appomattox: A Tactical Study of Mounted Operations during the Civil War's Climactic Campaign, March 27-April 9, 1865

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Review

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Longacre, Edward G. *The Cavalry at Appomattox: A Tactical Study of Mounted Operations during the Civil War's Climactic Campaign, March 27-April 9, 1865.* Stackpole books, \$32.95 ISBN 811700518

War horse

Authoritative new book contextualizes mounted branch of military

As in his other works, Edward Longacre's prowess as the premier authority on mounted operations of the American Civil War is once again manifested in his latest publication, **The Cavalry at Appomattox: A Tactical Study of Mounted Operations during the Civil War's Climactic Campaign, March 27-April 9, 1865.** In this work he pulls out all the stops.

There are an abundant number of books that cover the waning days of the Confederacy, but this one definitely turns over new ground, woven entirely around the tactics and maneuvers of the Civil War. The author manages to fill in many of the gaps heretofore overlooked by other historians with the application of so many interesting, never before published, facts and details. In his research he gleaned a prodigious amount of fresh material from personal letters and recently discovered field reports.

Longacre even manages to present interesting profiles on the major personalities of the drama, particularly Grant, Lee, Sheridan, Pickett, Sherman, Stuart, Hampton and Custer, to name a few, even to the point of revealing the name and description of their individual mounts. He gives a new spin on these characters, describing their negative and positive characteristics, and glimpses into their personal quirks and the animosities and conflicts between fellow officers in both armies.

The author begins by relating the origins of Civil War cavalry with a description of Southern horsemen running roughshod over the Northern troopers

during the early years of the war, i.e., Southern boys were natural born horsemen as opposed to the "...New England store clerks" who seemed to proliferate the Northern ranks. As a result, the Confederates consistently defeated and sometimes humiliated Federal cavalymen until, worn down through the intervening years by attrition and diminishing resources and the introduction of new cavalry tactics by the Union, the tables were dramatically turned in favor of the Union. From then on, Longacre describes in meticulous detail how it was downhill all the way, chronicling the death throes of Southern cavalry.

One overriding factor that frequently stands out throughout the unraveling of this work is the emergence of superior firepower possessed by the Federals, which definitely played a pivotal role in the outcome of the war. Often mentioned were the seven-shot Spencer and the 16-shot Henry rifles. The Confederates, on the whole, most of whom were still equipped with antiquated single shot muzzle loaders, simply had no way to prepare and defend against these rapid-firing weapons that confronted them with such devastating effects. These ingenious and spectacular weapons were, in essence, veritable machine guns.

The Cavalry at Appomattox makes for heart-rending reading for Southern sympathizers as the story gradually reveals the futile, albeit heroic effort of the Army of Northern Virginia in the face of such overwhelming odds. They simply didn't stand a chance. The Confederates did not go down easy, however. In the midst of their last ditch efforts to sustain the Confederate army long enough to allow Lee to join with Johnson, there would be sporadic moments of exhilarating victories as the outnumbered, under armed, underfed Rebels fought tenaciously. Even though the final outcome was clearly obvious to the Federals, they continued to hold the highest respect and fear for the dying Army of Northern Virginia. Like a wounded tiger, the Army of Northern Virginia was still capable of unleashing deadly counterattacks, right up to the McLean house.

The reader can feel the pain of the Confederates desperately trying to survive, and clearly experience Sheridan's ruthless, bloodthirsty drive to exterminate the last vestiges of the Rebel army and he was anxious "to smash things up!" And to "Let the thing be pressed."

The dramatic conclusion of the Appomattox Campaign earmarked it as the zenith of large-scale mounted campaigning in America, the like of which would never be seen again on the American continent.

A more apt subtitle would have been: The Thrill of Victory and the Agony of Defeat. The author captured it all.

William A. Spedale is an author and historian, whose Civil War publications include Battle of Baton Rouge, 1862 (1985), and Where Bugles Called and Rifles Gleamed (1986). His e-mail address is larelic@aol.com.