

### Horse Soldiers at Gettysburg: The Cavalryman's View of the Civil War's Pivotal Campaign

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## Review

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**Murphy, Daniel.** *Horse Soldiers at Gettysburg: The Cavalryman's View of the Civil War's Pivotal Campaign.* Stackpole Books, 2023. Hardcover. \$32.95. ISBN 9780811772716 pp. 397

The Civil War was an infantryman's war. The cavalry of the Civil War armies cuts a Romantic swath through Civil War military history for its Ivanhoe-like characters – J.E.B. Stuart, John Hunt Morgan, Judson Kilpatrick, Ulric Dahlgren – but its actual contribution toward any kind of military resolution on the battlefield was minimal. This was partly because the pre-war U.S. Army (and U.S. Congress) made only a reluctant and small-scale investment in developing a mounted arm, and partly because the American landscape east of the Mississippi was so heavily forested by contrast with Europe that large-scale cavalry operations were difficult to execute.

And yet Civil War cavalry operations still fascinate readers and admirers of Civil War military history, and never more so than the operations of the Gettysburg campaign. Not only was the Gettysburg campaign the site of two noteworthy cavalry-versus-cavalry collisions (at Brandy Station and on the Rummel Farm at Gettysburg), but J.E.B. Stuart's ill-starred ride around the Army of the Potomac was, from the first, blamed as a major cause of Confederate defeat. No surprise, then, that cavalry actions in and around Gettysburg have generated a literature all of their own, from the memoirs of William Blackford and James Harvey Kidd to the minute-by-minute accounts of Edward Longacre, Eric Wittenberg and David Petrucci. Daniel Murphy enters this field with a single-volume survey of these actions. He has the particular

virtue of being both an equestrian and a cavalry re-enactor, so that he brings to his account a lively appreciation for the character of horses and their high-maintenance demands. He adds to that another virtue, that of *not* being obsessed with J.E.B. Stuart, so that both Federal and Confederate cavalry get remarkably equal billing.

Murphy's opening offers a fine brief introduction to the nature of Civil War cavalry, from calculating the horse population of the United States at the opening of the war, to the daily needs of the horse on campaign. Unlike the European armies of the mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century, American Civil War cavalry was entirely a matter of light cavalry – which is to say, horses less than sixteen-hands-high and weapons limited to sabre, pistol and short-range carbine. Improvements in infantry weapons technology meant that “the days of heavy cavalry battering their draft horses through the infantry” – in other words, of Napoleon's *cuirassiers* at Waterloo or the British heavy cavalry brigade at Balaklava – were almost at an end, and in any event, the pre-war Army had never invested in the development of heavy cavalry. (17) The tasks of light cavalry were those of screening the movements of infantry from prying enemy eyes, and occasionally raiding an enemy's supply connections. Light cavalry, Murphy writes, “were “meant to be bold in their work, to lead the advance, find the enemy, and range between the lines” and stage “long-distance raids against supply lines, bridges, infrastructure, and even enemy cities.” (17) And given how some Civil War cavalry units (like Albert Jenkins' Confederate brigade) were actually armed with rifles, cavalry could also act as skirmishers, far in front of infantry movements.

Actual mounted combat was less dramatic. The sabre was a threatening, but not necessarily lethal, weapon: “Blades acted more like cleavers than scalpels and landed like steel whips that cracked skulls and splayed faces.” Cavalry might fight cavalry in line or in column, but the actual encounters were usually brief, at frighteningly close quarters, and involved quick

exchanges of attack, scatter, rally, and attack again. (21) Accompanying the cavalry (and much less likely to receive the attention they deserve) were batteries of "horse artillery," which were meant to be entirely mounted (unlike their field artillery counterparts) and served as "the most lethal arm in the mounted service." (25)

Murphy's narrative of the Gettysburg campaign begins with the opening cavalry encounter at Brandy Station on June 9, 1863, to which he devotes three chapters, then accompanies the movement of the Army of Northern Virginia's cavalry northward along the Blue Ridge. Murphy devotes particular attention to the series of actions at Aldie and Middleburg (June 17), and then Upperville (June 21), which were, like Brandy Station, less than bright moments for Stuart's cavalry and markers of how quickly the cavalry of the Army of the Potomac had achieved parity with them by 1863. One sees in these clashes how often cavalry charge back-and-forth, hacking and fleeing with sabres; but also how the real damage was usually inflicted by the artillery, followed closely by dismounted carbine fire. It is worth remembering from Murphy's descriptions how often cavalry actions occurred, not in sweeping formations over open fields, but in narrow roadways and even town streets.

No one writing about the Gettysburg campaign can ever escape the nagging question of Stuart's ride to nowhere-in-particular, from June 25<sup>th</sup> to July 2<sup>nd</sup>. Murphy is more generous in his interpretation of Stuart than most. He is inclined to credit both the potential benefits of the ride and Lee's awareness of the risks it involved. If Stuart hugged the right flank of Lee's advance down the Shenandoah and across the Potomac, "his horses would suffer a difficult trip. They threaded their way past macadamized roads" – which were brutal on horses' shoes and hoofs – "already clogged with Lee's main army," and with diminished hopes of forage. "The eastern route" which Stuart eventually pursued with three of Lee's seven cavalry brigades promised "to

deliver his horses in far better condition,” so “Stuart did what any good horse soldier would. He went east.” (169) Murphy also dismisses the idea – and rightly so – that Lee staged some theatrical dressing-down of Stuart once Stuart finally rejoined the Army of Northern Virginia on July 2<sup>nd</sup>. (208)

But Murphy does not merely turn his attention to trailing after Stuart. He actually gives usually short shrift to the so-called “Corbin’s Charge” action at Westminster, Maryland, and only cursory attention to the clash at Hanover, Pennsylvania, on June 30<sup>th</sup> and to John Buford’s crucial delaying-action west of Gettysburg on July 1<sup>st</sup>. Murphy reserves his longest Gettysburg moments to the July 3<sup>rd</sup> action at the Rummel Farm, a free-wheeling cavalry scrum reminiscent of the Brandy Station encounter, but on a significantly smaller scale and with less real importance. Murphy dismisses the notion that Lee intended the July 3<sup>rd</sup> action as the prelude to a joint infantry-cavalry rout of the Federal army, and equally dismisses Federal boasts that “this engagement stopped an attack aimed at the Federal rear via the Baltimore Pike, and therefore saved Meade’s army from a potential retreat-bearing blow.” (233) Murphy is actually much more interested in the cavalry actions that dominated the retreat from Gettysburg, at Fairfield, Monterey Pass, Hagerstown, Boonsboro and Williamsport, where Murphy credits Stuart for turning-in – finally – some genuinely impressive performances. On the larger question of Stuart’s responsibility for the Confederate debacle at Gettysburg, Murphy has little doubt: Lee allowed Stuart to “make the call on his own,” and if the blame lies anywhere, it lies with Lee. Stuart simply “went east, ran into Federal troops, and suffered a series of delays.” But “Lee did not lose the Battle of Gettysburg because Stuart came late.” (324)

Murphy’s *Horse Soldiers* can stand as a useful and perceptive overview of the cavalry’s role in the broad sweep of the Gettysburg campaign. There are the occasional mis-steps -- Joe

Hooker commanded a corps, not a division at Antietam (48), Henry Thomas Harrison was not “a civilian spy” (192), Lee’s military secretary was *Charles* Marshall, not Thomas Marshall (362) – and a few infelicities (describing George Meade as “a bug-eyed klutz”) (179) But the great weakness of *Horse Soldiers* is, in some senses, the weakness of any Civil War cavalry story, which lies in the repeated descriptions of the resultless smashing of mounted units into each other, with all the dubious variety of rugby match. It is also peculiar that, for all of Murphy’s fine-grained attention to cavalry movements in the campaign, he loses sight entirely of the four brigades who screened Lee’s *left* flank in the Pennsylvania invasion, and especially that of Jenkins, whose troopers caused a terrific uproar as they scoured the westward edge of Lee’s advance. It has to be said, too, that the maps do not bear the burden they need to bear in covering so much territory between the Rappahannock and the Susquehanna. But *Horse Soldiers* is, nevertheless, a fine introduction to the cavalry’s campaign at Gettysburg, and well-illustrated.

Allen C. Guelzo is the Thomas W. Smith Distinguished Research Scholar at Princeton University, and the author of the New York Times bestseller, *Gettysburg: The Last Invasion*. His newest work on Lincoln (*Our Ancient Faith: Lincoln, Democracy, and the American Experiment*) and on Gettysburg (*Voices from Gettysburg: Letters, Papers and Memoirs from the Civil War’s Most Famous Battle*) will be released in 2024.