

Confederate Cavalry Post Yellow Tavern

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Few would argue against the notion that for the first two years of the Civil War, the Confederate Cavalry in Virginia held a decided edge over its Federal counterpart in most every way. However, by Gettysburg a number of factors acting in concert had worked their magic to “level the playing field” between the cavalry forces of these two great armies.

Many point to the death of JEB Stuart at Yellow Tavern on May 12, 1864 as the watershed event leading to the changes of the roles that both cavalries would play in the remaining years of the war. It is impossible to underestimate Stuart’s value to the Army of Northern Virginia, but it is equally important to recognize the emergence of other important forces of change in the months leading up to Gettysburg that would substantially redefine the role of cavalry in both armies.

The first of these was the reorganization of the Federal cavalry in the Army of the Potomac just prior to the Gettysburg Campaign. While some might look at this as purely administrative in nature, Hooker’s move turned out to be substantive because for the first time an esprit de corps was instituted in the Federal cavalry. This move by Hooker would set the stage for a change in the mindset among Federal field commanders as to how cavalry should be used, and constituted a giant step forward in transforming the Federal cavalry into an effective fighting force.

While it had long served as an independent fighting force, it was not until after Gettysburg before Lee organized his cavalry into a true corps. As part of this reorganization, Wade Hampton and Fitzhugh Lee were both promoted to the rank of Maj. General and each placed in command of a division. Later, upon the return of Rooney Lee at the beginning of the Wilderness Campaign, the corps was again reorganized to add a third division, of which he was placed in command.

After the second reorganization, Hampton's division was comprised of Young's, Rosser's, and Butler's brigades which had been ordered North in May at the beginning of the campaigning season. Butler had been sent North to replace the First and Second South Carolina regiments which had been depleted by combat fatigue. Fitzhugh Lee's division consisted of Lomax's and Wickham's brigades; and, upon returning to duty in March 1864, Rooney Lee was given his old brigade, which had been previously assigned, to Chambliss and Gordon.¹

Over the years, historians have generally been in agreement that when Lee's Army entered the Wilderness at the beginning of the Overland Campaign, on May 5, 1864, its strength stood at about 65,995 men, or about one-half the strength of Grant's army.² Included within this number were cavalry units numbering about 9,320 men, of which 2,374 would fall as casualties during the campaign, supplemented by 760 additional men added during the campaign.³

¹Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War Volume II, The War in the East from Gettysburg to Appomattox, (The Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, LA 1981) pg. 82.

²Young, Alfred C. III, Numbers and Losses in the Army of Northern Virginia, (North and South, Volume 3 – Number 3, March 2000) pg. 19.

Hardships and the winter of 1863-64

While the numbers speak for themselves, Lee's ability to get the most out of his troops against an adversary who consistently held superiority in numbers as well as supplies and equipment often clouds one's perception of the conditions under which this army labored. As the summer of 1863 gave way to fall, Stuart and his subordinate commanders, much like their Federal counterparts were mostly concerned with the deteriorating condition of their horse stock.⁴ In late August Lee had written Jefferson Davis "*on some days the cavalry would have a pound of feed for their horses and other days they would have nothing,*" [when feed was available] this amounted too only about half the daily ration of the Federal cavalry. In late summer, the animals had been able to find grazing, but with winter approaching, and the lack of improvement in the supply of grain, winter prospects for the cavalry appeared grim.⁵

As if the shortages of grain and supplies were not bad enough, the effects of wintertime picket duty only made conditions worse. In January, Hampton complained to Stuart about the excessive amount of picket duty his troopers had to perform.

*"The pickets from Gordon's brigade," he wrote, "have now to travel 40 miles to their posts. Forage has to be carried to their posts, as none can be obtained near them, and the mere travel is sufficient to prevent nay improvement in the horses, if not to break them down."*⁶

³ Young, Alfred C. III, Numbers and Losses in the Army of Northern Virginia, North and South, pg. 27.

⁴ Faust, Patricia, Editor, Historical Times Illustrated Encyclopedia of the Civil War, (Harper & Row, New York, NY 1986) pg. 172

⁵ Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II, pg.83.

⁶ Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II, pg.83.

Two weeks later, Hampton informed Stuart of an “*alarming decrease*” in the strength of Young’s brigade, advising him that Young himself, had requested to winter in South Carolina, since he was unable to get horses in Virginia, and two-thirds of his men were dismounted. Young argued that the only way he could get his brigade back to a respectable strength was to go where the horses were. Unable to spare an entire brigade, Young’s request was at first denied both by Stuart and Lee. Later Stuart relieved Young of picket duty and allowed him to retire to Mathews and Middlesex counties for thirty days to rebuild his horse stock and recruit additional troops, which was precisely why Butler’s brigade was brought North.⁷

But likely the key factor, which contributed to Stuart’s woes, was the Confederate system of requiring each cavalryman to furnish his own horse. This, when combined with inflated prices during the winter of 1863-64, made it almost impossible for a dismounted trooper to replace a horse lost in battle or to harsh winter conditions. In fact, about the only way a dismounted trooper could replace a lost mount was to capture one from the enemy.⁸ In the meantime, the Union’s new logistics arm, the Cavalry Bureau, while not perfect, was doing a more than adequate job of providing remounts to the Army of the Potomac’s Cavalry Corps.

Not only were the horses literally gnawing the bark off trees to keep from starving, the men were also in desperate short supply of everything. Things had deteriorated so badly, by January the men of the Ninth Virginia were furloughed en masse so they could return home to be fed by their families, and hopefully

⁷ Starr, Stephen Z., *The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II*, pg. 84

⁸ Starr, Stephen Z., *The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II*, pg. 84

gather bacon, grain, and cattle, as well as clothing to bring back to their units.⁹ Without question, the deterioration of the Cavalry Corps of the Army of Northern Virginia, both in horseflesh as well as manpower and supplies was well under way by the spring of 1864.

The Influence of JEB Stuart

There is no doubt, that more than any other fighting arm of any nineteenth century army, the success or failure of a cavalry unit was most directly connected to the ability and personality of its commander.¹⁰ Accordingly, in the spring of 1864 the greatest asset possessed by Lee's Cavalry Corps was the skill and personality of its commander, JEB Stuart. Stuart's intangible qualities served to bond him with, and form a remarkable camaraderie with the common soldiers of his command. Writing in the September 1903 issue of the Confederate Veteran magazine, S.A. Cunningham, a former corpsman remembers Stuart....

*"In camp he was both a lovable and a provoking person, lovable from the genuine warmth of his character, and provoking from the entire disregard of the feelings of those around him, or, at least, from his proneness to amuse himself at any and everybody's expense. He never touched spirits in any form during his whole life, having promised his mother, he told me, that he would not, and did not use tobacco even."*¹¹

While Stuart's flamboyant personality, and his taste for the *pomp and circumstance* of plumes, silk-lined capes, and grand reviews did not receive universal approval, many of his men had great trust in his leadership in a fight,

⁹ Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II, pg. 85

¹⁰ Longacre, Edward G., The Cavalry at Gettysburg: A Tactical Study of Mounted Operations During the Civil War's Pivotal Campaign, (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE 1986)_pg. 271.

¹¹ Cunningham, S.A., Editor and Proprietor, The Confederate Veteran, (September 1903), pg. 391

and most would follow him into any battle.¹² While Stuart had been heralded as unequaled in tactical sense and leadership qualities by the northern press since the Peninsula Campaign, an equally compelling argument may be made for the superiority of Wade Hampton on both counts. One thing for sure, Hampton never lost a battle where he commanded the Army of Northern Virginia's Cavalry Corps, and Stuart certainly couldn't say that.

What Stuart's final legacy might have been had he survived is purely the subject of conjecture. But what is certain is that by 1864 a number of fatal flaws had surfaced in the Confederacy, and notwithstanding the argument of what would (or could) have been had Jackson or Stuart survived, most likely the fate of the fledgling government had already been sealed.

One writer has rated the loss of JEB Stuart at Yellow Tavern even more damaging to southern morale than the death of Jackson at Chancellorsville. After all, Jackson fell in victory, while Stuart fell in one of the more damaging defeats suffered by the Confederacy. In his report, issued after Yellow Tavern, Federal cavalry commander James Wilson wrote that with the death of Stuart could *"be dated the permanent superiority of the national cavalry over the rebels."*

Later, in 1913, with nearly a half-century of perspective, Wilson looked to Yellow Tavern as *"the turning point in the history of the two cavalry forces operating in Virginia. The rebel cavalry was fairly beaten, and after was wary of meeting the Federal cavalry in the open field."* Equally important in Wilson's

¹² Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II, pg. 86.

mind, the Confederacy “lost not only Stuart.....but also the legend of its own invincibility in the arm that was the pride of every Southerner.”¹³

General Davies also voiced the opinion that Yellow Tavern...

“had a lasting effect upon the conduct of the Confederate cavalry, as from that time until the close of the war it ceased to be distinguished for the enterprise in boldness in aggressive movement for which it was formerly remarkable, and in place of the frequent and successful raids upon our communications and trains to which it had become accustomed, it now found full occupation defending itself from attack or attempting to check hostile demonstrations made by the Federal cavalry.”¹⁴

However, all things considered, the deterioration of the rebel cavalry had already begun well before Yellow Tavern. Rebel officers captured after the battle admitted a few days after their capture that their commands had been “*entirely used up and demoralized, that they had the worse of every cavalry battle since the opening of the campaign.*”¹⁵ In fact, the record supports the argument that the two cavalry forces had reached parity by Gettysburg.

After Yellow Tavern

By the summer of 1864, it had become clear that the Rebel cavalry no longer held the edge it had enjoyed over the Federals three years earlier. Now the two were more nearly even.¹⁶ Without doubt, the deterioration of Lee’s cavalry had begun well before Yellow Tavern, but worsened by the time Grant came east in March of 1864. Over this period, the nature of the war had changed dramatically, becoming a hard fought no holds barred slugfest, with little regard for the plumes, and silk-lined capes which had characterized the flamboyant

¹³ Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II, pg. 108.

¹⁴ Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II, pg. 108.

¹⁵ Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II, pg. 93.

¹⁶ Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II, pg. 109.

cavalieristic conflict of 1861-62. In addition, by early 1864, the Confederate cavalry was showing serious effects of attrition in numbers, as well as a steady decline in available supplies.

Equally important, after Gettysburg there had been a tactical shift in how the war was being fought. For the most part, the cavalry was now fighting dismounted; a change of tactics, which nullified the advantage of superior horsemanship previously, enjoyed by the Confederates. Furthermore, the Federals were now armed with new breech-loading carbines and seemed to take to fighting on foot from where they could make the most of their advantage in firepower.¹⁷ But more than anything else, advances in technology and logistics embraced by the Army of the Potomac were what tipped the scale to the favor of the Federals, not some deterioration in the fighting skill of the Army of Northern Virginia's Cavalry Corps.

But things were not gloomy in all parts of the Confederacy in the spring of 1864. For the irregulars of John Mosby's 43rd Battalion, well fed and well equipped from feeding off Federal supply trains, Grant's spring offensive marked the beginning of a period of stepped up activity. In fact, as Grant's spring offensive began to take shape, the operations of Mosby's Rangers assumed a much greater importance than at anytime before. The demands of Grant's offensive extended Mosby's operations beyond its traditional area of operations (Mosby's Confederacy) and consequently, required the recruitment of more men.

¹⁷ Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War Volume II, pg. 109.

Thus, while the main body of cavalry was steadily in a state of deterioration, Mosby's irregulars seemed to flourish.¹⁸

By spring 1864, it was becoming increasingly clear within the Confederacy that many of the celebrated early successes of the first three years had come at the expense of second-rate Federal commanders. Now, as Grant's campaign unfolded, the people of the South were about to experience a new kind of Federal commander, and a new turn to an old war. Grant's movement east in March would mark a decisive change in Federal strategy; a change which would ultimately decide the war in the east.

Succession of Command

In terms of command potential, Wade Hampton, Fitzhugh Lee and Rooney Lee were fine cavalry officers, but in a very real sense, Stuart had no obvious successor. He was truly unique, and with certainty, would stand alongside the likes of Jackson and Lee in Confederate history.¹⁹ Upon Stuart's untimely death Lee was forced to reorganize the command structure of his Cavalry Corps. On the basis of past performances as brigade and divisional commanders, Wade Hampton and Fitzhugh Lee seemed to hold equal claim to be Stuart's successor. This posed a problem for Lee, with which he was very uncomfortable. To choose one of these excellent officers would only do an injustice to the other. In addition, by the beginning of the Wilderness Campaign, Rooney Lee (Lee's son) had

¹⁸ Wert, Jeffery D., Mosby's Rangers: The True Adventures of the Most Famous Command in the Civil War, (Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, 1990) pg. 160

¹⁹ Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II, pg. 109

recovered from his wound suffered at Brandy Station and provision had to be made for him as well.²⁰

But most likely, fully aware of his nephew's uneven and often unreliable performances throughout the war, Lee was faced with the fact that Fitzhugh Lee was clearly Stuart's favorite and handpicked successor. Not only that, Fitzhugh was part of the Virginia in crowd, and a West Pointer. Hampton was older than Fitzhugh, he was not a West Pointer, and most assuredly he was not a member of the Virginia in crowd. The problem was that Hampton outranked Fitzhugh, which created major political problems for Lee, so he simply avoided the problem by creating an awkward and totally unworkable command structure instead of making a choice. Initially, Lee solved both problems by dividing the cavalry corps into three divisions with two brigades each commanded by Hampton, Fitzhugh Lee and Rooney Lee respectively. According to Lee's order, each would constitute a separate command and report directly to army headquarters.

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Prior to Yellow Tavern, the 43rd Battalion, (Mosby's Rangers) one of only two partisan units remaining in the Confederate Army by the spring of 1864, had reported to Stuart as adjunct to the Cavalry Corps.²² Upon Stuart's death Mosby joined Hampton, Fitzhugh and Rooney Lee reporting directly to Lee, the only commanders below the level of a corps to do so.²³

²⁰ Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II pg. 117.

²¹ Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Volume II, pg. 117

²² Wert, Jeffery D., Mosby's Rangers, pg. 140.

²³ Wert, Jeffery D., Mosby's Rangers, pg. 162.

Insofar as the re-organization of the main body of the Cavalry Corps was concerned, having three divisions of cavalry, all of equal status, reporting directly to Lee had become cumbersome. While Lee had initially divided command of the corps among his three division commanders, it was becoming obvious that a permanent solution had to be found. Some historians have argued that Wade Hampton was placed in de facto command of the corps immediately following Stuart's death, and Fitzhugh Lee was number two man, ostensibly there until Hampton proved himself worthy of permanent appointment.²⁴ But Hampton ranked Fitzhugh, which is why he was in command of the Confederate pursuit of Sheridan during the Trevilian Raid and also why Hampton was in command at Trevilian Station.

On the other hand, others contend that Lee viewed both Hampton and Fitzhugh Lee as equals, and as in the case of Jackson, Lee had actually made no attempt to appoint a new single commander. Without doubt, Lee held a great loyalty and affection for the memory of Stuart, as well as confidence in his nephew Fitzhugh Lee, and thus he tended to deal with both men in such a way as not to betray either attachment.²⁵

The controversy was finally put to rest in June 1864 when Lee appointed Hampton to overall command after being pleased with his performance at Trevilian Station.²⁶ But, in reality, it was more than just Hampton's performance at Trevilian Station. Fitzhugh's performance had been atrocious, absolutely

²⁴ Faust, Patricia, Editor, Historical Times Illustrated: Encyclopedia of the Civil War, pg. 172.

²⁵ Boatner, Mark M., III, The Civil War Dictionary, (Vintage Books, New York, NY 1988) pg. 187.

²⁶ Foote, Shelby, Civil War, A Narrative, Volume II Fredericksburg to Meridian, (Vintage Books, New York, NY 1986) pg. 304.

awful, all spring. In fact, Rosser and Butler tried to talk Hampton into court-martialing Fitzhugh, but Hampton, ever the wise politician, realized that a court-martial of the commanding general's favorite nephew wouldn't go too far and wisely declined to bring charges. However, Lee had taken notice of his nephew's performance and ultimately decided to resolve the issue by appointing Hampton to command.

Later, in January 1865, when Hampton and his old division were sent to South Carolina, Fitzhugh Lee was officially placed in command of the depleted Cavalry Corps, which by that time numbered about 5,500 troopers.²⁷

Conclusion

In conclusion, the loss of Stuart was without doubt a serious blow to the Army of Northern Virginia. That fact is indisputable. However, the steps under way to streamline and upgrade the Federal cavalry, coupled with a serious deterioration in the Confederate Cavalry Corps months before Stuart's death, were harbingers of changes to come. While surviving the harsh winter of 1863-64, by spring, the Rebel cavalry could hardly be considered as thriving, and Grant's strategy to bring Sheridan south to do as much damage to Stuart's cavalry as possible was taking its toll. Realizing the destructive impact of Sheridan's assaults, Lee began to alter his battle strategies to protect his depleting cavalry assets.²⁸

Another important fact was that after Gettysburg, the nature of cavalry operations changed. During the first two years of the war, cavalry operations had

²⁷ Boatner, Mark M. III, The Civil War Dictionary, pg. 187.

most always been carried out on horseback, thus providing a decisive advantage to the superior horsemanship of the Southern trooper. After Gettysburg, cavalry operations were mostly dismounted, and the advantages changed from the superior horsemanship of the southern trooper, to the superior firepower of the Federal trooper. This aside, however, the period of JEB Stuart's exploits in the Shenandoah Valley and along the Virginia Peninsula in 1862, were some of the more colorful in American History.

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²⁸ Eicher, David J., The Longest Night: A Military History of the Civil War, (Simon & Schuster, New York, NY, 2001) pg. 680.