

The Transformation of the Cavalry Corps Of the Army of the Potomac

Leslie J. Rodman

With the onset of winter in January 1863, the Army of the Potomac began building its winter camp along the north bank of the Rappahannock River immediately juxtaposed to the Confederate camps across the river at Fredericksburg. After their disastrous defeat the previous December at Fredericksburg morale within the ranks of the army had reached its lowest point theretofore since the debacle at Manassas Junction in July 1861. The previous November Abraham Lincoln had relieved George McClellan who was extremely popular with the rank and file and literally forced Ambrose Burnside upon a very unhappy army. From the beginning, Burnside harbored many self-doubts about his suitability for higher command, twice before having declined when Lincoln wanted him to take the job. Finally, after McClellan's failure to aggressively pursue Lee in the aftermath of Antietam Lincoln relieved McClellan and ordered Burnside to take the post.

Burnside's self doubts soon became self-fulfilling prophecy, proving to be even more ineffective and incompetent in organizing and managing the army, and more specifically managing his cavalry units than had McClellan. Under Burnside serious administrative problems quickly developed. Insufficient rations, the failure to adopt a systematic means of granting furloughs, and the tardiness of the soldier's pay, which lagged several months in arrears, all served to further undermine the morale of the army. The consequence of this administrative disarray was to quicken a desertion rate, which was beginning to undermine the

effectiveness of several of the units. Soon after the command change, several of the higher ranking staff officers as well as subordinate commanders began to question Burnside's fitness for command. Over time, this confidence crisis grew, gained momentum and began to permeate the ranks of the entire army. Thus, in a short time, Burnside's new command became enshrouded in an atmosphere of "*gloom and despondency*" which threatened to deepen, as well as undermine the overall capability of the army.¹

In an attempt to get things under control, Burnside organized his army into three Grand Divisions, each consisting of two army corps for a total of six corps. While this seemed an effective means of organization, in reality the mounted units were relegated to mostly picket, reconnaissance, and skirmishing duties in terrible weather, exposing the army's horse stock to almost every form of equine disease for literally months.²

Each of the divisions into which the army was organized was comprised of two corps of infantry, and to each was assigned a cavalry detachment. At the time of this re-organization the cavalry corps numbered 6,312 troopers (including horse artillery), most of which were divided into three detachments assigned to each division, comprising four to six regiments commanded by Alfred Pleasonton, William Averell, and George Bayard. Once assigned to the divisions the cavalry troopers were utilized primarily as escorts and provost guards to Burnside and General Edwin Sumner, commander of the right division. The

¹ Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War Volume 1: From Fort Sumter to Gettysburg, (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge, Louisiana, 1979) pg. 329.

fifteen regiments of cavalry under Pleasonton, Averell, and Bayard number fewer than four hundred men each.³

During the battle at Fredericksburg JEB Stuart and his horse artillery commander, John Pelham had demonstrated what cavalry and horse artillery, properly supplied, used, and led could do in combat. On the contrary, with the exception of a minor role played by Averell's detachment, the Federal cavalry played a minor role in the battle, serving primarily as dispatch riders and orderlies.⁴

Mostly as spectators, the Federal troopers held their positions along with the artillery along the ridge running along the north bank of the Rappahannock as thousands of their infantry comrades fell in the battle, not moving until the infantry retreated across the river two days after the battle. While the cavalry's inactivity role was evidenced by the small number of sustained casualties, (two killed six wounded), one of the two killed was Brigadier General George Bayard, one of the more promising of the cavalry officers in the Federal army.⁵ Bayard's loss had long-term effects on the Federal mounted service. Ranking every cavalry officer in the Army of the Potomac except George Stoneman, had he lived, Bayard would have succeeded Stoneman as commander of the Cavalry Corps in June 1863, and only conjecture can predict what the face of the Cavalry Corps would have looked like.

² Longacre, Edward G., The Cavalry at Gettysburg: A Tactical Study of Mounted Operations during the Civil War's Pivotal Campaign, 9 June-14 July, 1863 (University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1986) pg. 46.

³ Starr, The Union Cavalry in the Civil War Vol. 1, pg. 325.

⁴ Longacre, The Cavalry at Gettysburg, pg. 46.

⁵ Starr, The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Vol 1, pg. 326.

In late November 1862, as his cavalry detachment was going about the dismal duties of picketing, scrounging forage for their starving horses, and catching straggling infantrymen, Pleasonton began to consider the fundamental organizational problems effecting the cavalry. Expressing his views to Burnside in a memorandum dated December 1, Pleasonton outlined certain recommendations for restructuring the army insofar as the cavalry was concerned, several of which were to be adopted by Joe Hooker two months later.

While history has long given Pleasonton credit for much of Hooker's plan of re-organization, it is just as likely that much of what Hooker finally implemented came from his own observation of the organizational structure, and the role of the cavalry within the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia. But comparing the Federal army to that of the Confederates was unfair in that from a re-organizational standpoint, every Federal commander operated within a significantly different political environment than did Lee. For example, before a new corps of cavalry could be created, or before a substantial re-organization of the existing structure could be undertaken within the Federal ranks required specific action by Congress. Unlike the practice of today where Congress passes broad legislation and allows the bureaucracy to fill in the blanks, during the era of the Civil War the organization of the army, down to the number of buglers in each regiment was controlled by Congress.⁶ As might be imagined, nothing was accomplished very quickly.

After having been in winter camp only five weeks, and haunted by the disaster at Fredericksburg only weeks earlier, and being relentlessly prodded by

Lincoln and Stanton to move get out on the march, Burnside became restless, and roused his army from its winter quarters on January twentieth. Once his grumbling army was assembled he then began to march westward intending to cross the Rappahannock at Bank's Ford, a point he believed to be well beyond Lee's left flank.

Early that evening, a strong storm came up that would last thirty hours without even a hint of a letup, turning the roads into a quagmire of mud. Consequently, the wagons carrying the pontoons, as well as the supply wagons, and artillery bogged down in the mud, and soon were completely rendered unable to move. By noon on the twenty-third, Burnside had to give up the struggle in the mud and ordered his troops back to their camps. Troopers of the Sixth Pennsylvania who were serving as General Franklin's escort witnessed what was described as....

*"an indescribable chaos of pontoons, wagons and artillerysupply wagons upset by the roadside, artillery stalled in the mud, ammunition trains mired by the way. Horses and mules dropped down dead, exhausted with the effort to move their loads.....a hundred and fifty dead animals, many of them buried in the liquid muck, wee counted in the course of a morning's ride."*⁷

While many historians attribute this ill-advised move, forever known as the "*Burnside's Mud March*," as the event that would ultimately lead to Burnside's dismissal as commander, it is only fair to recognize that Burnside had continued to constantly ask to be relieved. After the "mud-march" Stanton and Lincoln were more than happy to grant the request, and within two days after the mud-

⁶ Starr, The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Vol 1, pg. 328.

⁷ Starr, The Union Cavalry in the Civil War Vol. 1, Pg 337.

smattered dejected army returned to their camps at Falmouth, Burnside was relieved, and Joseph Hooker was appointed to command of the army.

For the most part, history has not looked with favor upon Hooker's accomplishments as a commander. While much of this is deserved, Hooker did achieve one important accomplishment often overlooked. With the help of his able chief of staff, General Daniel Butterfield, he re-organized the army within a scant three months after his appointment. In comparing the two commanders, historians have often given George McClellan credit for his administrative acumen, while at the same time discrediting Hooker. However, McClellan led the army in the early years when morale and enthusiasm for enlistment was running high, while Hooker took over an army which was described at the time as a "*disheartened mob of 100,000 men, demoralized by defeat and riddled with desertion,*" at possibly its lowest point. From this, Hooker built an army that would stand up to some of the hardest fighting of the war, e.g., Chancellorsville, Gettysburg, and the Campaign of 1864 under Grant.⁸ In fact, Hooker had a real genius for this sort of thing, and performed that role brilliantly.

Hooker's reforms affected the entire army, e.g., the issuance of ample rations, including fresh bread and vegetables; plenty of clothing; a rational system of furloughs; recruitment to the depleted ranks of his regiments; the abolishment of the grand divisions; the institution of a corps badge system (Butterfield's idea); improved hospital facilities; and, frequent inspections and drill to keep the men occupied. Furloughs were granted to regiments, which

⁸ Starr, The Union Cavalry in the Civil War Vol. 1, Pg.338.

performed well during drill and inspection, and furloughs were cancelled for those regiments not performing.

Specific to the Federal horsemen, Hooker issued General Order No. 6, on February 5, 1863, which liberated the cavalry from the control commanders of brigades, divisions, and corps of infantry, giving it a corps of its own, and named George Stoneman its commander.

“III. The cavalry of the army will be consolidated into one corps, under the command of Brigadier General George Stoneman, who will make the necessary assignments for detached duty.”⁹

Two days after Stoneman assumed command the new cavalry corps numbered 8,943 cavalrymen and 450 gunners. On February 12, Stoneman organized his corps into three divisions made up entirely of volunteer regiments, and assigned Pleasonton, Averell, and David McM. Gregg as their commanders, with a reserve brigade under John Buford. For no reason anyone can explain, except for possibly the personal influence of Buford, his Sixth Pennsylvania remained outside the new divisional/brigade alignment and was allowed to act independently under special instructions from corps headquarters.¹⁰ Actually, this was the same role that the Lancers had played under McClellan, and the role was maintained for a time. However, for all intents and purposes, the Lancers were part of the Reserve Brigade from the beginning, and served with the Regulars continuously.

While the overall reaction to these changes within the cavalry was favorable, there were those who questioned the move, as well as the fitness of

⁹ Starr, The Union Cavalry in the Civil War Vol. 1, Pg.339.

¹⁰ Starr, The Union Cavalry in the Civil War Vol. 1, Pg.339.

Stoneman to command. The debate over the proper structure of the cavalry centered on the argument that while the efficiency of the infantry was enhanced by organizing it into brigades, divisions, and corps, this rule of thumb might not equally apply to cavalry. Much of the debate surrounding the quality of command focused on the perception of the personal qualities of George Stoneman, who in fact was probably everything a mounted commander should not be; slow, ultraconservative, and completely unequal to the task of managing large numbers of troops. ¹¹

However, Hooker's reforms were generally embraced within the rank and file of the cavalry corps. The fact that Hooker found the Army of the Potomac in complete disarray, and in the matter of a few months managed to transform it into a viable well-disciplined fighting force make the achievements of his reforms even more remarkable. During the winter of 1862-63 Joe Hooker held a place of respect and esteem in the hearts of the men, second only to McClellan, the man who had organized them in the first place.¹²

The first and most direct criticism of Stoneman's command came during the first week of May 1863. While Hooker's army was being humiliated at Chancellorsville by Lee and Jackson, Stoneman was riding south with ten thousand men on a raid destroying bridges, railroad depots, and telegraph lines, depriving Hooker of much needed cavalry support during the battle on his right flank. ¹³ While the wisdom of Stoneman's expedition has long been debated, and even blamed for Hooker's defeat, there are some serious issues which need to

¹¹ Longacre, The Cavalry at Gettysburg, Pg. 46.

¹² Starr, The Union Cavalry in the Civil War Vol. 1, Pg.341.

be examined. There is no question that the absence of the cavalry during Stoneman's raid could have protected Hooker's right flank, or could have at least given warning of Jackson's surprise attack, but it is doubtful if it could have ultimately stopped the flanking move.

First of all, to conclude that the cavalry would have prevented the disaster assumes that even if Stoneman had been present during the battle, he would have been posted on Hooker's right flank. This may or may not have been the case since it ignores the fact that the terrain of the area was not conducive to cavalry, as well as the fact that Jackson's move was detected and reported to Hooker several times and ignored. At any rate, Pleasonton was present, and had instead been dispatched to Hazel Grove since the cavalry could not operate effectively in the dense underbrush. In short, it was not Stoneman's absence, but the superior generalship of Lee and Jackson that defeated Hooker at Chancellorsville.¹⁴

Over the years historians have debated, and even condemned the wisdom of Stoneman's raid as having little strategic or even short-term tactical value, and its accomplishments were insignificant. While all of this may well be true, the raid did have one very important unintended and indirect consequence. For the first time, a large body of Federal cavalry had essentially gone through a dress rehearsal for more important campaigning to come, and it had proven that the cavalry could work effectively as a self-contained unit. The raid helped to build

¹³ Longacre, The Cavalry at Gettysburg, Pg. 47.

¹⁴ Starr, The Union Cavalry in the Civil War Vol. 1, Pg. 360.

self-confidence, self-respect, and morale in the cavalry corps, and constituted a major step in the transformation of the Federal cavalry.¹⁵

Subsequent engagements at Brandy Station, Aldie, Middleburg, and Upperville would serve to prove the cavalry corps of the Army of the Potomac every bit the equal of Stuart's horsemen. Benjamin W. Crowninshield, regimental historian of the First Massachusetts, states that for the first time at Brandy Station, there had been "*more fighting than generalship,*" and that the Federal horsemen had proven themselves "*fully matched with Stuart's cavalry.*" In his judgement, Brandy Station was the "*turning point of the war*" for the Federal cavalry. This opinion was shared by at least one Confederate, H.B. McClellan, who observed that "*one result of incalculable importance certainly did follow this battle – it made the Federal cavalry.*"¹⁶

At Kelly's Ford, Brandy Station, Aldie, Middleburg, and Upperville, most all of the cavalry on both sides of the battle fought as cavalry on horseback. By Gettysburg, however, there was a change on the part of the Union to fight cavalry as dismounted foot soldiers. This was a harbinger of things to come. During the last two years of the war, cavalry would be used increasingly as mobile foot soldiers, and this would be the beginning of the end as cavalry on the European model and the emergence for the last two years of the war of cavalry as mounted infantry.

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, Nebraska, 1986)

¹⁵ Starr, The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Vol. 1, Pg. 365.

¹⁶ Starr, The Union Cavalry in the Civil War, Vol. 1, Pg. 395.

Starr, Stephen Z., The Union Cavalry in the Civil War Volume 1: From Fort Sumter to Gettysburg, (Louisiana State University Press, Baton Rouge Louisiana, 1979)