Protecting the Flank: The Battles for Brinkerhoff's Ridge and East Cavalry Field

John Benson

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Review

Benson, John
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Cavalry at the Crossroads

Study brings role at Gettysburg to light

Hope sprang eternal for the Confederacy in June and July 1863. General Robert E. Lee led his victorious Confederate Army north in the hope of destroying the Union Army, threatening northern cities, relieving the war torn desolate fields of Virginia, and forcing Lincoln to sue for peace. But for the gray and shoeless Confederate Army it was not the dawn of a new beginning; it was the twilight of their dreams.

After routing the Union Army on July 1st in the crossroads town of Gettysburg Pennsylvania, Confederate forces ran out of steam just south and east of the town at the base of Cemetery Ridge. Union forces entrenched themselves on this little rise while the Confederates withdrew to an opposing ridge, separated from their foes by a mile of open fields. Union and Confederate lines formed a fishhook configuration with the eyelet marked by two rocky hills named Big and Little Round Top; the barb of the fishhook was anchored by Culps Hill. On the afternoon of July 2nd, as Robert E. Lee attacked the Union left flank near the Round Tops, General Ewell was to create a diversionary attack at Culps Hill. During this diversionary attack Brigadier General David McMurtie Gregg's weary Second Cavalry Division of the Union Army arrived in Gettysburg, approaching from the east behind Ewells' attacking troops. Gregg anchored his troops on Brinkerhoff's Ridge and deployed skirmishers. Seeing the dust cloud of approaching cavalry from the east, the Second Virginia Infantry, of the famous Stonewall Brigade, turned to meet the threat. Colliding on Brinkerhoff's Ridge the two sides battled back and forth for several hours, with each side gaining the ridge before surrendering the advantage. As dusk appeared both sides retired; the Confederates to the west nearer their existing lines around
Culps Hill; the Union to open fields just east of the ridge.

Recognizing good ground for cavalry operations, Confederate General J.E.B Stuart returned on July 3rd to the open ground east of Brinkerhoff's Ridge. Union forces were waiting. With a pitched battle marked by saber charges, hand to hand combat, and dismounted fighting, Stuart was forced to yield the field.

While this area of the battle draws less attention by park visitors and historians alike, its significance cannot be overstated. By attacking this end of the field, Union forces forced Ewell to divert badly needed troops from his assault on Culps Hill. Had those troops been available, Ewell might have had the strength needed to take the hill on July 2nd or 3rd. With the capture of Culps Hill, the Confederacy would have had an excellent position to place cannons right on top and in the rear of Union lines. The result could have turned the entire battle.

Attorney Eric J. Wittenberg has spent most of his life studying the cavalry operations in the battle of Gettysburg. His first book, Gettysburg's Forgotten Cavalry Actions, won the Bachelder-Coddington Literary Award for the best new work interpreting the Battle of Gettysburg, in 1998. With this in mind, one would expect much from Protecting the Flank. Those purchasing it will be rewarded.

Wittenberg has crafted a short, detailed account of the battle. The main narrative is only 132 pages long. Wittenberg has included pictures of many of the participating officers as well as numerous detailed and helpful maps to aide the reader and increase the overall understanding of the cavalry actions. Wittenberg focuses almost exclusively on the two-day fight and does not go into great depth on the overall battle of Gettysburg, or the events leading up to the battle. While the narrative is often flat, the research and conclusions are sound. The author has drawn on numerous first person accounts in piecing together the actions on both sides of the fight. Extensive endnotes are helpful. The account is detailed, but may prove to be too technical for the novice reader of the battle. Unlike most history books, Wittenberg includes a 28-page narrative for use in a driving tour, including modern pictures of key areas.

Cavalry operations at the Battle of Gettysburg have received too little attention for too long. Anyone with a good understanding of the battle would benefit and enjoy Protecting the Flank. It is a valuable tool to understanding the
battle in greater depth.

John Benson is a Deputy District Attorney in Bucks County Pennsylvania. He is President of the Bucks County Civil War Roundtable and is currently working on a book detailing the overall strategy and use of the Union and Confederate navies during the Civil War. He can be contacted at johnbensoniii@hotmail.com.