

The Union Cavalry Comes of Age: Hartwood Church to Brandy Station, 1863

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Review

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Wittenberg, Eric J. *The Union Cavalry Comes of Age: Hartwood Church to Brandy Station, 1863.* Brassey's Inc, \$39.95 ISBN 1574884425

Riding High

Years and experience improved effectiveness of horse soldiers

For the first two years of the American Civil War, Union cavalry troopers seemed to enter battle with a "kick me" sign taped to their backs. Thus the average Confederate trooper considered himself the equal of three of his blue brethren. In January 1863, even Joe Hooker, the new commander of the Army of the Potomac held his federal troopers in low regard, dismissively referring to the lack of dead cavalry troopers to indicate the combat arm's lack of aggressiveness. But all that soon changed. And Eric J. Wittenberg's **The Union Cavalry Comes of Age** does an excellent job of chronicling the amazing maturation of the Union cavalry during the winter and spring of the third year of the war. He thoroughly examines the training that troops went through to fight more effectively. Wittenberg's research is quite impressive. Using primary source materials including newspapers, manuscripts, letters and diaries, he recounts the Union's cavalry perilous climb from humiliation to respectability and eventually battlefield dominance.

In February 1863, Hooker reorganized the cavalry, establishing a corps of several divisions under the command of career horse soldier Maj. Gen. George Stoneman. Stoneman took, as his model, a recommendation from Brig. Gen. Alfred Pleasonton and ordered all the regiments, squadrons and troops that had been scattered throughout the Army of the Potomac be consolidated into one command. Wittenberg does a good job of depicting the wretched state of the Union cavalry. He uses the soldiers' own words and experiences to detail life in camp and out on the picket lines as well as the abysmal morale to which the mounted arm had sunk by the time of Ambrose Burnside's infamous Mud March. Picket duty, especially in the winter of '63 was miserable work that required the

men to remain mounted in the face of howling winds and stinging precipitation. As one Pennsylvania cavalryman wrote, "I got in night before last from a 3 days scout and a more uncomfortable 3 days and nights I never passed."

Wittenberg also provides succinct biographies of the principal commanders of the brigades and divisions in the new corps. In addition to such well-known figures as John Buford and Judson Kilpatrick, he introduces the Alabama-born Benjamin F. "Grimes" Davis, who was a cousin of Confederate President Jefferson Davis and despite his Southern roots stood firm under the flag of the United States; William Woods Averell, who believed in constant training for his troopers and balked at taking his men onto the field of battle until he believed they were ready; and David McMurtrie Gregg, a Pennsylvanian described as brave, prudent and dashing.

Wittenberg follows the leaders through the defining Battle of Brandy Station through the end of the war and beyond in a section at the back of the book. While Pleasonton's courage in battle is suspect, the book recounts another unpleasant aspect of the cavalry leader. Pleasonton's racism and xenophobia led to the dismissal of such capable officers as the spectacularly mustached Col. Sir Percy Wyndham, the Frenchman Col. Alfred Napoleon Duffie, and Col. Luigi Palma di Cesnola.

According to Capt. Wesley Merritt of the 2nd U.S. Cavalry, "From the day of its reorganization under Hooker, the cavalry of the Army of the Potomac commenced a new life." Hartwood Station was the first large-scale fight the cavalry fought after the reorganization. Although it was a small affair, involving a Confederate brigade and several Union regiments, it set the stage for later events. Amid a whirling snowstorm, the Confederates rode to another victory, but this time the chagrined Union commanders began to show the courage, resourcefulness and willingness to learn from mistakes that were needed for success on the battlefield.

In mid-March, Hooker sent Averell on a reconnaissance in force to cross the Rappahannock River at Kelly's Ford. Confederate cavalry pickets were swept aside after some hard cross-river fighting, and Averell's force was drawn into a swirling cavalry battle with the five regiments of Fitz Hugh Lee's Rebel cavalry. The battle showed that Union cavalry could stand up to their Confederate counterparts. Even though Averell withdrew from the field at the end of the fighting, the fact that his troopers fought the Rebels to a standstill proved a

further boost to Union morale.

Throughout the spring of 1863 the Union cavalry corps continued to mature, through Stoneman's raid to kick off the Chancellorsville campaign, and culminating at Brandy Station, where the blue troopers gave as good as they got with Stuart's forces in a surprising show of aggressiveness and hard fighting that shook the gray-clad commanders and troopers. Wittenberg does a good job of presenting the ebb and flow of cavalry battles, which often involved charge after charge as the forces took and retook ground. In the words of Stuart's aide, Henry McClellan, Brandy Station made the Federal cavalry. "The fact is that up to June 9, 1863, the Confederate cavalry did have its own way . . . and the record of their success becomes almost monotonous. . . . But after that time we held our ground only by hard fighting." From that day forward, according to Wesley Merritt of the 2nd U.S. Cavalry, the prestige of the Rebel cavalry was broken and its pre-eminence was gone forever.

As Wittenberg writes, the fight at Brandy Station "marked the end of the 'coming out party' for the Army of the Potomac's Cavalry Corps. Its maturation process was now complete. The Northern horsemen were finally the equals of their Southern counterparts, and they would never look back."

Don Evans is a newspaper editor and the author of Locust Alley: A Novel of the Civil War.