

One Continuous Fight: the Retreat From Gettysburg and the Pursuit of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, July 4-14, 1863

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Review

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Wittenberg, Eric J. and Petruzzi, J. David and Nugent, Michael F.. *One Continuous Fight: The Retreat from Gettysburg and the Pursuit of Lee's Army of Northern Virginia, July 4-14, 1863.* Savas Beatie, \$34.95 hardcover ISBN 9781932714432

Retreat from Gettysburg

When the Battle of Gettysburg finally ended on July 3, 1863, more than 50,000 men had been killed and wounded, and General Robert E. Lee and his Army of Northern Virginia had been soundly defeated. And while Gettysburg was the high water mark of the Confederacy, it was the ten days after the battle that were the most important ten days of the Civil War, according to three Civil War historians. *One Continuous Fight* is a marvelous history of the ten days following Gettysburg, when General George Meade and his Army of the Potomac had its best chance to destroy or capture Lee and his army, and end the Civil War in the summer of 1863.

This is probably the most original, complete, and exciting history of this frequently overlooked period of the Civil War, focusing on those ten critical days, July 4 to July 14, when the Confederates tried desperately to retreat from their defeat at Gettysburg back to the safety of Virginia, and the Union army tried valiantly but vainly to stop them.

The three authors, Eric J. Wittenberg, J. David Petruzzi, and Michael F. Nugent, are Civil War historians specializing in cavalry operations. They are also a complimentary blend of research talent and writing skill, successfully combining their efforts to produce a riveting account of just how close the Union came to winning and ending the war in 1863. They have wisely combined soldiers' letters, army reports, and war correspondents' stories with excellent maps, photos, illustrations, and gripping narrative to create a dramatic portrayal of deception, pursuit, bitter fighting, and lost opportunities.

Following the stunning defeat and incredible slaughter on the Gettysburg battlefield, Lee knew he had to move quickly to retreat more than fifty miles back through Pennsylvania and Maryland, and cross the rain-swollen Potomac River to reach sanctuary in Virginia before Meade's Union army could recover and attack in force and possibly bag the whole Confederate army. As the authors accurately reveal, both armies were exhausted when the fighting ended on July 3, but both generals knew they had to move fast—one to avoid total destruction, the other to complete the victory. They tell vividly of the fatigue, hunger, thirst, and general malaise that affected both armies, conditions made even worse by the terrible weather, torrential rains, and clinging mud.

They describe how Lee organized the retreat, using decoys, deception, and bold decisions to move tens of thousands of marching infantrymen, hundreds of cannons, supplies, prisoners, and a seventeen mile-long wagon train carrying the wounded, all protected by Jeb Stuart's cavalry. This was a monumental logistical and tactical effort, in bad weather and over harsh, unforgiving terrain, dogged the entire way by pursuing Union cavalry. Lee's retreat began on July 4 and the deception plan worked at first; Meade was initially duped, allowing Lee to break contact, giving the Confederates a head start. However, Meade was also a cautious commander, realizing that Lee still possessed a powerful army capable of striking back quickly. He moved slowly, prodded by General Halleck, who chided Meade: "Bring up and hurl upon the enemy all your forces, good and bad" (234). Still, as the book cleverly reveals, Meade did order his cavalry to pursue, followed by his own exhausted infantry marching in mud so deep the roads were "one immense hogwallow the entire way" (145).

The authors describe ten days of constant misery and desperation, as well as the more than twenty deadly skirmishes and fierce battles fought between Confederate rear guards and Union cavalry and infantry at little known battlegrounds like Monterey Pass, Hagerstown, Boonsboro, Falling Waters, and Williamsport. The fighting was furious, for both sides knew well what was at stake, and thousands more men were killed, wounded, and captured in these wild and bloody melees of pistol and saber. They also tell how Lee and his army were pinned against the flooding Potomac River at Williamsport, Maryland for three days, waiting for the river level to lower, building pontoon bridges, and digging fortifications for the expected assault by the Union army. But Meade never gathered enough strength to decisively attack Lee when he was most vulnerable.

They colorfully describe the leaders of both armies and their decisions, good and bad, as well as the reasons why the Union army was unable to trap the Confederates at the Potomac River. The authors correctly stress Lee's brilliance and luck, and Meade's hesitation and poor tactical coordination, which allowed Lee and his army to escape to fight for two more years. The authors clearly and smartly argue that if Meade had been successful in pursuit of Lee after Gettysburg, the war might likely have ended in July 1863. This is entertaining, thoughtful, and well-presented history, and is a fitting tribute to the soldiers of both armies.

William D. Bushnell, a retired Marine Corps colonel, is a professional book reviewer with more than 1700 reviews published in thirty-five magazines and newspapers, and is a member of the National Book Critics Circle. Recently retired from teaching at the University of Southern Maine, he lives on an island on the coast of Maine.