The Battle of Brandy Station: North America's Largest Cavalry Battle

Jeffry D. Wert

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Studying the Largest Cavalry Battle

On June 9, 1863, in Culpeper County, Virginia, nine thousand Union cavalrymen and three thousand Union infantry clashed with ten thousand Confederate horsemen in the battle of Brandy Station. The fighting lasted for roughly twelve hours and covered dozens of square miles. When it had ended, the Southerners held the field. Total casualties on both sides amounted to nearly thirteen hundred. It was the largest mounted engagement of the Civil War.

The battle began at dawn on June 9, when one of the two Federal columns crossed the Rappahannock River at Beverly’s Ford. The Union advance surprised the Rebel troopers of Major General J. E. B. “Jeb” Stuart. The combat escalated rapidly into a series of attacks and counterattacks in the fields and woods around St. James Church. Farther downriver at Kelly’s Ford, a second Union force crossed the Rappahannock hours behind schedule. Ultimately, these Yankees assailed Fleetwood Hill, where the fighting swirled through the afternoon for possession of the dominating terrain. The tenacity of Stuart’s horsemen and the caution and mistakes of Union leadership allowed the Confederates to escape a potential defeat.

At the time, General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia had completed its initial march in the Gettysburg Campaign. The Union offensive delayed the resumption of the movement for a day. The battle signaled the continuing emergence of the Federal cavalry as a worthy foe of Stuart’s vaunted troopers. For Stuart, the surprise enemy attacks drew harsh criticism of his generalship from Richmond newspapers.
With Brandy Station’s size and importance as a mounted engagement, it is unusual that a modern, detailed book on the battle has not appeared since Fairfax Downey’s work in the 1950s. Although Eric J. Wittenberg admits that his new study is not the final word on Brandy Station, it is most welcome. The book is well-researched and well-written. It includes a walking and driving tour of the battlefield, with GPS coordinates.

An acknowledged authority on eastern cavalry operations, Wittenberg devotes chapters to the opposing forces, with biographical profiles of the leading officers. The heart of his book is a blow-by-blow description of the fighting. An analysis of the engagement and leadership provides a fine summary of Brandy Station.

The author incorporates the words of the participants in the narrative. While the use of quotes by the officers and men provides immediacy, it can in this case be too overdone. Descriptions of the combat become confusing at times as one quote after another, often in similar words, blurs the account.

Wittenberg’s argument that had Alfred Duffie acted more aggressively and joined in the struggle for Fleetwood Hill Stuart’s command would have been completely destroyed is dubious at best. Two of Stuart’s brigades were barely engaged, and his men inflicted nearly twice as many casualties as they incurred. If Duffie had entered the fight, it is reasonable to conclude that Stuart’s horsemen might have been routed.

The author also states that Brandy Station had minimal, if any, impact on the outcome of the Gettysburg Campaign. That conclusion is likewise open to debate because of Stuart’s reaction to the criticism of his leadership, which might have contributed directly to his ride around the Union army and absence from the campaign.

Wittenberg’s book is a solid work, based on sound research in manuscript collections and published memoirs and regimental histories. The maps, drawn by Steven Stanley, are excellent although an area map would be most helpful. Until a fuller account of the Brandy Station comes along, this book is recommended.

Jeffry D. Wert is the author of Cavalryman of the Lost Cause: A Biography of J. E. B. Stuart.