The Tactical Flexibility of the Union Cavalry: How Modern Firearms Changed the Federal Cavalry

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THE TACTICAL FLEXIBILITY OF THE UNION CAVALRY:
HOW MODERN FIREARMS CHANGED THE FEDERAL CAVALRY

by

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ABSTRACT

THE TACTICAL FLEXIBILITY OF THE UNION CAVALRY:
HOW MODERN FIREARMS CHANGED THE FEDERAL CAVALRY

Peter J. Francione
Old Dominion University, 2007
Director: Dr. Harold S. Wilson

The history of warfare is replete with episodes chronicling the struggle between developing tactics with technological advances. From the bow to the smoothbore musket, military leaders have always been forced to alter their tactics in order to take advantage of technological advances. During the American Civil War the Union cavalry was able to achieve great heights by wedding their tactics to the advanced firearms their troopers carried. Realizing the potential of breech-loading and repeating firearms the Union cavalry, from 1861-1865, developed a flexible set of tactics that took advantage of those modern weapons. Their efforts came to fruition as the war ended in the spring of 1865, as the Federal cavalry had become an unrivaled mounted force at that time. Prior to the American Civil War, theorists declared that the cavalry served a specific and limited purpose in warfare. Europeans believed that the cavalry was an offensive arm that was strictly limited to relying on the mounted charge. Arguing that horse soldiers should not fight dismounted the European cavalry remained true to its traditional role as a strictly mounted force. In America, young Union officers deviated from the traditional path after two years of failure. Modern firearms provided an opportunity for Union officers to devise new, flexible tactics that provided a battlefield edge. Combining dismounted and mounted action with close artillery support, Federal cavalry officers designed a mounted force that had never been seen before on the battlefield.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The American Civil War is one of history's most analyzed conflicts. Historians for over one hundred and fifty years have studied every possible aspect of the war, leaving few areas undiscovered. One area of research that has been neglected over the years is the tactical development of the Union cavalry, with specific insight into how breech-loading and repeating carbines along with horse artillery affected that change. Unlike their Southern counterparts who have received a vast amount of attention, most likely due to their colorful leaders and daring early war exploits, Federal troopers have been relegated to a second-tier status.

Fortunately, within the last twenty-five years and more specifically the last decade, this area of study has expanded greatly. Starting with Stephen Starr's grand three-volume set dissecting the Union cavalry and James A. Schaefer's dissertation chronicling the strategic and tactical evolution of the Confederate and Federal cavalry in the early 1980s, and continuing today the growth of the Federal mounted force has become a targeted area of research.¹ Yet, these studies whether covering specific officers,

battles, or general histories all have one theme in common, a lack of analysis concerning the importance modern breech-loaders and repeating carbines and horse artillery batteries had on the tactical development of the cavalry. Scholars such as Edward Longacre, Eric Wittenberg, Schaefer and Starr, have argued that by 1863 the Union cavalry began better acquitting itself on the battlefield due to a number of factors. Generally, better leadership, organization and experience are viewed as the overlying factors behind the Federal cavalry’s combat resurgence. The acquisition of better carbines is often acknowledged, but rarely given any serious credit for the change in the tactical development of the Union cavalry. One weakness that plagues the authors is the breadth of the topic they cover. Although their scholarship is excellent they discuss the Union cavalry as a broad topic. The research covers all aspects of the Federal cavalry service from horsemanship and training to regimental movements on the battlefield. By focusing on a broad analysis of the Union cavalry some vital areas of research and analysis are neglected. The one area where this specifically holds true is in the realm of firearms, and how their acquisition helped alter tactics. Another area is how the presence of horse artillery affected the Union cavalry’s tactical growth. Edward Longacre in *Lincoln’s Cavalrymen* does an excellent job of showing the importance horse artillery was to the Federal cavalry, but Stephen Starr in his lengthy three volume set seems to lose focus. James Schaefer in his dissertation is plagued by the broad approach he takes in examining the entire cavalry aspect of the Civil War. Not only does Schaefer analyze the tactical evolution of the Federal and Confederate cavalry, but he also studies the strategic role they played,

*Civil War*, have published articles concerning the growth and battles of the Union cavalry. Leading this scholarship are Edward Longacre and Eric Wittenberg who have written numerous books and articles on specific Federal cavalry officers, battles and organizations, most of which will be cited throughout this thesis.
specifically the introduction of the raid. Schaefer by delving into so many topics neglects the importance modern breech-loaders and repeaters had on the tactical evolution of the Federal cavalry. By comparing both the Federal and Confederate cavalry tactically and strategically Schaefer seems to just pierce the topics he is trying to analyze rather than probing deeply into their greater meanings. Despite these weaknesses each author has done a credible job trying to bring forth the story of the Federal cavalry, which until this point has been generally neglected. This thesis is designed to look further into the question that has generally been left alone, which is how modern breech-loading and repeating carbines changed Union cavalry tactics during the war.

The purpose of this study is to demonstrate that modern carbines and repeaters along with the use of horse artillery provided the foundation for transforming the Union cavalry into a tactically flexible mounted force that could act in conjunction with the army or as an independent strike force. This change in cavalry tactics, which focused on the use of firepower rather than cold steel, ultimately allowed the Federal cavalry to meld into a mounted force unseen in military history. It is not the purpose of this study to explore the strategic evolution of the Federal cavalry. Although cavalry raids are explored, for instance Sheridan's Richmond and Trevilian Station raid and Wilson's Alabama raid, they are done so only in context. Whether the raid was a success or not is of no concern to this study. The sole purpose is to demonstrate how Federal cavalry tactics were altered and became more flexible. This is why specific engagements during these raids will be used as case studies.

Separate from Federal cavalry studies are a limited area of research that focuses on Civil War era firearms, and a more thoroughly investigated topic concerning changing
battlefield conditions and tactics of the nineteenth century. Each area is vital to this study because they provide specific information concerning military conditions and firearms which directly affected the changing role of cavalry in war. John D. McPualy has written a number of books focusing on the development and procurement of U.S. Cavalry and Infantry carbines and rifles. Joining McPualy's numerous books are Jack Coggins' *Arms and Equipment of the Civil War* and Claud E. Fuller's study surveying breech-loading arms. These works provide military historians with excellent insights into the strengths and weaknesses of the cavalry carbines, numbers in which they were purchased and distributed, and the types of ammunition used. Supplementing these important sources is a rarely cited national archive that contains field reports about the carbines Union troopers carried. These reports, often very short, provide a glimpse into which firearms troopers had confidence in and the ones they did not. Unfortunately, most Union cavalry works do not cite this significant data since the role carbines played in developing Federal tactics is often neglected. This study will rely significantly on these reports and the secondary sources to explain the strength and weaknesses of the firearms to prove that without reliable carbines the ability of the Union trooper was significantly reduced. When excellent breech-loading Sharps carbines and repeating Spencers were acquired the tactical flexibility and prowess of the Federal cavalry was significantly increased. Aiding

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in this tactical transformation was the use of 3-inch ordnance rifles (light field artillery pieces) which provided direct artillery support, while greatly increasing the cavalry's ability to produce an overwhelming amount of firepower.

Battlefield tactics and especially the cavalry's role in combat were challenged during the nineteenth century by the invention of rifled muskets and artillery. Rifling small arms and cannons expanded the distances at which infantry and cavalry could be engaged. Supporting the expansion of the battlefield was the increase in rates of fire as rifled muskets became easier to load, and breech-loading firearms became more prevalent. As a result, the tactical role of the cavalry was forced to undergo a dramatic shift. Most historians have correctly pointed to the technological developments in small arms and artillery, which resulted in the increase of firepower as the foundation for changing battlefield tactics. Unfortunately most of these historians have not credited or discussed the Union cavalry's transformation as an answer to these changing combat conditions. When discussing the Civil War, in terms of nineteenth century warfare, most authors cite the destructiveness of the rifle, and the benefits of breastworks and trenches as important aspects to the changing battlefield. The Civil War is more known for the advantages of the tactical defensive rather than the offensive because of the mass slaughter inflicted upon attacking infantry.  

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of the battlefield the tactical offensive, which relied upon close artillery support and the bayonet (Napoleonic tactics), was dealt a serious blow. With soldiers able to level an accurate fire well over the 100 yard range of smoothbore muskets, close order infantry and artillery formations were now susceptible to devastating fire at longer ranges. As a result, the ability of an army to successfully assault the enemy was reduced, and the tactical defensive gained prominence. Soldiers soon began fighting behind either hastily erected breastworks or elaborate trenches that further strengthened the defender. With men now armed with accurate, long range rifles the tactical conduct of war was significantly altered. With the adoption of the rifle not only had the tactical defensive replaced the offensive, but the roles of artillery and cavalry were also altered. Artillery as a result began rifling their guns to increase their range, while also moving out of the danger distance the rifle presented. With artillery ranges now increased the defensive attributes of these guns when placed behind breastworks and supported by rifle wielding infantry, dramatically increased the tactical defensive. In the new military world of rifled muskets and artillery the role of the cavalry was accordingly changed. No longer was the romantic cavalry charge with saber in hand a viable option. The cavalry, already vulnerable to massed fire from smoothbore infantry and artillery, was left with few tactical options after the adoption of the rifle. Now cohesive infantry could begin unleashing accurate volleys at the charging horsemen at 1,000 yards. With the infantry firing away and the artillery reigning down shell and shot on the exposed horse soldiers from a greater distance the cavalry charge was neutralized. With the tactical use of

cavalry now diminished, many believed the cavalry would be relegated to reconnaissance duties or the strategic raid, using mobility to create havoc in the enemy rear areas.\textsuperscript{4}

Unfortunately, most theorists did not realize that the ability of the cavalry to conduct the strategic raid had to be based upon the cavalry’s ability to defend itself.\textsuperscript{5}

Without employing tactical flexibility the cavalry could not conduct strategic raids with any certainty of success. Once again the role and development of the Federal cavalry is neglected. By failing to study the transformation of the Union cavalry historians and theorists of the time overlooked a significant aspect of the changing battlefield conditions during the nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{6} By combining advanced technologies and tactical flexibility the Federal cavalry was able to survive on the battlefield when most officers thought it was waning in importance, while establishing itself as a strike force capable of surmounting the decisive advantages an entrenched defender possessed. The fact is the Federal cavalry showed that mounted forces had not become battlefield obsolete with the


\textsuperscript{5} Only a few military theorists understood the advantages of flexible tactics that were based upon the cavalryman relying upon firepower rather than cold steel. Denison, 360, 380, 394; Charles C. Chesney, The Military Resources of Prussia & France, and recent changes in the Art of War (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1870), 47; Henry M. Havelock-Allan, Three Main Military Questions of the Day: I. A Home Reserve Army. II. The More Economic Military Tenure of India. III. Cavalry as Affected By Breechloading Arms (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1867), 47-48, 53, 79-80.

\textsuperscript{6} Many studies deal with firearms developments during the 19th Century, but few thoroughly link them with changes in cavalry tactics, specifically the Union cavalry. Some of these important books are: Brent Nosworthy, The Bloody Crucible of Courage: Fighting Methods and Combat Experience of the Civil War (New York: Carroll and Gref Publishers, 2003); Geoffrey Jensen and Andrew Wiest, ed., War in the Age of Technology (New York: New York University Press, 2001); Theodore Ropp, War in the Modern World (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1959); Michael Glover, Warfare from Waterloo to Mons (London: Cassell, 1980); David Gates, Warfare in the Nineteenth Century (New York: Palgrave, 2001); Cyril Falls, A Hundred Years of War (New York: Collier Books, 1953); Grady McWhiney and Perry D. Jamieson, Attack and Die: Civil War Military Tactics and the Southern Heritage (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1982); Perry D. Jamieson, Crossing the Deadly Ground: United States Army Tactics, 1865-1899 (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1994). Along with a vast scholarship concerning Nineteenth Century tactics and technological advancements is a detailed discussion amongst European officers during that time period concerning the affects these new small arms would have on cavalry’s role in battle. This discussion will be briefly analyzed in the following chapter.
emergence of the rifled musket. Instead of the horse being eliminated from combat operations the Federal cavalry had paved a way for mounted soldiers to remain viable. Predictably few Europeans saw this transformation for what it was - a changing role for cavalry where the tactical offensive was reasserted by promoting firepower and celerity.

By the end of the American Civil War the Union cavalry had become a dominant force on the battlefield. They were unrivaled in mobility and firepower. For the first time in history the cavalry had developed into an independent army, capable of accomplishing many tasks. No longer were mounted units confined to a limited role on the battlefield. They were now capable of launching their own offensives, attacking any enemy unit they encountered, seizing vital road junctions, towns and cities, and penetrating deep into enemy territory where they could destroy enemy infrastructure with little fear of engaging a superior force. As James Jones declared in his book *Yankee Blitzkrieg*, General James Wilson’s Federal cavalry, during the Alabama raid, was a “...fine, mobile striking force” that “…utilized the best in cavalry theory formulated during the war. By 1865, a fortuitous combination of theory and practice put a well-organized, well-armed force under the command of young officers determined to use the mounted arm properly.”

Jones supported the idea that the Federal cavalry, which accelerated its growth under Sheridan and Wilson during 1864, had become by 1865 the forerunner to modern mechanized infantry. The blue troopers played a decisive role in forcing Confederate armies throughout the South to capitulate during the spring of 1865. The Federal cavalry, in four years, had transformed itself from an inept, ill-equipped and misused auxiliary

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8Jones, *Yankee Blitzkrieg*, 188.
arm of the United States Army to a lethal, well-organized, independent force that could engage Rebel cavalry, infantry, and artillery. This transformation occurred when the Union cavalry devised a tactical system using a combination of dismounted and mounted action, coupled with important artillery support to overwhelm opponents while on the offensive and defensive. The Federal cavalry, by 1865, had devised a type of tactical flexibility that allowed them to act independently on the battlefield, while making significant contributions without necessary infantry support, which European doctrine claimed was impossible.

A major contributing factor to this cavalry revolution was the growth in firearms technology prior to the war. The Union cavalry was the only organization on either side during the conflict that took full advantage of those improvements. Persistence in acquiring these advanced firearms eventually led to a well armed trooper who had the confidence to fight against anyone, anywhere. Major-General James H. Wilson, a brilliant cavalry commander during the last two years of the war, stated in an article written well after the war for the Military Historical Society of Massachusetts that: 

"...green regiments that you couldn’t have driven into a fight with the old arms, became invincible the very moment that good arms were place in their hands."\(^9\) When specifically discussing the Spencer carbine Wilson stated: “There was not a man in the division who faltered from the moment they got their new carbines in hand.”\(^10\) The ability of the Union cavalry to finally distribute decent firearms by 1863 was an enormous step towards completing this transformation. This process was further advanced in 1864-65 with the


\(^10\)Ibid., 78.
mass procurement and distribution of repeating Spencer carbines. Spencer carbines and rifles gave the Union trooper confidence to fight dismounted against Rebel cavalry and infantry, while providing their officers with a flexibility that translated into the unprecedented use of cavalry in military operations. Europeans meanwhile were reluctant to view this new mounted force as cavalry, while steadfastly refusing to alter their traditional but outdated shock tactics.

Antoine Henri de Jomini, the great Swiss military theorist of the nineteenth century, believed cavalry could be used only in certain situations. Jomini claimed that cavalry could not hold a position without infantry support, and if used against unbroken infantry and artillery failure was likely. The main functions of cavalry on the battlefield were to charge wavering infantry, capture artillery, prisoners, and supply wagons, pursue a broken army, and allow friendly infantry to occupy ground without resistance. These operations were to be undertaken solely through the mounted charge. The power of cavalry centered on celerity, and use of the saber or lance. The carbine, according to Jomini, had no use on the battlefield. Carbines were useless because to properly employ them meant halting, thus losing any charging momentum while becoming vulnerable to a mounted counterattack. Although some battalions of dragoons fought as mounted infantry, attacking an enemy flank or covering a retreat as a rear-guard by dismounting, it was deemed too difficult to train mounted soldiers as both infantry and cavalry.

12Ibid., 304-305.
14Ibid., 308.
These precepts guided European cavalry throughout the nineteenth century, and also influenced Union cavalry tactics during the initial two years of the war. These tactics can be traced back to Gustavus Adolphus who ordered his cavalry to charge with the sword, while banning the mounted use of carbines or pistols. Prussian King Frederick the Great continued this tradition during his reign in the mid-1700s, attaining a cavalry force that became the model for all of Europe. Europeans relied entirely on the shock value of cavalry, and this was the cornerstone of their tactical doctrine for centuries. In the United States, however, although heavily influence by the French military system the Union cavalry during the Civil War transformed itself into a combat force entirely foreign from what the Europeans employed. Instead of relying solely on the charge the Federal cavalry came to rely on dismounted and artillery firepower along with speed and cold steel. As a result, many Europeans argued that due to dismounted tactics the Federals were nothing more than mounted infantry, not traditional cavalry. This is an


incorrect assertion since the Federal cavalry was adept at using mounted tactics and the
crion when tactically possible. By referring to the Federal cavalry as mounted infantry
many traditional Europeans were disregarding the new role cavalry would play in war.
The failure to see the benefits of a tactically flexible cavalry force would cost the French
dearly in 1870, while handicapping the Prussians. Had European theorists paid closer
attention to the role of Federal cavalry during the initial years of the American Civil War
they would have seen the traditional cavalry role they still coveted had lost its tactical
effectiveness

This body of opinion, while having some merit because of the extensive use of
dismounted tactics, is not correct. In fact, the Union trooper engaged his Rebel adversary
in many mounted engagements throughout the war where sabers were the primary
weapon used by northern soldiers. The military experience of the Civil War produced a
new type of cavalry that most of Europe did not understand or accept, thus they referred
to it as mounted infantry. What the Union cavalry command was able to accomplish, with
typical American ingenuity, was to take the best aspects of European cavalry and
combine it with new military technologies. This technology allowed Union officers to
formulate an original set of diverse tactics, which assisted in the development of a
mounted soldier far superior to the old dragoons.19

Yet, to argue that the Union cavalry was only a new and improved version of the European dragoon is incorrect. There is no question they possessed the same characteristic of dismounted fighting, but that is where the similarities end. The Union cavalry was more than a dragoon. Unlike their predecessor they had the ability to act independently, achieving decisive results. To compare this new type of American mounted force with the outdated and abandoned European dragoon fails to acknowledge the combat advances of the Union cavalry through four years of war. Union cavalry officers and troopers carved out their own niche from 1861-1865, developing a force that had never been seen on the battlefield. The foundation for this change was the advanced small arms troopers began carrying in 1863.

The European tactical tradition was followed during the early years of the war, 1861-1862, when the Union cavalry was inefficient, ill-equipped and misused. Although three engagements will be studied during this period the Federal cavalry was rarely used in battle. By 1863, when the introduction of better arms helped produce better combat results a shift in tactics began. Brandy Station, the 1st and 3rd days at Gettysburg, Hoover’s Gap, and Chickamauga will be used as case studies to illustrate that progression. What will be made clear is that during 1863 the Union cavalry was finally able to engage their Confederate adversary on even ground, while also acting successfully on the defensive against infantry. During 1864 and 1865 with better firearms being distributed and experience increasing the Union cavalry had become so proficient they not only routed their mounted adversary, but systematically engaged and eliminated

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Rebel infantry. The case studies for these final two years will focus on the battles of
Yellow Tavern, Trevilian Station, Nashville, Five Forks, and Selma.

The purposes of the case studies are to provide specific examples illustrating the
cavalry's failures and subsequent growth. Each example after 1861-1862, illustrates an
engagement where the cavalry played either the sole role in combat or, at the very least, a
vital part. These studies demonstrate the cavalry in both an offensive and defensive role,
while engaging in dismounted and mounted action, providing a well balanced look at
how firearms technology assisted in developing this special type of mounted arm.

Although most of the case studies used cite Union victories the actual outcome of the
engagement is not overly important to this study. The main focus is on the firearms
soldiers carried at the time and how their tactics changed as a result of possessing these
more reliable firearms. What will be evident is that as more reliable carbines, like breechloading Sharps and repeating Spencers, filled the ranks Federal cavalry tactics clearly
became flexible.

Prior to delving into the Federal cavalry development, a background chapter is
necessary. The next chapter will briefly focus on the small arms developments of the
nineteenth century, and the debates concerning the effects rifles had on the battlefield.
Secondly, the chapter will also discuss the American cavalry's tactical approach prior to
the war's outbreak. What will be evident is that, although acknowledging the destructive
nature of these weapons, many theorists continued to believe that cavalry should maintain
their adherence to outdated shock tactics of earlier generations. Little discussion in
Europe and America centered on formulating alternative uses for cavalry to counter small
arms developments. This helps explain Europe's continued reliance on shock tactics, and
their insistence on disregarding the recent tactical and armament advances in cavalry warfare made by the Americans. Secondly, the stage will be set for discussing the Union cavalry’s willingness to radically alter their tactics and adopt breech-loading and repeating firearms resulting in a distinct firepower advantage.

With amazing foresight and a willingness to adopt new tactics, rather than relying on outdated European models, Union cavalry commanders like Philip Sheridan, Wesley Merritt, James Wilson, George Custer, Robert H.G. Minty, Thomas Devin, Eli Long, Edward McCook, John Wilder, and John Buford brought into existence the first truly mobile, independent force in history. It was their ability to adapt tactically during the war that brought about their unprecedented success as a cavalry arm. These men realized the advantages certain types of firearms, like the Spencer and Sharps carbine, provided by producing large volumes of fire. Understanding the advantages of superior firepower these officers then molded their heavily armed and organized troopers into a tactically flexible corps that dramatically assisted in the ultimate Union victory.
CHAPTER II

SMALL ARMS DEVELOPMENT DURING THE MID-19th CENTURY AND THE CORRESPONDING EFFECTS ON CAVALRY IN EUROPE AND THE UNITED STATES

During the third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century technological advances in small arms and artillery brought forth a military revolution. With rifled arms replacing smoothbore muskets and artillery the tactical conduct of warfare had to be reassessed. The development of new and improved firearms and artillery forced military theorists to create tactics, taking advantage of those advances. The presence of the rifle on the battlefield led to a serious discussion concerning the tactical conduct of combat. From the infantry to the cavalry, the tactical offensive to the fortified defensive, and the bayonet charge to the use of overwhelming firepower, all preconceived notions concerning the art of war were being challenged. Technology advances forced the armies of Europe to critique their outdated tactical models, while developing new methods to ensure victory. This appraisal was the result of farsighted officers who foresaw the changing nature of warfare. Their ideas were vociferously debated and, once accepted, the conduct of warfare during the latter half of the nineteenth century was drastically altered. As tactics changed to correspond with the rapid development in firearms technology the power of the infantry and artillery was reaffirmed, but the cavalry was left with an uncertain future.

The smoothbore musket, the staple arm of European infantry for centuries, was rendered obsolete during the 1830s and 1840s. Although wildly inaccurate at distances
over eighty to one hundred yards, musket fire produced by volley was deadly. Quick reloading capabilities and dexterity with the bayonet were advantages that outweighed the gun’s inaccuracy. Troops could often fire three rounds a minute with the smoothbore since time was not wasted by forcefully ramming bullets down the barrel. The bayonet was relied upon for its shock value during the attack and in square formations against cavalry. By the mid-nineteenth century though, the smoothbore musket had been replaced by two technological advances, the rifle and breechloader. With the adoption of the rifle as the standard infantry firearm, and advances in breech-loading guns the conduct of warfare would, once again, be analyzed.

The rifle did not suddenly appear on the battlefield. Often specific infantry units, acting as sharpshooters, would be distributed rifles. Early problems with rifles were twofold, the excessively slow reloading time and the inability to attach a bayonet. The rifle ball was often wrapped in a grease patch, which helped slide the round down the barrel with the use of a rod. By forcing the bullet down the barrel reloading times for rifles were significantly higher when compared to smoothbore muskets. At best, using the grease patch a rifleman could get off two shots per minute. This rate of fire would dramatically decrease over the course of the battle as residue buildup would clog the barrel. A French Captain, Gustave Henri Delvigne, started to alter the long process of

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3Garavaglia and Worman, 44.
reloading a rifle. With the development of the Minié rifle the extended process of reloading was significantly reduced. As a result the rifle began replacing the smoothbore musket throughout Europe.

Muzzle velocity was the one drawback of the rifled musket. Unlike smoothbore muskets which, although wildly inaccurate, could be fired with leveled guns rifled muskets had to be elevated for accurate fire. Since rifles had a significantly lower muzzle velocity than smoothbores the drop of a bullet per distance rate was drastically increased. The solution to the problem was two fold. The first was to add an adjustable back-sight to the rifle allowing soldiers to properly level their guns to compensate for the low muzzle velocity. The second was the adoption of the scientific method of firing. Beginning in France during the 1840s, and carrying over into Britain and America by the 1850s, the scientific method taught soldiers how to estimate the range of their target in order to produce accurate fire at long distances. Military minds in France and elsewhere understood that the increased range of rifles could not be taken advantage of if infantrymen were not trained to properly sight their weapons. For this reason, schools of musketry began appearing in France, Britain, and America. Officers from all arms of the military were intrigued by the rifle, and began focusing on how the conduct of war would change. Europeans began asking what effects the rifle, with its improved range and accuracy, would have on the cavalry and artillery.

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4 Garavaglia and Worman, 44; Nosworthy, Bloody Crucible of Courage 25; Mahan. “Civil War Infantry Assault Tactics,” 57.

5 Nosworthy, Bloody Crucible of Courage, 32; Brent Nosworthy, “Small Arms and the Battlefield” North and South 6 (September, 2003): 16; Brent Nosworthy, “The Rifle Musket and Associated Tactics” North & South 7 (January, 2004) 32.

6 Nosworthy, Bloody Crucible of Courage, 32-35
The rifle was not the only small arm development forcing a general discussion about the evolving conduct of warfare. Rapid development of breech-loading rifles also played an important, yet less visible, role. Breech-loading firearms had been in existence dating back to the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, but were seldom used in warfare. Patrick Ferguson, a British officer, prior to the American Revolution designed and tested a new breech-loading rifle. Ferguson’s rifle proved more accurate than the standard Brown Bess, and took just as long to reload. Compared to other British rifles Ferguson’s breechloader produced a faster rate of fire. After strenuous testing the British, scrambling for rifles during 1776 as reports from the colonies described the great effect colonial sharpshooters were having, canceled all orders for muzzle-loading rifles, replacing those arms with Ferguson’s design. Unfortunately, Ferguson was killed at the battle of Kings Mountain in 1780, where a number of his men, armed with his breechloader, were defeated by rifle wielding colonial mounted infantry. With his death the Ferguson rifle left the British service. Breech-loaders once again faded into obscurity but found a rebirth during the 1800s, and ultimately played a significant role on the battlefield.

The first functional breech-loading firearm, known as the Hall carbine, was designed in America by John Hall in 1811. American soldiers began receiving the weapon in 1826, and although testing proved the carbine’s durability many conservative
officers within the Army disliked the weapon tending to prefer old smoothbore muskets. By 1844, production of the Hall carbine had ceased in both national armories, followed by all private armories in 1852. The adoption of the Hall carbine however, did prove significant to the future arming of the United States military. A niche for breech-loading firearms had now been created. This led to a growth in manufacturing different models of breech-loaders, mostly carbines, which were used to arm the United States cavalry. What the United States did not experience as a result was a frank discussion concerning the effects breech-loaders would have on combat tactics. That discussion was left to the Europeans.

In Europe the development of a functional breech-loader did not occur until the 1830s. In 1838, Johann von Dreyse completed his work on the famous 'needle gun'. This breech-loader was able to fire at least six rounds per minute, and had a range of 800 to 1,200 yards. In 1842 Prussian regiments began adopting the weapon, while the government attempted to keep the firearm’s existence a secret. This secrecy was short lived though as the British, by 1849, were able to procure some of the Prussian breech-loaders. Despite knowing about the needle gun European nations would not experiment with breech-loaders for another fifteen years since they were enchanted with the rifled musket.

The new Minié rifle, and its potential effects on the battlefield, had consumed the thoughts of Europeans. Needle guns had a comparable range of fire to rifled muskets, but

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11 Davis, 110, 112.
13 Bilby, 52.
were able to produce a vastly higher rate of fire. These advances in small arms caused Europeans to engage in a tactical discussion lasting from about 1840 to 1870. Most agreed that the supremacy of the infantry was reasserted. To remain battlefield viable artillery and cavalry had to adjust. Artillery would remain a vital part of the battlefield by also turning to rifling.

By rifling their pieces artillerists increased the range of their guns removing them from the danger of rifle wielding infantry. Prior to rifling cannons the artillery was placed close to enemy infantry, usually between 600 to 1000 yards distant. Their safety was maintained because of the smoothbore musket’s inaccuracy. When rifled muskets were adopted the artillery became more vulnerable since infantry could now pick off artillerists without being subjected to intense cannon fire, rendering their pieces ineffective. Louis Napoleon led this artillery change by developing a twelve pound howitzer which could fire on a straight trajectory. Napoleon knew this invention was only a stopgap measure, and proceeded to rifle his artillery.

The French use of rifled artillery in Algeria and the Italian War of Unification proved successful, illustrating the power of these improved pieces. Soon the rest of Europe began adopting rifled artillery, replacing their older smoothbore pieces. In the United States, after years of discussion and foot dragging, replacing smoothbore artillery with rifled pieces began in 1860. While the infantry and artillery of Europe underwent

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15 Nosworthy, “Small Arms and the Battlefield”, 15.

16 Nosworthy, Bloody Crucible of Courage, 103-108.
practical changes, evolving with the technological advances in small arms, the cavalry remained relatively stationary.

As a direct result of rifles becoming the standard infantry weapon an increase in firepower occurred. Increased firepower on the battlefield reduced the likelihood of close quarters combat, increased the role of the defense, and made the cavalry charge obsolete. Since infantrymen could now deliver accurate fire at longer distances the cavalry charge had lost its practicality. The cavalry had already shown its declining shock value in 1815 at Waterloo when Napoleon’s French cuirassiers were destroyed by massed British smoothbore musket and artillery fire. With improved small arms becoming available, and the tactical defense considerably stronger, cavalry was placed at a further disadvantage. What resulted was a discussion concerning the effects rifles would have on the mounted arm, and how the cavalry should react. The British army undertook an extensive examination of these questions in *The Journal of the Royal United Service Institution* and other publications.

Captain Charles Cornwallis Chesney wrote a series of articles during the 1850s and 1860s that were eventually published in an 1870 book titled *The Military Resources of Prussia and France, and Recent changes in the Art of War*. Chesney’s first chapter outlines his opinions about changes in the art of war. Chesney concluded that cavalry, since its shock value will decline due to recent small arms developments, must become a mounted infantry force. A Prussian Captain named Wittich, writing in 1849, concluded

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that cavalry should only be used as a small reserve force, trained as mounted infantry and
used against the flanks and rear. Chesney agreed with Wittich’s thoughts and
observations. Both theorists believed mounted infantry, by using its mobility to
constantly change positions on the battlefield and engaging the enemy with a comparable
volume of firepower, was the new role for cavalry. No longer was the headlong charge a
viable option for the cavalry. Nevertheless, the majority of military theorists did not
accept the mounted infantry argument as feasible.

After 1859, Louis Napoleon began reforming his cavalry, issuing troopers rifled
carribines. With firearms in hand cavalrmen were to act as skirmishers when needed, but
when attacking enemy formations a raking charge with swords flailing was the preferred
tactic. French tactics dictated that instead of charging headlong into enemy infantry the
cavahy would instead approach from the right riding across the front, slashing as they
rode by. These charging tactics would remain the cornerstone of cavalry doctrine. Most
cavalry officers remained convinced of the shock value of cavalry and the psychological

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19 Nosworthy, Bloody Crucible of Courage, 40-42; Nosworthy, Small Arms and the Battlefield, 14;
Nosworthy, “Where Have All the Bullets Gone: The Effectiveness of the Rifled Musket in the Civil War.”

20 Very few theorists believed that cavalry forces should alter their tactics and armament. Prior to
the American Civil War the major proponents of mounted infantry were Chesney and Wittich. Afterwards
they were joined by a few vocal officers such as Henry Havelock, but the majority of officers continued to
espouse the mounted aspect of the cavalry, and wanted to minimize the use of firearms. Both of these
arguments can be found in the following texts. Luvaas, Military Legacy, 4-5, 46, 73, 109-110, 227-229;
Luvaas, “Cavalry Lessons”, 22; Chesney, Military Resources, 45, 47; Denison, 394; Havelock, 35, 39, 52-
53; Anderson, 718; Shunk, 247, 253-256; Marquis of Anglesey, A History of the British Cavalry, 1816-
Steinmetz, 455, 467-468, 477, 482, 484, 489-490; Smith, 150, 153.

21 Nosworthy, Bloody Crucible of Courage, 282.
fear it instilled.\textsuperscript{22} Many officers were further convinced when they began arguing that the rifle’s influence on the battlefield was exaggerated.\textsuperscript{23}

Officers believed that the psychological stress of battle coupled with the rifle’s rainbow trajectory and extended aiming process would not allow infantry to accurately destroy a cavalry charge with long range fire. The argument stated that soldiers could not produce accurate volleys under intense artillery fire and the pressure of an oncoming charge. Instead of accurate fire, infantrymen would panic under the pressure, firing without properly sighting their targets. Battlefield pressure would allow the cavalry to maintain its current role as a shock force.\textsuperscript{24} The only compensation mounted troops would have to make was forming beyond the range of enemy artillery and rifle fire. All agreed that the single greatest threat to cavalry was standing still within range of enemy guns. By forming beyond the range of those guns mounted troopers retained their primary value as a mounted force. Constant celerity would protect cavalry from the extended range of fire from infantry and artillery.

This thinking was not entirely accepted. Officers in other branches believed cavalry, if it continued to act as a shock force, would never be capable of weathering the intense firepower infantry and artillery could produce.\textsuperscript{25} Regardless of what proponents

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{22}Nosworthy, “The Rifled Musket and Associated Tactics”, 36.

\textsuperscript{23}Steinmetz, “Musketry Instruction for the Cavalry Carbine and Pistol,” 468; Tyler, “The Rifle and the Spade or the Future of Field Operations,” 171; Smith, “Cavalry: How far its Employment is Affected by Recent Improvements in Arms of Precision,” 142.

\textsuperscript{24}Smith, 150-153. Steinmetz, 468-469; Nosworthy, “The Rifled Musket and Associated Tactics.”


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of the rifle thought, most cavalry officers maintained their belief that the cavalry was best used as a shock force. The standard role of cavalry therefore changed little over the next decades. Distinctions between heavy and light cavalry and their employment in war remained.

Although more troops were given carbines and pistols by the 1860s, they were trained to fire from horseback. Dismounted tactics were not stressed. Cavalrymen were still taught to fight mounted using the saber. The mounted aspect of war was still the foundation from which European cavalry derived its tactics. In the United States the situation was completely different. There was little, if any, attempt to discuss the probable effects new firearms would have on the conduct of war, and specifically on the action of cavalry. The tactical development of the American cavalry began with the adoption of a French Dragoon manual and a growth in its mounted force. Ironically the Americans adopted a French manual that was no longer in use. The French for some time had changed the role of their dragoons. They no longer dismounted, but rather fought from the saddle like their light and heavy brethrens.

The 1st United States Dragoons were organized as a full regiment of ten companies on March 2, 1833. They were initially armed with smoothbore muskets, pistols and sabers, and their job was to patrol the frontier. By 1836, Congress had authorized a second regiment, the 2nd U.S. Dragoons, to be organized. The 2nd Dragoons

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were deployed to Florida where they would participate in the Seminole War. These dragoon regiments would be the only American mounted force in the Army until 1846. A major problem confronting the two new dragoon regiments was the lack of a uniform tactical system, despite Carlisle Barracks being established in 1835 as a training school for new cavalry officers. Companies in the 1st Dragoons, when initially mustered, were poorly trained and led. Each company devised their own training regimen, preparing troopers for combat. By 1839 the Secretary of War, Joel R. Poinsett, sent, then lieutenant, Philip Kearny to France, enrolling him in the Royal School of Cavalry.

Kearny returned to the United States a year later, and by 1841 the first uniform tactical manual for the United States mounted arm was published. Titled *Cavalry Tactics* this manual was better known as Poinsett’s tactics. It was a simple translation of the French dragoon manual, and served as the tactical guide for American mounted troops for twenty years. Albert Brackett, a cavalry officer during this era, claimed that the 1841 tactics were far superior to any other introduced into the mounted service. The *Cavalry Tactics* manual emphasized both the mounted and dismounted action of the trooper, and provided a detailed training regimen. Troopers were drilled in the dismounted aspects of combat, such as marching, assembly, use of the carbine and saber, and tactical

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29 Starr, *The Union Cavalry*, volume 1, 50.

30 Ibid., 50.

31 Brackett, 48.

deployments. The manual best suited the American trooper because it equally emphasized dismounted and mounted action. Adopting this French manual was an initial step toward combining the dismounted action American soldiers used with a European system that still believed in the mounted power of cavalry.

Unfortunately, any movement towards establishing a tactically flexible cavalry force was halted by leading American theorists. Henry Wagner Halleck and Dennis Hart Mahan published two influential military treatises that covered all aspects of military operations. Their discussions about the use and strength of cavalry are very similar, and both are in lockstep with Jomini. Where Jomini preaches that the strength of cavalry lay in the mounted charge, both Halleck and Mahan are in complete agreement. Mobility and velocity were the primary assets of mounted troops. The carbine was considered useless because it could not be fired accurately from a mounted position. In their respective treatises distinctions were made between light and heavy cavalry. Both espoused the notion that American cavalry should be employed in the European model.\footnote{Ibid.} This was an interesting argument considering the United States did not possess heavy cavalry, a necessity for shock tactics. The five United States regiments by 1860 were light cavalry by European standards. They were given no armor, and carried sabers, pistols, and carbines or rifles. Combat experience against Native Americans taught them to fight both

dismounted and mounted.\textsuperscript{35} The United States cavalry in no way mirrored a European force, but officers were taught to use shock tactics.

Halleck claimed that cavalry was the second most important arm on the battlefield, and its principal merit was based on mobility and velocity of the charge.\textsuperscript{36} Mahan, the principal professor of tactics at West Point, discussed the role and need of heavy and light cavalry, and agreed that the traditional purpose of heavy cavalry lay in the mounted charge.\textsuperscript{37} Both men did not believe cavalry could hold a position against an enemy without infantry support, and that the use of the carbine should be limited.\textsuperscript{38} Cavalry, according to their writings, should be placed behind the infantry and out of range of enemy artillery. They should be used only for the mounted charge when the enemy was on the verge of breaking, while always being supported by horse-artillery. The flanks and rear of the enemy were the points cavalry should aim at when charging. Halleck and Mahan believed dragoons, although meant to act as both infantry and cavalry, had never been serviceable in either role, and that referring to the American mounted arm as such was incorrect.\textsuperscript{39} Interestingly enough Halleck's own views on cavalry are countered when he referred to Napoleon's memoirs, when the Frenchman


\textsuperscript{36}Halleck, \textit{Elements of Military Arts and Science}, 125, 128-129.

\textsuperscript{37}Mahan, \textit{An Elementary Treatise}, 42-43, 57-58

\textsuperscript{38}Mahan, \textit{An Elementary Treatise}, 39, 57; Halleck, \textit{Elements of Military Arts and Science}, 125, 128, 263.

\textsuperscript{39}Mahan, \textit{An Elementary Treatise}, 44; Halleck, \textit{Elements of Military Arts and Science}, 264.
argued that all cavalry should be given firearms and taught to dismount when necessary.\textsuperscript{40} Despite this discrepancy Halleck and Mahan both preached the traditional cavalry charge as the basis of American tactical doctrine, although cavalry tactics as a required class at West Point were not introduced until 1853.\textsuperscript{41} All cavalry officers during the 1850s and 1860s took Mahan’s course learning his theories. As a result many young officers came to believe in the power of the charge and saber despite their combat experiences against the Native Americans.\textsuperscript{42} This new wave of European thinking carried over into the adoption of a new tactical manual, replacing the old Poinsett tactics as the Civil War began.

Philip St. George Cooke, originally commissioned into the infantry upon graduating West Point, became a first lieutenant in the 1\textsuperscript{st} Dragoons when the regiment was mustered in 1833.\textsuperscript{43} Cooke spent the rest of his career in the mounted service eventually becoming a Brigadier-General in November, 1861. In 1858, Cooke was sent to Europe with the mission to prepare a new tactical manual for the United States cavalry. By this time two more regiments, the 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} United States cavalry, had been mustered into service as the mounted arm of the army continued to expand. These new regiments brought forth a number of younger, promising officers. Just like their sister regiments of dragoons and mounted infantry the cavalry was armed with Hall carbines, pistols and

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  \item \textsuperscript{40}Halleck, Elements of Military Arts and Science, 268.
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  \item \textsuperscript{42}Longacre, Lincoln’s Cavahyemen, 8-9.
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  \item \textsuperscript{43}Wesley Merritt. “Life and Services of General Philip St. George Cooke, U.S. Army.” Journal of the United States Cavalry Association 8 (June, 1895) 79-80.
\end{itemize}
sabers, and tasked with fighting Indians on the frontier. With the mounted arm of the United States Army now standing at five regiments the military hierarchy vigorously sought a European styled cavalry force. Cooke, a proponent of the charge and saber, drew his inspiration from Frederick the Great and Napoleon. Upon returning to the United States the Colonel’s tactical manual was published in early 1862, and the influences of Frederick and Napoleon could clearly be seen.

Where the previously accepted dragoon manual focused equally on dismounted and mounted movements and action, Cooke’s manual focused solely on the mounted use of cavalry. Movements, marching, deployment, the use of the sword and pistol, and adopting the single rank system, all illustrate Cooke’s preference for the American cavalry to remain mounted in war. Only small sections of the tactical manual dealt with dismounted cavalry tactics usually calling for a platoon or two to fight on foot. There is no section devoted to carbine instruction compared to the previous manual. Cooke claimed dismounted fighting should be conducted with pistols, using the sword as a last resort. When dismounting was necessary cavalry soldiers would fight on foot at seventy-five percent of their effective strength. One out of every four troopers would remain mounted holding the horses, while the other three joined a battle or skirmish

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44. Longacre, *Lincoln’s Cavalrymen*, 4-5; Norvell, 360.
45. Merritt, 84.
47. Ibid., 213, 217.
The necessity for horse holders further hampered the cavalryman's ability to fight dismounted by depleting their fighting capacity by twenty-five percent. This made the acquisition of excellent breech-loading and repeating carbines even more important because the manpower shortage they faced had to be offset. One advantage of having horse holders was that the cavalry always had a small reserve force that could join the fight dismounted. To call upon this immediate reserve every other holder pulled their carbines and hit the ground, leaving one in eight men holding a horse. Although Cooke briefly mentioned the full spectrum of dismounted tactics his call for using the pistol and sword while acting as infantry illustrated his disdain for carbines, and any type of combat away from the saddle. Cooke’s manual, along with the writings of Mahan and Halleck caused a tactical dilemma for the United States cavalry when the Civil War broke out.

The experienced officers and troopers who remained loyal to the Union cause now had to disregard their combat experiences against the Indians where the use of firearms was necessary and effective, instead adopting the traditional European version. This change resulted in much confusion during the initial stages of the war when the cavalry had no identity. Not only did the Union mounted regiments have to contend with a deficiency in arms and equipment, but they also had to overcome the inexperience of working as a coherent organization, while adopting a new tactical system. What made matters worse for the Union cavalry was the loss in leadership. Four of the five regimental colonels resigned once their states had seceded. These colonels were joined by three lieutenant-colonels and numerous officers of lesser rank. Officers such as Generals A.S. Johnston, Robert Lee, William Hardee, J.E.B. Stuart, John Hood, Richard Ewell, Fitzhugh Lee and Joseph Wheeler left the American cavalry to join the Confederacy.

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Their defection would prove significant over the short term. Men like Wheeler, Stuart and Fitz Lee would mould the Rebel cavalry based upon their combat experiences out west, whereas Union commanders attempted to devise a more traditional system. The limited yet effective tradition of the American mounted infantryman was replaced with something, almost, entirely foreign to the individual trooper’s experience. They were no longer told to rely on the firearms they carried, which although unreliable, still provided troopers with a carbine or rifle they were familiar with. Instead the sword and charge would now be the cornerstone of their tactical employment. This, as will be seen, proved extremely harmful to the early action of the Union cavalry.

What further affected the Union cavalry was the leadership’s inability to realize that technological advances in small arms had inevitably changed the role of cavalry. During the 1830s, infantry firearms had quickly developed, and over the next few decades continued improvement led to tactical discussions about the changing nature of warfare. Many of the early Union leaders missed or did not acknowledge this armament transformation, and this greatly affected the development of the Federal cavalry.

Understanding these technological advances and subsequent discussions about the future of the cavalry is vital to recognizing and appreciating the tactical and armament evolution of the Union mounted force.

Unlike their European counterparts the United States cavalry was experimenting, prior to the Civil War, with breech-loading small arms. By the late 1850s mounted regiments were armed with an assortment of carbines that were being field tested.\textsuperscript{50} The

cavalry was the only arm of the United States Army taking advantage of breech-loaders. The rise of the rifle stymied breech-loaders for infantry regiments. Many in and out of the military believed breech-loaders would never live up to the expectations of maintaining a consistent high rate of fire, while possessing similar range and accuracy. Another fear often cited was the extreme waste of ammunition breechloaders caused due to their quick reloading ability.51

The problem for the Federal cavalry was that, despite possessing modern breech-loading arms, they did not have a coherent tactical system to complement these firearms. There was no discussion about the advantages these weapons could have on the battlefield unlike their European brethren, who engaged in a discussion concerning the effects new firearms, like the rifle, would have on cavalry. Unfortunately, this is not surprising. The United States always maintained a limited military force, and had no real strong tradition upon which to build. Although the hierarchy wanted to have a stronger European connection, in terms of military organization and tactics, history and experience taught otherwise. This was an inherent problem the Federal cavalry had to overcome during the beginning stages of the war.

51 R.E.C. Modern Tactics, 7, 11; Davis, Arming the Union, 107, 116, 118-120.
CHAPTER III
SEARCHING FOR A TACTICAL MODEL: THE EUROPEAN TRADITION VERSUS FLEXIBILITY

After the secession of the southern states Federal cavalry regiments, dispersed throughout the frontier and returning in piecemeal fashion, made their way back to Carlisle, Pennsylvania and Washington, D.C. to refit and rearm. The War Department concluded that the five mounted regiments of regulars would be enough to support the Army’s operations. Soldiers with company level experience were now expected to act with regimental and brigade level cohesion. This expectation was furthered hampered by the leadership void each regiment faced. A majority of the prewar mid-level and junior southern officers tendered resignations once their states seceded. Other officers who stayed loyal to the Union were removed from their cavalry posts and given infantry commands. George Thomas, Edward Sumner and Philip Kearney, all three becoming prominent Generals during the war, were cavalry officers transferred to the infantry.1

Added to the structural problems of the cavalry was the deficiency of carbines, both in quantity and quality. The immediate problem of procuring and distributing the necessary numbers of carbines would haunt the Federal cavalry for the next two years as troopers were armed with a plethora of different arms. More pressing than arms and equipment shortages was the fact there was no tactical consistency which the Union cavalry could build upon, and no general agreement concerning how cavalry should be used in battle.

All of these problems became immediately apparent at Bull Run.

1Starr, The Union Cavalry, volume 1, 58.
In the months leading up to the first major engagement of the war the Secretary of War Simon Cameron and General in Chief Winfield Scott both agreed that volunteer cavalry regiments would not be accepted by the government. Only infantry and artillery regiments were called for. Scott believed that the five Federal regiments already in service were enough cavalry for the duration of the war. To support these claims Scott argued that large numbers of cavalry would not be needed since the war would be short, it took two years to properly train a cavalry regiment, it was too expensive to equip and maintain a cavalry regiment (estimates vary), and the terrain of Virginia did not lend itself to mounted operations. For these reasons the mounted force of the Union army remained weak until after Bull Run. Defeat forced everyone to realize the war would be a much longer affair than initially anticipated.

When Brigadier-General Irvin McDowell moved on Manassas in July 1861, he did so with only seven companies of cavalry to escort the army. This hodgepodge cavalry force consisted of four companies from the 2nd U.S., two companies from the 1st U.S. and one company from the 2nd U.S. Dragoons. Major Innis Palmer, given command of the cavalry, was assigned to Colonel Andrew Porter’s brigade of Brigadier-General David Hunter’s division. Throughout the battle Palmer’s men were kept in the rear. Porter, an infantry officer, was unable to find a place where he could throw Palmer into the fracas.

*All regiments listed hereafter will be in reference to cavalry units unless otherwise specified.


*From this point all references to the Official Records will be noted as the OR.*
Only after the tide of battle turned and Confederate forces threw the Federal infantry into a rout did the small force of cavalry play any role. For twelve miles the Rebel cavalry, led by the Virginia Blackhorse, chased the broken Union army back towards Washington. Palmer’s force admirably protected the flanks and rear of the army all the way to Centerville, Virginia as they were the only cohesive force remaining. The debacle of Bull Run changed the thinking of the Federal leadership. Abraham Lincoln, Simon Cameron and Scott realized that the war would be a much longer affair than originally perceived. With this realization the role of cavalry, in both the eastern and western theaters, grew in importance. No longer could the Union rely solely on the five regular mounted regiments.

By August 31st, 1861, the mounted arm had grown to thirty-one regiments. As 1861 ended eighty-two regiments of cavalry were mustered for service. With the rapid growth in manpower new problems quickly arose for the Federal cavalry. One severe problem was the Ordnance Department could not arm the mass influx of recruits because they possessed a limited number of carbines.

When hostilities began the Ordnance Department had 4,076 carbines on hand. Federal armories by 1855 had halted all carbine production to focus on manufacturing Springfield rifled muskets. Carbine production was turned over to private arms manufacturers, and the Federal government prior to the war limited the numbers purchased. Only Sharps and Burnside carbines were procured in limited quantities. As a

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5 Starr, The Union Cavalry, volume 1, 78.

6 OR, series III, vol 1, pt. I, 858

7 Davis, Arming the Union, 10.
result, when war arose the Federal government was not prepared to provide large numbers of cavalry with carbines. Since the national armories were only producing rifled muskets, they could not alter production because of the rapid expansion of infantry regiments. Lieutenant-Colonel James Ripley, chief of the Ordnance Department, contracted out all carbine requests to fill the demand of cavalry regiments. By turning to the private sector Ripley was forced to make contracts with numerous companies, each producing its own type of carbine with its own specific ammunition. This forced procurement resulted in the acceptance and distribution of poor quality carbines, hindering the fighting ability of Union cavalrymen. The carbine shortage was so severe the Federal government sent agents to Europe to purchase firearms. The addition of European carbines, often muzzle loading and/or smoothbore, further added to the inferiority of small arms carried by cavalrymen during the initial years of the war.

One of the early carbines receiving exceptional reviews from cavalry troops was the Sharps carbine. The Sharps had been in service since the 1850s, but the army refused to standardize the weapon citing constant technological advances of the era. Developed by Christopher Sharp during the 1840s, the Sharps carbine would become the most famous single shot, breech-loading small arm of the war. By 1852, the government agreed to its first contract for 200 carbines with the Sharps Manufacturing Company. In 1854, the Sharps carbine was used by both Dragoon regiments, proving to be an excellent firearm. Between 1855 and 1861, another 5,800 carbines were purchased making it the

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9 *Davis, Arming the Union*, 66.
10 Ibid., 77.
unofficial arm of the cavalry.\footnote{12}{Ibid, 13.} Using a linen cartridge that contained black powder and a .52 caliber bullet the trooper would open the breech of the gun by working the lever, load the round, and close the breech. When the breech closed the linen was cut open exposing the powder. The hammer was cocked, and a percussion cap was placed on the nipple of the firing mechanism readying the gun for action.\footnote{13}{Bilby, A Revolution in Arms, 36-38; Claud E. Fuller, The Breech-loader in the Service, 1816-1917: A History of all Standard and Experimental Breech-loading and Magazine Shoulder Arms. (New Milford, Connecticut, N. Flaydeman & Co., 1965), 72.} The ability to quickly reload allowed troopers to maintain a rate of fire, double that of a standard Springfield rifle. The breech-loading carbine’s ability to maintain a constant rate of fire provided a distinct advantage. Although the carbine could not match the range of Springfield and Enfield rifles the Union trooper’s ability to produce a hotter fire negated that distance disparity.

On June 29th and July 4th, 1861, Ripley ordered 6,000 Sharps carbines. Shipments began arriving in September, and by the end of 1861, 5,800 carbines had been delivered. Troops in the field appreciated the Sharps carbine. Major A.H. Seley of the 5th Illinois declared the Sharps an “excellent arm, easily kept in repair.” Colonel Thomas Herrick of the 7th Kansas stated that the Sharps carbine was the “best arm for the cavalry service.” This opinion was supported by Major Browninshield of the 2nd Massachusetts, who stated “The Sharps carbine is, in my opinion, far superior to any of the other carbines which I have seen used in the Army.”\footnote{14}{National Archives, 75. Records of the Cavalry Bureau, 1863-1865, “Abstracts of Reports Received Relating to the Efficiency of Carbines and Rifles,” Box 1, no. 1, RG 108.} By the end of the war the Sharps had become the second most distributed small arm in the cavalry service trailing only the Spencer carbine. Over 77,300 Sharps were eventually purchased by the Ordnance department, and it was
considered by most troopers an excellent arm. The problem was that throughout 1861-1862, Sharps carbines were available in limited numbers. Carbine production during 1862, by the Sharps industry, was halted when orders for Sharps rifles for two regiments of U.S. Sharpshooters had to be filled. The production order for rifles deprived the cavalry of 6,000 carbines, which would have been produced between February and May, 1862. Not until 1863-1864, when over 47,000 Sharps were received did mass distribution occur. Prior to 1863, the government filled the needs of the cavalry with less reliable breech-loaders.

By the end of 1861, the Ordnance department had contracts with a number of different companies to produce carbines. Contracts for Burnside, Gallager, Smith, Starr and Gibbs carbines, ranging from 5,000 to 10,000 in quantity, were made. In all, over 73,000 carbines had been ordered for the year 1861, of which only 9,000 were delivered by last day of December. Seventy-five percent of those were Sharps, while the remainder were mostly Burnsides. Designed by Ambrose Burnside, who retired his commission from the army in 1853, but was later reinstated when the war broke out as a Brigadier-General the carbine competed with the Sharps. Burnside carbines fired .54 caliber metallic cartridges that contained a small hole in the bottom of the round allowing the gunpowder to be ignited once the hammer slammed down on the percussion system. Initial problems of

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16Davis, *Arm the Union*, 83.

17Ibid., 80-82.

18Wilson, "How Soldiers Rated Carbines," 40; McAulay, *Carbines of the Civil War*, 25;
procuring Burnside carbines were the result of Bristol Firearm's inability to fulfill the contract quotas. In August 1861, the Ordnance department ordered 7,500 carbines with delivery to begin in January 1862. This contract was eventually cancelled, and a new contract was signed in June 1862, for more carbines.\(^\text{19}\) When troopers began receiving Burnsides their reviews were generally negative. Most officers reported their men found the gun ineffective, often "getting out of order" and inferior to the Sharps carbine. Major Reno, of the 12\(^{\text{th}}\) Pennsylvania, declared that the Burnside was the "...worst and least effective arm in the service."\(^\text{20}\) Not all reviews of the carbine were negative though. Many found the Burnside superior to other carbines but generally not the Sharps, and the metallic cartridge was found to be well protected.\(^\text{21}\) Despite the poor reports Burnsides were the third most distributed breech-loader throughout the war. In 1863, the Bristol Firearms company finally began meeting production quotas, and by the end of the war more than 53,000 Burnsides had been delivered.\(^\text{22}\)

All other carbines contracted for by the Ordnance department never reached the numbers delivered by the Sharps, Burnside, and Spencer manufacturers. A major problem throughout the war was the failure of companies to meet shipment dates. Private factories were not designed to meet the war needs of the government for thousands of carbines. Further complicating the system was the fact that each carbine required a different cartridge and caliber bullet. For instance, while both the Gibbs and Burnside carbine

\(^{19}\)McAulay, *Carbines of the Civil War*, 26, 29.

\(^{20}\)National Archives, Record Group 108, Entry 75.

\(^{21}\)National Archives, Record Group 108, Entry 75.

\(^{22}\)McAulay, *Carbines of the Civil War*, 29.
required a .54 caliber bullet they required different cartridges. The Gibbs required a paper cartridge while the Burnside a metallic one. The Sharps carbine required a .52 caliber bullet and a linen cartridge while the Spencer rifle required the same caliber, but a rim fire cartridge. With different styles of carbines requiring millions of diverse cartridges supply problems were inevitable.

Compounding ammunition problems was the inferiority of most carbines. Cavalry soldiers often went into battle during 1861 and 1862 with carbines, if they had any at all, that would jam, misfire and break. Troops complained that they had difficulty removing spent cartridges from Joslyn, Gibbs, Gallagher and Starr carbines. Major Weed, of the 10th New York, claimed the Smith’s carbine was not a sure fire like the Burnside. Colonel Alfred Gibbs, from the 1st New York Dragoons, declared the Joslyn unfit for service. Officers referred to the Gibbs carbine as worthless, a sentiment also reported about Gallager and Starr carbines. Troops in the field, if lucky enough to receive any carbines, were often provided inferior arms that required diverse types of ammunition.

By the end of 1861, the carbine situation had not improved. Very few carbines were actually delivered to the government, and with over 90,000 new cavalry recruits flocking to the colors the vast majority of soldiers were not given firearms. In 1862, the situation barely improved as many companies faulted on their contracts, and the Sharps Company was occupied with fulfilling the rifle order. This shortage led George Stoneman, the Chief of Cavalry, to order that each company in every regiment (twelve

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23 Wilson, "How Soldiers Rated Carbines", 40.

24 National Archives, Record Group 108, Entry 75; McAuley, *Carbines of the U.S. Cavalry*, 23-28; McAuley, *Carbines of the Civil War*, 42, 49, 74, 106.

25 National Archives, Record Group 108, Entry 75.

26 Starr, *The Union Cavalry*, volume 1, 78.
companies made up a regiment) be given ten carbines for picket and outpost duty.\textsuperscript{27} Troops were to rely on the saber and pistol. The lack of available carbines pushed the Union cavalry toward using the European model, relying upon the charge and saber.

As cavalry recruits were billeted around the hundreds of camps ringing Washington and other Union strongholds a serious problem arose. Horsemanship was a quality that most troopers did not possess.\textsuperscript{28} Unlike their Confederate adversaries who, for the most part, were experienced in riding and shooting the Union trooper came to war having to learn these abilities.\textsuperscript{29} Compounding this inexperience was the lack of regimental leadership that could properly train new recruits for battle. Cavalry recruits often had to wait months for the proper amount of equipment and horses to be delivered.\textsuperscript{30} Drill and training, already pushed back by material shortages, was further hindered by the harsh weather conditions during the winter of 1861-1862. Thomas Smith, a sergeant in the 6\textsuperscript{th} Pennsylvania who was billeted around Washington often wrote home detailing the weather conditions recruits faced. Constant rain and snow made training all but impossible as the ground became mud.\textsuperscript{31}


\textsuperscript{30}Starr, \textit{The Union Cavalry}, volume I, 86; Ryan, "Some Cavalry Lessons from the Civil War", 270-271.

\textsuperscript{31}Eric J. Wittenberg. \textit{We Have it Damn Hard Out Here: The Civil War Letters of Sergeant Thomas W. Smith, 6\textsuperscript{th} Pennsylvania Cavalry}. (Kent, Ohio: Kent University Press, 1999), 8-9, 12-13.
experienced leadership, and limited drill hindered the training of the Union cavalry. Their opponents, already well versed in the basic attributes of a cavalryman and possessing combat experience, were much better prepared for the rigors of mounted warfare.

As Union armies, from east to west, began planning offensives for the spring of 1862, it became obvious that not one single theater commander understood how to deploy his cavalry. Instead of massing their mounted units commanders like McClellan, Grant, and Buell divided them piecemeal. Cavalry units were distributed amongst infantry brigades, divisions and corps. They were not under the command of cavalry leaders, but infantry officers who had no conception about using mounted forces effectively. Major Benjamin Crowninshield declared that during 1862, "...the Federal cavalry at that time had no general who understood its use; on the contrary it was used up and ruined in a service which stupidly did not only give it no rest to prepare for an emergency, but placed it where it could not even gain a reputation." When McClellan landed on the Peninsula in early 1862, he had approximately 6,000 cavalrymen accompanying a force exceeding 100,000 soldiers. By the end of McClellan’s Peninsular campaign the cavalry, whether deserved or not, had been earmarked with a reputation as useless and incompetent. The same held true in the west as Federal mounted forces were unable to check the marauding Rebel cavalry, while failing to play a significant role in major battles. Yet, before the Federal cavalry was labeled as useless a small skirmish on the Virginia peninsula


33 Crowninshield, “Cavalry in Virginia During the War of Rebellion,” 9
provided some interesting tactical lessons that were not heeded for the rest of that fateful year.

On the morning of May 4th the Union command woke up to find the entrenched Rebel army at Yorktown gone. During the previous night General Joe Johnston evacuated his troops in front of McClellan's grand siege, which had been in place since the first week of April. McClellan, waiting until noon, finally sent his cavalry, under General George Stoneman to pursue to retreating Rebels. Stoneman was to be supported by two infantry divisions. During the day long pursuit and subsequent skirmish at Williamsburg, the infantry was unable to provide any support.

Without infantry support the pursuing Federal cavalry were on their own. Stoneman's problems were compounded by the limited number of troops he was following with. When the pursuit of Johnston began, Stoneman was given only four regiments and one squadron of cavalry along with four batteries of horse (or flying) artillery to harass and cut off the Rebel rearguard. This force consisted of the 1st and 6th U.S., 3rd Pennsylvania, and the 8th Illinois. Yet, it was the presence of the horse artillery that provided the support the cavalry needed. Horse artillery batteries, for the most part, consisted of 3-inch ordnance rifles with each battery consisting of six guns. Other horse artillery batteries, especially in the western theater, consisted of a variety of guns like the 10 pound Parrot, the 12 pound smoothbore Napoleon, and in some cases mountain howitzers. New to the army the 3-inch rifle had undergone strenuous testing since 1854,

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when it was first known as the Griffin gun. Weighing just over eight hundred pounds the ordnance rifles were deemed light and maneuverable enough to support cavalry units. With a maximum range of 1,800 yards the guns provided excellent firepower and support capabilities. The 3-inch rifle, as reliable an artillery piece as there was during the war, was an integral part of the Union cavalry’s tactical growth. The skirmish at Williamsburg provides an example of how cavalry and horse artillery, working in conjunction, could be a potent force.

The Federal cavalry engaged J.E.B Stuart’s mounted troops eight miles south of Williamsburg. Rebel resistance was dispersed when one battery of artillery was unlimbered, firing a few rounds. The pursuit resumed for a few miles when another skirmish occurred. Stuart’s cavalry was again dispersed this time by artillery fire, and a mounted charge from the 6th U.S. Stoneman then divided his forces. Sending the 3rd Pennsylvania and 8th Illinois with a battery of horse artillery under the command of Brigadier-General William Emory to capture the Lee’s Mill Road and connect with Smith’s division, Stoneman continued pursuing Stuart. Advancing south on the Lee’s Mill Road, Emory was ambushed by elements of the 3rd Virginia cavalry making a mounted charge. Parrying the charge Emory reformed his troops. Dismounting two squadrons of the 3rd Pennsylvania, armed with Sharps carbines, and placing them on both flanks under Colonel William Averell the Union troopers repulsed the 3rd Virginia with a combination of carbine and artillery fire. Emory pursued the Rebels for one mile

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39 Ibid., 433, 435; Longacre, Lincoln’s Cavalrymen, 77; McAulay, Carbines of the U.S. Cavalry, 20.
driving them from another position with well placed artillery fire. When requests for infantry support to guard the artillery were not met Emory halted the pursuit.\textsuperscript{40}

As Emory pushed back Stuart’s cavalry along the Lee’s Mill Road, Cooke and Stoneman continued their pursuit of Johnston’s rearguard. Cooke was informed that Rebel defenses just beyond the woods were vulnerable.\textsuperscript{41} The advance was resumed. As Federal troops emerged from the woods they faced a strong Rebel defensive position. At the intersection of the Williamsburg and Lee’s Mill Roads was Fort Magruder, and on either side were supporting redoubts. The defenses contained at least one brigade of Rebel infantry, Stuart’s cavalry, and approximately thirty guns.\textsuperscript{42} Cooke and Stoneman immediately attacked. Gibson’s battery of horse artillery moved to within four hundred yards of the enemy position, unlimbered and began to fire. The 1\textsuperscript{st} U.S. was kept mounted in support of the guns, and ordered to charge any Rebel formation which left the works in an attempt to capture the artillery.\textsuperscript{43} The Union forces quickly came under a hot cross fire from Rebel artillery and musketry.

Meanwhile, Cooke ordered the 6\textsuperscript{th} U.S. to the right, attempting to outflank the Rebel position. Under the command of Major Laurence Williams the 6\textsuperscript{th} U.S. advanced. Meanwhile, Rebel infantry and cavalry were moving along the same route to outflank Stoneman’s small force.\textsuperscript{44} Soon the opposing forces came into contact, and a squadron of

\textsuperscript{40}OR, series I, vol. XI, part I, 433.

\textsuperscript{41}Ibid., 427.

\textsuperscript{42}Ibid., 424, 426-428; Longacre, \textit{Lincoln’s Cavalrymen}, 77-78; Warren Lee Gross, \textit{Battles and Leaders}, 194-195.

\textsuperscript{43}OR, series I, vol. XI, part I, 429.

\textsuperscript{44}Ibid., 436-437; Longacre, \textit{Lincoln’s Cavalrymen}, 78.
the 6th U.S. charged the advancing Rebels allowing the rest of the regiment to fall back. As the 6th U.S. fell back Stoneman and Cooke realized they could no longer hold their position. Rebel artillery and musketry fire were inflicting serious casualties. After battling for an hour a retreat was ordered. The 1st U.S. remained mounted, protecting the artillery as the batteries limbered up. With the Federals withdrawing elements of Stuart’s cavalry began pursuing, but were quickly halted by a charge from Captain Davis and sixty men.\(^\text{45}\) During the engagement Stoneman lost one piece of artillery, four caissons, a number of horses, and thirty-five to forty-five men killed and wounded. Emory’s losses were considerably lighter, losing at least two killed and four wounded.\(^\text{46}\)

Overall the cavalry had performed well in this pursuit. With a limited force, and supported only by artillery they were able to hotly pursue Johnston’s rearguard. After doing very little work during the previous month the Union cavalry had delivered an acceptable performance. Although the battle was not comparable in size and intensity to future engagements the fighting provides valuable insights. First, that cavalry could be effective when properly armed and fighting dismounted in skirmish lines. Using carbines and dismounted tactics troops could fight like infantry, and not ruin the essence of cavalry as Mahan and Halleck had argued. The dismounted action of the 3rd Pennsylvania proves this point as they pushed back the 3rd Virginia and continued the pursuit.

Second, artillery support for mounted units was a vital ingredient to success. Artillery fire was the single most important aspect that allowed the Federals to maintain their pursuit. Had Stoneman not possessed these batteries the pursuit might have bogged


\(^{46}\)Ibid., 427, 429, 434.
down against Stuart’s rearguard, ultimately being smashed upon reaching Fort Magruder. Instead, the Federal cavalry was able to maintain its cohesion and mobility.

Third, the cavalry charge could still be useful in certain instances. When used with artillery to disperse the Confederate rear-guards the cavalry could still effectively charge without placing itself in too much danger from concentrated small arms fire. The charge when used against a broken enemy remained valuable, but the limitations of mounted action were also illuminated. Federal cavalry would have to devise alternatives for engaging Rebel forces when entrenched with substantial artillery support. No longer could the cavalry stay mounted when within range of enemy guns. The majority of Union casualties resulted from entrenched Rebel artillery fire. The power of rifled musketery and artillery against mounted cavalry was proven, but since this engagement was a skirmish not a developed battle lessons were not heeded. Instead, the Federal cavalry remained divided amongst the Army, troops were still woefully armed, and similar mounted tactics continued being used against cohesive infantry units. The continued reliance on traditional European tactics helped accentuate the failure at Gaines’s Mill, while accelerating the cavalry’s overall decline.

On June 26th, 1862, Robert E. Lee launched a series of battles known as the Seven Days. As a result McClellan ordered General Fitz John Porter to fall back to a better defensive position around Gaines’s Mill along the Chickahominy River. At Gaines’s Mill the cavalry, under Cooke, arrived on the field just before the battle began on the 27th and were placed along the rear of the Union army.47 Cooke’s force was at half strength as the remaining troopers were at Cold Harbor. According to Abraham Arnold, a young Union lieutenant participating in the battle, the cavalry only had 634 men to hold the left flank.

of Porter’s line. This meager cavalry force was made up of five companies from the 5th U.S. equaling 220 men, five companies of the 6th Pennsylvania constituting 250 men armed only with lances, four companies of the 1st U.S. with 125 men, and the provost guard of the reserve force totaling 39 men from the 6th U.S.. The regular regiments of the 1st, 5th and 6th U.S. were armed with Sharps carbines along with sabers and pistols. As the infantry battle raged to his front and right the old cavalry veteran moved his meager force to the extreme left of the Union line to protect some exposed artillery batteries. Cooke deployed this skeleton force of 600 troopers just behind the reserve batteries with the 5th U.S. on the right, the 1st U.S. in the center, and the 6th Pennsylvania on the left. The troops were left mounted. No attempt was made to strengthen the position by erecting breastworks. Cooke was sticking to his belief in the traditional European role of cavalry as a strictly mounted force. In a few hours this tactical decision ruined Cooke’s career. (Refer to Map A)

At noon on the 27th Confederates infantry began launching massive assaults along the right wing of Porter’s line. After six hours of intense fighting the Union line wavered as the Confederates launched a general assault along the whole line. Soon the entire Federal line was in retreat. The infantry, initially to Cooke’s front, was now streaming into the rear. The reserve batteries in front of Cooke immediately began firing as Rebels, from General George Pickett’s Brigade, became visible.

Despite the intense artillery barrage the Rebels continued advancing. Fearing they would be overrun the batteries began to limber. Cooke immediately ordered the batteries


49 McAuay, Caribines of the U.S. Cavalry, 19.
to maintain their firing, while promising the cavalry would provide protection. As the artillery sustained their fire by switching to canister rounds Cooke moved his troops into position.\(^5\) Canister rounds were tin cylinders filled with either cast-iron or musket balls. Once fired the canister bursts open and balls are sent flying towards the advancing infantry. Used as a short range round, anywhere from six hundred yards or less according to John Gibbon’s *The Artillerist’s Manual*, massed canister fire was extremely effective at tearing huge holes through the ranks of advancing infantry.\(^6\) At Gaines’s Mill the canister fire was effective enough to momentarily halt Pickett’s advance. Cooke, meanwhile, moved the 1st and 5th U.S. forward filling the interval separating the two batteries on the right. The 6th Pennsylvania was placed on the right of the leftmost battery.\(^7\) Orders to charge the Rebels were issued if the batteries became endangered.

Remaining mounted the three regiments were ready to charge at any moment. Unfortunately, by staying mounted the cavalry absorbed a heavy amount of rifle fire. Although the Union batteries had done an excellent job halting the Rebel advance most of the damage had been done to the center of Pickett’s line as his right and left flanks were still intact. Soon the batteries ran out of ammunition, and the Rebel advance quickened. As the artillery fire slackened Captain Charles Whiting of the 5th U.S. ordered a charge.\(^8\) The charge was a disaster. The 5th U.S., with sabers in hand, galloped into a hail of fire that decimated their ranks. Five out of six officers were killed, missing, or wounded only


\(^7\) *OR*, series I, vol. XI, part II, 41-42.

\(^8\) Ibid., 46.
Captain Joseph McArthur was unharmed. The 5th U.S. lost a total of 58 men in the charge. Meanwhile, the 6th Pennsylvania covered the retreat of the battery it was tasked to defend, while the 1st U.S., instead of supporting the charge of the 5th U.S. as ordered, retreated. The charge of the 5th U.S. failed to save all of the Union guns on the left flank. Cooke was forced to retire, but only after Porter’s infantry had done so. By doggedly following the mounted tradition of relying on cold steel and celerity Cooke stubbornly chained his career to a dying cavalry tactic. Not only was Cooke’s career shattered, but his new tactical manual that focused predominately on the mounted aspects of the cavalry service was quickly discredited. It had become painfully obvious that the mounted offensive ability of the cavalry had come to a bloody end. That evening Porter began blaming Cooke and his ill-conceived charge for the defeat. By July 5th, Cooke had been relieved of duty, his career as a field officer was over. This controversy lasted well beyond the war years. When the Century Company was gathering wartime memoirs for its multi-volume series Battles and Leaders of the Civil War this controversy still raged as Porter continued blaming Cooke. Cooke, and many of his former officers including General Wesley Merritt, only a captain at the time, mounted a vociferous defense. These officers stated that the infantry had already fled the field when the charge was conducted, and since it was their duty to save those guns the cavalry acted honorably and correctly.  

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54 Ibid., 46.
55 Ibid., 44.
56 Ibid., 226; Longacre, Lincoln’s Cavalrymen, 91-92; Arnold, “The Cavalry at Gaines’s Mill”, 360.
Clearly, the cavalry did not directly cause the defeat of the Union forces at Gaines's Mill, but their performance does merit question. The engagement proved once again that the cavalry charge against unbroken infantry was no longer a viable option. Cooke had six hours to better prepare his position. With the exception of the 6th Pennsylvania his units carried a fair amount of carbines, so fighting dismounted was not out of the question. The fact is Cooke continued relying on European tactics despite their inadequacy. Cooke should have altered his tactics knowing that cavalry could no longer charge cohesive infantry, even with artillery support. The failure of Cooke to experiment with new tactics in order to offset the vulnerability of his cavalry to the rifle is his legacy. Had the cavalry dismounted and taken up positions behind breastworks there may have been a better opportunity to save all of the guns. Regardless, it would have been impossible to hold the position for an extended period since the regiments were not fully armed and vastly outnumbered, but it may have bought the artillery more time to retreat. Unfortunately, Cooke relied on tactics he knew and believed in. His reliance on mounted tactics led not only to his removal from command, but the continued decline of the cavalry in the eyes of the Army.

Throughout the remainder of 1862, the cavalry continued plunging into a massive decline. At the battles of Second Bull Run, Antietem, and Fredericksburg the cavalry played no active combat role since the Union commanders did not understand how to employ their cavalry. The other problem was that although the cavalry was kept out of harm's way by inexperienced infantry commanders they were unprepared to engage in any heated combat since they were not properly armed. The carbine situation remained in

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flux, and the cavalry still had not developed a cohesive set of tactics. They could not
engage in mounted combat because of the power which rifle-carrying infantry wielded,
and the superior Confederate cavalry which whipped them at every turn. The other
problem was the blue cavalrmyen could not begin to experiment in dismounted tactics as
whole regiments because only a limited number of men were armed with carbines, and
many of those were unreliable. This quandary continued to haunt the cavalry as General
McClellan sought to alter his mounted arm.

Reorganized and consolidated after the retreat from the Peninsula the cavalry was
placed under command of Brigadier-General Alfred Pleasonton, a man dubbed the Knight
of Romance, because of his exaggerated intelligence reports.\(^{58}\) At Second Bull Run
Brigadier-General John Buford’s cavalry provided General John Pope with some
valuable intelligence about the movements of Longstreet’s Corps, but this information
was disregarded and the Union Army of Virginia was throttled the following day. Prior to
the battle of Antietam Pleasonton provided McClellan with a number of false reports
exaggerating the Rebel strength, which supported the general’s reluctance to aggressively
pursue Lee. During the battle of Antietam McClellan refused to commit his cavalry, or
send them on a flanking maneuver to disrupt the reinforcing march of A.P. Hill. After the
pyrrhic victory of Antietam McClellan’s lack of pursuit with the cavalry, and his
insistence on receiving remounts led President Lincoln to ask sarcastically “I have just
read your message about sore-tongued and fatigued horses. Will you pardon me for
asking what the horses of your army have done since the battle of Antietam that fatigues

\(^{58}\) J. David Petruzzi. “The Fleeting Fame of Alfred Pleasonton.” America’s Civil War (March
The Union cavalry was further embarrassed when J.E.B Stuart took a second ride around the army after Antietam, and Plesonton failed to doggedly pursue. Once McClellan was replaced by Ambrose Burnside the fortunes of the cavalry did not improve. At Fredericksburg the cavalry was again used in a limited capacity, but suffered a devastating loss when Colonel George Bayard, a promising young cavalry officer, was killed by an artillery shell.

As 1862, closed the reputation of the Federal cavalry in the eastern theater had been shattered; even the President joked at their expense. They remained ill-equipped, poorly organized and had no tactical foundation on which to build. The year 1862, had proven that relying solely on the mounted charge was useless. Without good carbines to arm each soldier the tactical ability of the cavalry was limited. In the west the cavalry experienced similar pains, but new tactics were being implemented to counter the standard mounted charge.

Unlike the eastern theater, where the Union cavalry eventually came to outnumber their opponents, the Rebel mounted force in the west was generally superior in raw numbers. Not only did the Rebel cavalry in the west heavily outnumber their opponents they were better organized and commanded. Where Confederate troopers worked under brilliant officers like Nathan Bedford Forrest, John Morgan, and Joseph Wheeler, the Federals were clearly lacking leadership. The Union cavalry, as in the east, was parcelled out amongst infantry divisions or small units where it lacked cohesion and an identity.

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60 Longacre, Lincoln’s Cavalrymen, 117.

Prior to and after Shiloh, General Don Carlos Buell had over 10,000 cavalrymen at his disposal, but their power was wasted as they were spread throughout Tennessee.\textsuperscript{62} By dispersing his cavalry Buell failed to secure his communication and supply lines. Raids conducted by Forrest and Morgan throughout 1862, often threatened and cut these lines. Buell, by breaking up his cavalry, allowed the Confederates to strike wherever they wanted since they did not fear a consolidated Union force pursuing them.

During early 1862, the first Union General to consolidate his cavalry into brigades and a division was John Pope. Pope appointed Brigadier-General Gordon Granger to command this united force. In May 1862, a young officer on General Henry Halleck’s staff was promoted to Colonel of the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Michigan.\textsuperscript{63} This officer was Philip Sheridan, who quickly began navigating a path that made him one of the most effective Union commanders of the war. On June 26\textsuperscript{th}, Sheridan with two regiments of cavalry was ordered to Booneville, Mississippi, an outpost for the Union army camped at Corinth. Confederate General Braxton Bragg, planning to attack Halleck at Corinth, wanted to use his cavalry as a screen for his advance, and to eliminate Sheridan’s force at Booneville.\textsuperscript{64} The Rebel cavalry was commanded by Brigadier-General James Chalmers. It is unknown how large the Rebel cavalry force was, but Sheridan later claimed he was facing between 5,000 and 6,000 Confederates.\textsuperscript{65}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62}Laurence D. Schiller. “Two Tales of Tennessee: The Ups and Downs of Cavalry Command.” \textit{North & South} 4 (April, 2001), 78; Harris, “Union Cavalry”, 11.
\item \textsuperscript{63}Robert C. Suhr. “Little Phil Sheridan Wins His Spurs.” \textit{America’s Civil War}. Available at: http://historynet.com/acw/blphilip_sheridan/index3.html. Internet; accessed on 21\textsuperscript{st}, October 2005.
\item \textsuperscript{64}Suhr, “Little Phil Sheridan” Internet; \textit{OR}, series I, vol. XVII, part II, 629.
\item \textsuperscript{65}Philip H. Sheridan. \textit{Personal Memoirs, volume 1}. (New York: Charles L. Webster & Company, 1888), 156.
\end{itemize}
To confront Chalmers, Sheridan commanded the 2nd Iowa and 2nd Michigan totaling 900 men, of which 728 were actually engaged.66 Although outnumbered, they were better armed than the Rebels. The 2nd Iowa was armed with Sharps carbines, while the 2nd Michigan was armed with Colt repeating rifles, the first repeater used during the war. The Colt repeating rifle was a six shot, .44 caliber small arm that received mixed reviews from the troops in the field.67 Still, the Colt rifle was better than most carbines available to cavalrymen during this period. General Rosecrans was so enamored with the Colt repeaters he constantly requested them from Washington during the latter half of 1862, for his mounted troops.68

During the morning of July, 1st, advance pickets from the 2nd Michigan were attacked by lead elements of Chalmers’s force. Slowly the men from Michigan retired, realizing the Rebels were attempting to outflank them. Under the command of Lieutenant Leonidas Scranton the Union troopers fought a delaying action by using superior firepower to cover their retreat.69 Sheridan then dispatched four companies from the 2nd Michigan, under Captain Campbell, to hold the intersection currently being defended by Scranton. Campbell, dismounting his troops, took advantage of the local terrain and his superior firepower. As the Confederates continued pushing, Sheridan ordered the 2nd Iowa forward. Colonel Edward Hatch deployed all but three companies on Campbell’s flank and rear.70 One of Hatch’s companies remained in Booneville, while his two saber

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67 National Archives, Record Group 108, Entry 75; Wilson, “How Soldiers Rated Carbines”, 40.
companies, troopers armed without carbines, were kept in reserve. When Hatch arrived, he deployed his men on Campbell’s left helping to relieve the mounting pressure on the 2nd Michigan by dismounting and working their Sharps carbines. (Refer to Map B)

With most of the 2nd Michigan and 2nd Iowa engaged, Sheridan planned to send four saber companies, two from each regiment, under Captain Alger around the Rebel left flank hitting their rear. Alger, once gaining the Rebel rear, was to charge in conjunction with Hatch as Campbell’s men maintained their fire. The plan worked accordingly as Alger’s force engaged a Rebel rearguard. The Confederates were quickly disrupted by their retreating comrades fleeing from the simultaneous charge of the 2nd Iowa. As the Rebels wildly escaped the closing vice, the battle of Booneville ended in a rare Yankee cavalry victory.

Booneville was not a strategic victory or tide turning battle of any sort. What is important is the obvious tactical use of dismounted action. Using superior firepower and defensive terrain to their advantage troopers of the 2nd Michigan were able to halt a superior Confederate advance long enough for Sheridan to formulate a plan. Sheridan credited overwhelming firepower as the main reason he was able to maneuver his forces into place. Booneville exhibits the advantages of dismounted fighting, especially when soldiers were armed with reliable carbines that produce high rates of fire.

The battle also illustrated the benefits of using a combination of mounted and dismounted action. Using both tactics Sheridan, knowingly or not, was able to gain the

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71 Ibid., 20.
72 Ibid., 20; Suhr, “Little Phil Sheridan”, Internet; Sheridan, Personal Memoirs, 161-163.
benefits of both while limiting their disadvantages. By not relying solely on the charge troopers were not forced to engage an enemy that was clearly their superior in the saddle. Instead, by engaging in dismounted action the superior Union firepower halted the Confederate advance. As a result the Rebels became vulnerable to a flanking movement and charge. Keeping the saber companies free to maneuver Sheridan exploited the tactical advantage he was provided by the dismounted action. These arms, working in conjunction with one another, would eventually become the trademark of the Union cavalry after 1862.

Stephen Z. Starr in his trilogy covering the Union cavalry declared that the biggest difference between the mounted arm in the east and west was the latter's "...casual lack of reverence for the orthodoxy, sanctioned by West Point and Carlisle, of traditional cavalry doctrine imported from Europe." Starr makes an excellent point. In the east most of the cavalry command was made up of regular cavalry officers, like Cooke, who were trained in the European use of cavalry. West Point, though, while tactically outdated did preach the importance of horse artillery. Whereas out west, with the exception of the 4th U.S., all mounted regiments came from the states, and correspondingly their tactical foundation was less influenced by European models. As a result, commanders were more willing to experiment with dismounted tactics, while not fully recognizing the importance of horse artillery.

The process of incorporating the unfamiliar roles of dismounted action and artillery support would mesh in each theater during 1863, as better arms were distributed and combat experience increased. The key to the tactical development of the Union cavalry was the wedding of horse artillery, dismounted action and mounted action. These

74Starr, The Union Cavalry, volume 3, 5-6.
combinations would start making consistent appearances on the battlefield during 1863, as the cavalry became better organized. After two years of failure and ridicule the Union cavalry was about to experience an epic transformation.
CHAPTER IV

THE GROWTH OF TACTICAL FLEXIBILITY: UNION CAVALRY ON THE OFFENSIVE AND DEFENSIVE

As 1863, began the Union cavalry, in both theaters, was still developing an acceptable tactical foundation. Although experiencing limited success the cavalry’s overall tactical ability was still hindered by deficiencies in good arms, commanders, and organization. Slowly, these flaws would subside. By the middle of 1863, the Federal cavalry began asserting its combat prowess. This shift started out west under General William Rosecrans.

“Old Rosy,” as his soldiers referred to him, first organized his mounted troops while commanding the Army of the Mississippi during the summer of 1862. He found placing mounted soldiers into brigades rather than leaving them imbedded with the infantry a successful organization of cavalry.1 After replacing General Don Carlos Buell as commander of the Army of the Cumberland, Rosecrans went to work reorganizing his mounted force. Requesting General David Stanley to lead his reconstituted cavalry force, Rosecrans was able to offset the ineptness of his predecessor, while establishing a strong foundation from which his cavalry could succeed.2 It is no coincidence that under Rosecrans’s command two of the Union’s best cavalry brigades, Colonel John Wilder’s Lightning Brigade and Colonel Robert Minty’s Saber Brigade, were formed and used with great effect.

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1Starr, The Union Cavalry, volume 3, 74-77.

2McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 522, 579; Schiller, “Two Tales of Tennessee”, 82.
Rosecrans was a pioneer in cavalry organization, armament and deployment. Where most of his colleagues were unsure about employing and arming their cavalry, Rosecrans had a clear idea of what he wanted. By the summer of 1862, “Old Rosy” began bombarding Halleck, Stanton and others with requests for Colt repeating rifles to arm his cavalry, believing this was the best weapon available. These requests did not go unheeded as the ordnance department worked feverishly to send all the Colt repeating rifles and rifled carbines they could muster. Soon after requesting arms Rosecrans worked to increase the size of his mounted force realizing his current levels could not stop the constant raiding by Confederate cavalry. At the beginning of December 1862, Rosecrans reported that he had 4,534 total cavalrymen armed with 1,996 carbines within the Army of the Cumberland, and that he was requesting another 3,500 carbines or Colt repeating rifles. Writing to General Halleck in January 1863, Rosecrans stated “I must have cavalry or mounted infantry…. With mounted infantry I can drive the Rebel cavalry to the wall and keep the roads open in my rear.” In response to this growing threat the mounting of infantry regiments rapidly expanded. Rosecrans was not the only commander to see the wisdom of mounting infantry regiments (Ulysses Grant and Don Carlos Buell also mounted infantry regiments), which helped alleviate the growing pressure Confederate raids were having on Union supply and communication lines, but he was the most aggressive in getting his units properly equipped.


4 Ibid., 135.

5 OR, series I, vol. XX, part II, 326.

6 OR, series I, vol. XX, part II, 57-58.
After the battle of Stones River at the end of December 1862, and beginning of January 1863, Bragg retreated, but the incessant Rebel cavalry raids continued. To halt the likes of Wheeler, Forrest, and Morgan, Rosecrans often used his infantry. One specific brigade comprising regiments from Indiana and Illinois under the command of Colonel John T. Wilder was tasked for the job. Quickly, Wilder realized that his foot troops could not keep up with the fast moving Confederate cavalry. The inability to engage Morgan led the colonel to toy with mounting his brigade. At first, Wilder attempted to mount his brigade on mules, but this proved ineffective and horses were procured.\(^7\) Wilder approached Rosecrans about mounting his men, and the general immediately supported the idea. The innovative colonel did not stop at mounting his troops he also sought the very best firearm available. The Lightning Brigade consisted of the 17\(^{th}\) Indiana, 72\(^{nd}\) Indiana, 75\(^{th}\) Indiana and 98\(^{th}\) Illinois Infantry regiments (the 75\(^{th}\) Indiana declined to become a mounted regiment rather electing to stay with the infantry and were replaced by the 123\(^{rd}\) Illinois). These infantry regiments possessed either standard Springfield or Enfield Rifles, weapons deemed too heavy for use by mounted soldiers in the Union army.\(^8\) At first, the enterprising colonel attempted to purchase sixteen shot repeating Henry Rifles, but the New Haven Arms Company could not meet the request of 900 rifles since their production line could only make 200 guns a month.\(^9\) Luckily for Wilder, a young arms dealer by the name of Christopher Spencer was traveling to Union camps showing off his new repeating rifle. Spencer had been trying to


\(^8\)Bilby, 89.

\(^9\)Bilby, 89.
coax the ordnance department into purchasing his repeating rifle, but was continually rebuffed by the conservative chief of ordnance James Ripley, who had no confidence in repeating arms. 

Spencer traveled to display the power, durability and accuracy of his seven shot repeater. Wilder became an instant believer requesting enough guns to arm his regiment. Folklore has it that Wilder and his men decided to buy the firearms themselves. Supposedly, the colonel obtained a loan from a bank where he resided in Greensburg, Indiana, and each trooper signed a note declaring they would pay back the thirty-five dollars it cost to purchase the gun by taking allotted amounts out of their monthly paychecks. In reality, many believe, Wilder and his men did not purchase the repeaters themselves since the army had already placed an order for 7,500 Spencers back in June 1862, and the sum needed for each weapon equaled approximately three months pay. Regardless, Wilder and his troops received their Spencer Rifles on May 15th, 1863. With their new repeaters in hand the Lightning Brigade would become one of the most feared and effective Union mounted forces in the war.

What changed Ripley’s opinion concerning repeating rifles between 1861 and 1862? Apparently, a number of factors led to the army’s contracting for Spencer rifles and carbines. First, enormous political pressure was placed on Ripley to purchase the weapons. Christopher Spencer and his friend Charles Cheney, a close associate of Gideon Welles, were able to get the navy to test the arm and shortly thereafter the army. Both the army and navy were enthralled with the weapon, forwarding reports declaring its

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11 Sunderland, 27.

12 Davis, Arming the Union, 92; Bilby, 90.

13 Bilby, 74.
favorability. Ripley was still not impressed though. Writing to Secretary of War Simon Cameron, Ripley declared that Spencer and Henry repeaters were too heavy, needed special ammunition, and the magazine, containing the ammunition, was prone to breaking. Ripley's stubbornness persisted until Secretary Cameron ordered that 10,000 Spencers be purchased at the end of 1861.

Although political pressure played a large part in forcing Ripley to order the Spencer rifle and carbine, another contributing factor was the overall deficiency in carbines. Despite signing contracts with numerous companies for different types of carbines the flow of cavalry firearms to the government remained slow in early 1863. Many manufacturers did not meet their quotas and contracts were terminated. With demand for carbines growing daily the market for repeaters also expanded since the production of single shot carbines could not fill the void. In June 1863, the initial Spencer contract, which had been downgraded from 10,000 repeaters to 7,500, was fulfilled. The government now turned to the mass procurement of Spencer carbines (a smaller, lighter version of the Spencer rifle) to arm their mounted troops. From December 1862, to June 1863, twelve shipments of Spencer rifles were delivered to the Ordnance department consisting of 7,500 guns. By the end of the war over 105,000 Spencer carbines and rifles had been contracted for by the United States Government.

By late spring the Union carbine shortage was starting to change. In one year the Ordnance Department increased their stock of U.S. purchased carbines by over 60,000,

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15 McAulay, Civil War Breech-loading Rifles, 180.

16 Davis, Arming the Union, 90.
raising the total from just over 46,000 in June 1862, to over 111,000 a year later. Most of these were excellent single shot Sharps carbines now being produced at full capacity after the sharpshooter contract was fulfilled. With the Sharps production at full capacity, Spencer carbines were constructed at a rate of 1,500 a month. Once the original Spencer rifle contract was fulfilled, another was agreed upon for 11,000 guns in July 1863, but this time it was for carbines not rifles. The contract quota was then increased to over 34,000 repeaters. Spencer rifles and carbines, once distributed, quickly became favorites with men in the field.

The Spencer was a seven shot repeating rifle or carbine measuring thirty-nine inches and weighing just over eight pounds. Ammunition was fed through a magazine tube located in the butt stock of the rifle. To fire the gun troopers worked the lever, which extracted the spent cartridge and loaded the new round, cocked the hammer, and pulled the trigger. All seven shots could be fired in as little as ten seconds. The biggest fear for officers was repeaters would ruin fire discipline, but for the cavalry this was an ideal arm. The very nature of its firepower would allow cavalrymen to become self-sufficient on the battlefield. Union troopers now possessed a weapon that allowed them to engage not only the Confederate cavalry, which up until this point were superior in all aspects, but also Rebel infantry. The lethality of the Spencer carbine and how it affected the Union cavalry's battlefield performance will be illustrated over the remaining case studies.

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18 McAulay, Caribines of the U.S. Cavalry, 35.
19 Davis, Arming the Union, 93.
20 McAulay, Caribines of the Civil War, 9.
21 Ibid., 10.
Although victory was not always achieved by cavalrymen carrying the Spencer carbine or rifle the firearm clearly increased the ability of the Federal trooper to fight dismounted, thus laying the foundation for the development of flexible combat tactics that less reliable carbines could not provide.

For the cavalry of the Army of the Potomac fortunes began changing when General Ambrose Burnside was replaced by General Joseph Hooker in January 1863. Soon after assuming command "Fighting Joe" reorganized the structure of the army and, more importantly, the cavalry. Similar to Rosecrans in the west Hooker consolidated his cavalry into brigades, divisions, and a single corps. Forming the cavalry into three divisions each containing two brigades and a horse artillery battery (only the 1st and 2nd Division's initially received horse artillery) along with an independent reserve brigade, consisting of four depleted regiments, Hooker produced the first cavalry corps of the Army of the Potomac.22 Along with this structural change came increases in morale, training and discipline. Major Benjamin Crowninshield of the 1st Massachusetts claimed that discipline was now "first-rate" and regiments were well officered and drilled.23 To command this new mounted corps Hooker chose General George Stoneman, McClellan’s failed cavalry commander from the Peninsula campaign. The troops were expecting a "dashing general" to be appointed so the cavalry could finally win some "laurels" but instead received Stoneman who was "...as wretched a failure with the mounted troops as Hooker did with the whole army...".24

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22Longacre, Lincoln's Cavalrymen, 128.


24Ibid., 11-12.
Regardless of Stoneman’s future failures the cavalry arm of the Army of the Potomac was revitalized. A coherent command structure was finally established the supply situation improved, remounts arrived, better weapons reached the regiments - even the 6th Pennsylvania turned in their lances for carbines - and the troops were ready for a fight. By May 22nd Stoneman was relieved of command after returning from his failed raid. Hooker’s brutal defeat at Chancellorsville coupled with the cavalry’s inability to inflict any dramatic or lasting damage during Stoneman’s raid made the cavalry commander expendable. Hooker promptly replaced Stoneman with another cavalry commander from McClellan’s tenure, Alfred Pleasonton. Shortly after assuming command Pleasonton led his horse soldiers against the vaunted Rebel cavalry commander J.E.B Stuart. At Brandy Station the tide of the cavalry war in the east shifted. The Union trooper had finally come of age. (Refer to Map D)

On June 5th, 1863, General John Buford reported that Rebel cavalry under command of General J.E.B Stuart was massed at Culpepper Court House. Stuart’s concentration was part of Lee’s initial stages for the second invasion of the north. Hooker and Pleasonton, though, feared Stuart was on the verge of making another raid.25 Hooker soon gave Pleasonton permission to move on Culpepper with his cavalry and some infantry support from General George Meade’s V Corps. Pleasonton quickly devised a plan. Buford’s division, supported by an infantry brigade under the command of General Adelbert Ames, would cross Beverly Ford to Brandy Station. The 2nd and 3rd Divisions, moving further south would cross the Rappahannock River at Kelly’s Ford and link with the 1st Division at Brandy Station. Unbeknownst to the Union commander, Stuart had

moved his cavalry to Brandy Station from Culpepper a few days prior. To make matters worse, Stuart possessed roughly an equal number of troopers and more artillery.  

Early on the morning of June, 9th the cavalry began moving. Trouble began immediately for the Union advance as Colonel Alfred Duffié took a wrong road, delaying the crossing by the 2nd and 3rd Divisions.  

General Gregg, waiting for Duffié, followed orders and did not cross until the colonel’s whole division had done so. The southern leg of the expedition fell behind schedule more than two hours. The 1st Division meanwhile maintained their schedule reaching Beverly Ford a little before 4:30 a.m. Pleasonton, the evening before, had laid down a series of orders which were meant to maintain the element of surprise. Prohibiting fires, bugles, shouted commands, and the use of artillery, Pleasonton wanted to maintain the advantages of speed, stealth and surprise.  

Across the Rappahannock, at Beverly Ford, was an entrenched picket force from the 6th Virginia. Upon reaching the ford Buford ordered a couple of squadrons from Colonel Thomas Devin’s 2nd Brigade to disperse the pickets. This was accomplished quickly. At 5:00 a.m., the 1st Brigade under the command of Colonel Grimes Davis crossed the ford. Davis pushed forward as elements of the dispersed Rebel pickets reached the Confederate camp alerting the 6th and 7th Virginia cavalry of the advancing bluecoats. Rebel cavalrymen scrambled to arms as the 8th New York, with Colonel Davis at its head, reached open ground. A short distance away Davis noticed a number of vulnerable horse artillery batteries. Realizing the opportunity at hand, Davis ordered a

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26Ibid., 154.  
mounted charge. As the 8th New York thundered towards their prizes the 6th Virginia launched a counter-charge. The two forces collided just before the northern troopers reached the Rebel guns. A melee ensued with sabers slashing and pistols firing. Quickly, the 8th New York retreated, falling back on the rest of the advancing brigade consisting of the 8th Illinois and 3rd Indiana. During the melee Colonel Davis was shot and killed by a pistol wielding Rebel lieutenant. The charge of the 6th Virginia succeeded allowing the Rebel artillery to retreat. Having suffered a number of casualties the regiment fell back to a skirmish line established by the 7th Virginia.

As the 8th New York fell back, the remainder of Davis’s Brigade now under the command of Major William McClure of the 3rd Indiana, dismounted and began using carbine fire to hold back the Rebel cavalry. To support the dismounted troopers six guns from Robertson’s 2nd U.S. artillery, battery B/L, unlimbered and opened fire. Within minutes Devin’s troopers arrived, and the Colonel rallied the 1st Brigade. Immediately Devin renewed the assault on the 6th and 7th Virginia regiments forcing their adversaries to fall back. As the Rebels under General William Jones retreated reinforcements from the brigades of Wade Hampton and Rooney Lee, supported by Thomas Munford’s troopers, arrived. Establishing a line of battle supported by artillery behind a stone wall near Saint James Church the Confederates waited. While the Rebels were retreating, Pleasonton and Buford arrived on the field. Once Colonel Whiting’s reserve Brigade arrived the Federal advance resumed.


30 Longacre, The Cavalry at Gettysburg, 55, 67.

31 Starr, Union Cavalry, volume I, 379.
Buford ordered Devin with the 1st and 2nd Brigades, to the left in search of the Orange & Alexandria Railroad. Meanwhile, Whiting's horse soldiers moved to the right, while the accompanying infantry protected the flanks. As the 1st Division moved forward Rebel resistance increased. Pleasonton, believing his men were outnumbered three to one during this stage of the battle, decided to go on the defensive until contact with Gregg was made. Devin, advancing on the Union left, found himself confronted with regiments from the brigades of Jones and Hampton. Instead of charging the Rebels Devin dismounted most of his command, while keeping three regiments mounted. Throwing out skirmishers, armed with mainly Sharps and Burnside carbines, the bluecoats advanced on foot. Rebel artillery opened a devastating fire forcing the Union line to recoil. As Devin's line wavered under the intense cannon fire General Jones ordered a charge by the 12th Virginia, supported by the 11th Virginia and 35th Virginia Battalion. Buford responded by ordering Devin whose troops were now taking cover behind fences, walls, and trees to lay down a covering fire with the support of the horse artillery so the 6th Pennsylvania could make a charge. As the 6th Pennsylvania charged the Confederates opened fire at 800 yards. Rush's lancers absorbed an incredible amount of artillery and rifle fire which decimated their ranks. The charge was abruptly repulsed, but it successfully relieved the pressure on Devin's line. At noon a lull settled over the battlefield. For six hours Buford and his force of about 5,500 cavalry and infantry had engaged the superior Rebel cavalry. Although almost breaking at times the use of

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34 Brennan, "Thunder on the Plains of Brandy", 29-30; McAulay, Carbines of the U.S. Cavalry, 30.

superior firepower, heroic but deadly charges, and excellent leadership allowed the
Federals to hold their position. Unfortunately, the 1st Division had lost most of its striking
power when, to the south, General Gregg and his 3rd Division attacked.

Gregg, despite the delay in crossing the Rappahannock, had reached the opposite
bank with little opposition. Rebel pickets from the General Beverly Robertson’s Brigade
were easily swept aside at Kelly’s Ford. Once across, Gregg sent Duffié further south to
the town of Stevensburg, while his division followed the same road to Brandy Station.
Gregg, hearing the roar of artillery to the north knew Buford was engaged. Confirmation
came shortly thereafter from couriers of General Pleasonton’s staff. The 3rd Division
continued its march until reaching the Fredericksburg Plank Road, which ran directly
north into Brandy Station. Gregg planned to take this road and outflank the Rebel
position, attacking Stuart from the rear.

By noon, the 1st Brigade of the 3rd Division led by Colonel Percy Wyndham, an
English soldier of fortune, was within sight of Brandy Station and Fleetwood Hill. With
most of Stuart’s cavalry engaged with Buford there was little opposition facing
Wyndham. Maintaining the Rebel rear was Stuart’s trusted adjutant general, Major Henry
B. McClellan. McClellan, immediately realizing Gregg’s presence, understood the
importance of maintaining this position. Couriers were sent to Stuart at Saint James
Church informing the cavalry commander of the flanking attack. McClellan meanwhile
ordered shell depleted batteries placed on the heights as a deterrent. The Major’s quick

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Longacre, Cavalry at Gettysburg, 74; OR, series I, vol. XXVII, pt. 1, 950.

38McClellan, I Rode with JEB Stuart, 269-270.
thinking halted Wyndham’s advance, and allowed Stuart to return with the brigades of Jones and Hampton. Wyndham, fearing the Rebels were massing, deployed his supporting artillery of two guns to protect his mounted men. Once completed Gregg ordered Wyndham to charge the heights.\(^{39}\)

The 1st New Jersey initiated a series of epic charges and counter-charges to take control of Fleetwood Hill. Galloping forward the 1st New Jersey climbed the slope of the hill. Just as the New Jersey troopers reached the crest the 12th Virginia, riding hard but deployed in marching columns, made contact. Using their sabers the blue cavalymen slashed their way through the pistol firing Virginians. To support their southern brethren the 35th Virginia Battalion charged, but just like the 12th Virginia they were easily routed by the Jersey troops. A third charge led by the 6th Virginia and some elements of the reformed 12th finally broke the momentum of the 1st New Jersey. As the Union troopers reeled from the third charge support arrived from the 1st Pennsylvania and 1st Maryland. With fresh reinforcements the Union troopers broke the counter-charge and a melee ensue with pistols firing and sabers flailing.\(^{40}\)

Just as Wyndham’s Brigade was retaking Fleetwood Hill, General Wade Hampton arrived with his veteran cavalry. Hampton led his troops on another furious charge, supported by the rallied regiments of Jones’s Brigade. Tearing into the disorganized Federal troops the Rebel cavalry sent them reeling towards their original positions. Without pause the Rebel cavalry continued its pursuit charging the two Union guns at the bottom of the hill. The artillerists, without cavalry support, began firing

\(^{39}\text{OR, series I, vol. XXVII, pt. I, 950-951.}\)

double shots of canister halting the charge momentarily. Untouched by the artillery fire the 35th Virginia Battalion charged from the flank, cutting through the unarmed artillery crews. Unable to fight back Captain Joseph Martin spiked his guns before retreating.41

With Wyndham’s brigade in shambles from their intense mounted combat with the Rebel cavalrymen and Martin’s battery silenced, the young, brash, reckless, and “possibly incompetent” commander of the 2nd Brigade, 3rd Division arrived on the field. Colonel Hugh Judson Kilpatrick, nicknamed “Kill-Cavalry” because of his love for the mounted charge, immediately sent the 10th New York on a charge. Impetuous as always, Kilpatrick sent his cavalry on the charge before placing his artillery support. As the 10th New York roared towards Fleetwood Hill they were attacked by Cobb’s Legion and the 1st South Carolina. Before reaching the crest of the hill the New Yorkers were routed. Seeing the 10th destroyed Kilpatrick ordered the 2nd New York on another wild charge. Just like their compatriots the 2nd New York was attacked on the flank by the 1st South Carolina and disintegrated. With two of his regiments crippled, Kilpatrick sent in his last reserve the 1st Maine. Riling up his troopers with a fiery speech the brash Colonel sent his men on another wild charge. Braving a hail of bullets the 1st Maine climbed Fleetwood Hill, and routed Hampton’s troops. Despite the success, reformed Rebel cavalrymen counter-charged and forced the men from Maine back. As the 1st Maine retired the series of incredible charges ended. Gregg, no longer possessing any fresh reserves as both brigades were exhausted from the past one and half hours of combat, retreated. Since

Duffie, despite being ordered to the battlefield was absent, Gregg effectively withdrew his battered division by using carbine fire to keep the Rebel pursuit at bay.\footnote{OR, series I, vol. XXVII, pt. I, 950-951, 985-986; Longacre, The Cavalry at Gettysburg, 79-80; Brennan, “Thunder on the Plains of Brandy, Part II”, 42-46.}

While the battle raged along Fleetwood Heights the 1st Division made some attempts to assist Gregg. When Stuart led Hampton and Jones to meet the 3rd Division, Devin advanced dismounted. Rooney Lee with his men supported by Mumford continued to hold. The battle turned into a skirmish affair as each force made limited assaults, but neither launched a large scale attack. By late afternoon Buford’s men were exhausted. Pleasonton had seen enough and ordered a retreat. That night the Union cavalry re-crossed the Rappahannock with morale soaring. For the first time in the war the Union cavalry had successfully engaged the battle hardened Confederate cavalry, led by their brilliant commander J.E.B Stuart.

After the battle Major Henry B. McClellan said Brandy Station made the Union cavalry.\footnote{McClellan, I Rode with JEB Stuart, 294.} Major Benjamin Crowninshield agreed this was the turning point for the cavalry during the war.\footnote{Crowninshield, “Cavalry in Virginia During the War of Rebellion,” 13.} For the first time the Union mounted arm stood toe to toe with an enemy that had always bested them. Using diverse tactics ranging from charges to dismounted fighting, while employing artillery support, especially in Buford’s sector, the Union cavalrymen were able to fight efficiently. The blue clad troops for the first time in a major battle effectively used carbine fire. They were not hamstrung by the West Point or European model that worked so poorly in 1861 and 1862. Buford, more so than Gregg, effectively used both mounted and dismounted action to defend his position and attack
the Rebel horsemen. Helping make dismounted tactics a viable option was the presence of Sharps and Bumside carbines. Carrying more reliable firearms, especially the Sharps, troopers maintained a constant rate of fire that produced favorable results. This carbine fire halted many Rebel counterattacks and charges during the morning hours. In regards to mounted combat troopers from the 3rd Division used their swords effectively. Had they received cohesive rather than piecemeal support from Kilpatrick’s Brigade, along with better artillery support victory may have been achieved. Regardless, the mounted engagement proved that Union soldiers could perform just as competently on horseback as their opponents, while also validating the defensive power of dismounted combat.

Brandy Station was truly a turning point for the Union cavalry.

Within days, Federal cavalrymen returned to the saddle trying to ascertain the movements of General Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia. After four weeks of marching and skirmishing the Union cavalry followed up its impressive showing at Brandy Station at a small town in Pennsylvania. This time, though, it was not only the Rebel cavalry they would be fighting, but also battle-tested Rebel infantry.

By June 30th Lee’s army was marauding around southern Pennsylvania, while the new commander of the Army of the Potomac General George Meade (he replaced Hooker on the 28th of June) was preparing plans for battle. That same day Buford’s division, minus one battery and the reserve Brigade, entered Gettysburg. As the Union cavalrymen were entering the town a small Rebel force, advancing from the west in search of shoes, retreated back towards Cashtown where the Rebel corps of General A.P. Hill was located.45 That evening John Buford, realizing the terrain surrounding the town was tactically advantageous for the defender, made a decision to hold Gettysburg until

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infantry support arrived. Writing to General John Reynolds of the 1st Corps and General Pleasonton, Buford let his intentions be known. (Refer to Map E)

The first day of Gettysburg would prove that the Union cavalry was more than a traditional mounted arm incapable of defending a position without infantry support. Buford’s decision to fight on July 1st proved fateful as both armies engaged in a battle that, although neither expected, ultimately helped turn the tide of the war in the east. During the three days of bloody combat the Union cavalry performed brilliantly, only tarnished by a foolish decision by General Kilpatrick to charge an entrenched Rebel force on the final day.

The hardnosed Kentuckian had decided to stand and fight, an interesting choice considering the General knew his two brigades would be fighting at least a division of veteran infantry in the morning. Had Buford held true to the tactical teachings of Mahan, Halleck, and Cooke he would have retreated, remembering that cavalry could not act on the defensive or against unbroken infantry. Instead, Buford decided to stand firm against Rebel infantry advancing on his small division, devising a plan calling for the employment of dismounted tactics that countered traditional cavalry doctrine.

One myth, which now has been discredited, is that Buford’s decision to fight was based upon his troopers’ possessing Spencer repeating rifles. Shelby Foote, in his three volume series on the Civil War, argues such a point in his narrative. William G. Adams puts to rest this speculation using war records as evidence that Buford’s men did not

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46 Ibid., 923-924, 926-927.
carry the deadly Spencer repeating rifles at Gettysburg. Instead Buford’s men relied on single shot breech-loading Sharps carbines, an excellent weapon but not the same as a seven shot repeating Spencer. During the Gettysburg campaign only two regiments in the Army of Potomac’s Cavalry Corps possessed Spencer rifles. They were the 5th and 6th Michigan regiments of Custer’s 2nd Brigade. Fortunately, Buford’s men were well versed in quickly reloading their Sharps carbines. This allowed for the blue troopers to maintain an exceptional rate of fire which was approximately double what the Confederate infantryman could sustain with his muzzle-loader.

Early on July 1st a Rebel division, under the command of General Henry Heth, marched down the Chambersburg Pike. Around 7:00 a.m., infantry skirmishers of General James Archer’s Brigade ran into a picket post from the 8th Illinois. Each picket consisted of four or five troopers tasked with sounding the alarm once the Confederates advance was known. The previous evening, Buford had deployed his cavalry in the following manner. Gamble’s Brigade was left of the Chambersburg Pike facing west, while Devin was right of the pike. Calef’s battery was broken into three sections, each containing two guns. One section was right of the Chambersburg Pike, and two sections were to the left.

Buford immediately ordered reinforcements forward to assist the skirmishers on Herr Ridge. Gamble responded, ordering 500 troopers to assist his outnumbered pickets. Buford’s division consisted of about 2,950 troops, of which he could put 2,200 into

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48 William Adams, Jr. “Spencers at Gettysburg Fact or Fiction.” *Military Affairs* 29 (Spring 1965) 41-42.

On Herr Ridge Gamble’s troopers deployed at intervals of thirty paces, instead of the stated two to three paces in Cooke’s cavalry manual. This disposition allowed troopers to maximize their individual firing potential, while providing the pickets a line to rally behind. At 8:00 am Calef’s batteries began firing in support of Gamble’s engaged troopers. The fire produced by Gamble’s troops and Calef’s ordnance rifles caused Heth to halt his advance.

Instead of disengaging as his orders called for, Heth escalated the battle. The fighting had become so fierce that he ordered his two leading brigades deployed into battle lines. When the deployments were finally finished the Confederates had lost anywhere from an hour to two hours of fighting time against the hard-pressed Federal cavalry. Regardless, the heavy fire produced by the Union troopers caused Heth to pause. This was significant in regards to Buford’s ability to hold his position. Not only was Reynolds coming up with I Corps, but the lull provided Buford’s men with time to regroup and reform. Had the Confederates continued to press forward, their superior numbers might have overwhelmed the cavalrymen.

When Heth’s two brigades resumed their advance they slowly pushed Gamble’s men off Herr Ridge. Buford saw Reynolds marching down the Emmitsburg Road as the Confederate infantry pressed on towards McPherson Ridge. Reynolds, upon meeting Buford, rode back to his leading division, moving them forward at the double-quick.


51 Longacre, Lincoln’s Cavalrymen, 183. Cooke, 217.

Gamble’s troopers were heavily engaged with Archer’s division on McPherson Ridge when the blue clad infantry arrived to buttress the cavalrymen’s firing line. On the opposite side of the Chambersburg Pike Rebel infantry from General Joseph Davis’s Brigade engaged Devin’s troopers along the Oak Hill ridgeline. Gamble and Devin, although putting up a continuous fire, were on the verge of falling back to the last defensive position along Seminary Ridge when Reynolds arrived. Devin’s troopers were relieved by three regiments of Cutler’s infantry, while the Iron Brigade relieved Gamble’s troops on McPherson Ridge.

Gamble, moving his men left of the Iron Brigade, helped blunt the Confederate assault by mauling Pettigrew’s Brigade with a flank attack. During this encounter Gamble’s 8th Illinois mounted and threatened a cavalry charge. In response, Pettigrew formed his soldiers into squares. The 8th Illinois never charged but simply retired to a new position, but their feint caused Pettigrew to throw-off the Confederate advance. Although Buford’s plan had worked the day’s fighting continued to rage.

With infantry support arriving, the Rebel advance was repulsed by 11:00. Another lull settled over the battlefield. Buford ordered Gamble to withdraw his brigade moving to the left flank and rear of I Corps. Devin meanwhile, was ordered to pull back and cover the roads leading north. Aware that Ewell’s Corps would be converging on Gettysburg from that direction Buford wanted to be fully prepared to meet his advance.

By 11:30 Devin observed the advance elements of Ewell’s Corps marching down the Carlisle road. Devin immediately sent forward skirmishers to reinforce his pickets engaging the Confederates. Using dismounted delaying tactics, Devin’s men slowly fell

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54 Ibid., 185-186.
back firing until the very last second. The troopers then remounted and fell back to a new position. This tactic again proved effective. Devin slowed down the Rebel advance until Howard's XI Corps moved into position, relieving him.\(^55\)

Once XI Corps had relieved Devin the colonel shifted his troops to cover the unprotected right flank along the York Road. By 1:00, Devin's troopers were engaged for the third time that day. General Jubal Early's division, of Ewell's Corps, was now marching down the York Road. Devin, holding the extreme right of the Union line, was forced hold against a vastly superior force once again. Devin sent the 9\(^\text{th}\) New York to engage Early, but by 2:00 his troopers were outmanned and outflanked. In response, Devin formed his entire brigade on the York Road, but soon came under artillery fire from Cemetery Hill. Believing that the Confederates had captured the hill and were spreading into the Union rear, Devin realized it was friendly artillery firing on his men.\(^56\)

Under a growing barrage Devin pulled his troops back into town. By falling back the Union right flank became exposed, and Early immediately assaulted the XI Corps.

By 3:30, Ewell had destroyed the Union XI Corps and the far right flank of the I Corps under General John Robinson. As broken troops flooded Gettysburg only Devin's Brigade was in a position to halt the rout. To the west, as General Pender's division advanced on Seminary Ridge, Gamble moved his troopers to the far left flank of the Union line. Dismounting behind a stone fence, the tired cavalymen unleashed a hot fire into Abner Perrin's flank devastating the Confederates.

\(^55\) Ibid., 186.

\(^56\) Ibid., 187.
The 8th Illinois meanwhile was decimating James Lane’s flank with carbine fire and a feinting charge.57 Fearing a cavalry charge Lane ordered his soldiers into squares. By forming squares, Perrin was left to advance without support.58 This time though it did not halt the Confederate advance. Perrin’s troops continued attacking pushing the rest of Gamble’s troops from the stone fence.

With the Union of the verge of collapse, and field commanders desperately trying to establish a new defensive line, Buford was ordered by Doubleday to halt the Confederate advance. When asked, Buford erupted in a fit of anger stating “What in hell and damnation does he think I can do against those long lines of the enemy?”59 Despite his anger Buford reformed Gamble’s Brigade, and marched them on horseback to the foot of Cemetery Hill. Instead of dismounting orders were given to draw swords. Bluffing a charge the Confederate advance halted as squares were formed in anticipation of a mounted attack.60

The first day of Gettysburg was a bloody affair for the Union cavalry as the two brigades lost about 130 troopers.61 Although these losses amounted to only five percent of Buford’s men this does not mean the fighting was no less intense for the cavalrmen of the 1st Division. Using dismounted tactics and skirmish lines behind cover or breastworks rather than firing lines Buford, Devin, and Gamble reduced the ability of the Confederate infantry to inflict heavy casualties on the horse solders. Their mobility and firepower

57 Ibid., 187.
58 Ibid., 188.
59 Ibid., 188.
60 Ibid., 188.
proved invaluable as Buford’s men held back determined Confederate advances, while scurrying from threatened sector to threatened sector to hold the fragile Union line together. By fighting a running battle all morning and afternoon through the use of dismounted tactics the cavalry disproved the maxim that horse soldiers could not fight on the defensive or against infantry. For the first time in the war the Union cavalry made an impact during a large scale engagement. Using overwhelming firepower and defensive terrain and breastworks the cavalry held the line against superior Rebel numbers. Tactically, Buford coordinated the engagement correctly by employing flexible rather than outdated European tactics. Using a combination of dismounted tactics and artillery fire, along with threats of mounted charges the Union cavalry established a sound tactical system. The progress made at Brandy Station was further advanced on July, 1st and proved worthy once again on July, 3rd. (Refer to Map F) 

By the early afternoon of July, 3rd General Gregg and his 1st Brigade had returned to the intersection of the Hanover and Low Dutch Road, a position they held the day before. Earlier that morning Gregg received orders to move further west, leaving the area vulnerable. Worried that the Rebels would occupy this position and flank the entire army, General Custer was ordered to bring his Michigan troopers up and hold the intersection.62 A few days before the young general had experienced his baptism of fire at the town of Hanover where his troops, along with Kilpatrick’s other brigade, battled Stuart. Kilpatrick, and his inexperienced brigade commanders, fought the Rebels to a draw. Stuart, stung but not defeated, withdrew that evening. During the engagement two of

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Custer’s regiments the 5th and 6th Michigan dismounted and used their Spencer rifles with great effect.\(^63\)

As Gregg arrived around noon on the 3rd, he received a message from Alfred Pleasonton stating that Stuart’s cavalry was seen leaving Gettysburg heading southward towards the intersection he currently held.\(^64\) Stuart was moving with four brigades and three batteries of artillery. Skirmishing between the 5th and 6th Michigan and elements of Stuart’s cavalry had been ongoing since the early morning.\(^65\) By 1:00 McIntosh began relieving the Wolverines as Custer informed him that heavy concentrations of Confederate cavalrmen were to the front. The 1st and 7th Michigan began moving out as McIntosh’s men relieved Custer’s dismounted skirmishers from the 5th and 6th Michigan. With movements being carried out along the Union line Stuart launched an attack with dismounted troopers from Jenkins brigade, supported by batteries along Cress’s ridge. In response to the Rebel artillery, ordnance rifles from the Federal horse artillery began firing knocking out two enemy guns.\(^66\)

As the artillery dueled, dismounted Rebel cavalry continued to advance. The Confederate horse soldiers then retreated when skirmishers from the 1st New Jersey, taking cover behind a stone wall, unleashed a hot fire. With the battle increasing in intensity, Gregg ordered Custer to stay on the field.\(^67\) Immediately, Custer redeployed the 5th Michigan as dismounted skirmishers. Arriving with their Spencer rifles as McIntosh’s

\(^{63}\)Brent L. Vosburg, “Cavalry Clash at Hanover.” America’s Civil War Available at: http://historynet.com/acw/bcavalryclashathanover/index2.html. Internet; accessed 10 October 2005.


\(^{65}\)Longacre, Lincoln’s Cavalrymen, 195-196.

\(^{66}\)Daniel Murphy, “Slashing Sabers at Rummel Farm.” America’s Civil War (January, 2005), 41.

men were being pressed the Wolverines halted the dismounted Rebel attack. Reforming quickly, the Confederates resumed the attack pushing back the Union troopers. Federal artillery fire rained down on their advance, forcing the Rebels to fall back again. Counterattacking, Federal troopers vigorously pursued pushing the Rebels beyond Rummel’s Farm. In response, Stuart changed his tactics adopting the mounted charge.

Stuart ordered the 1st Virginia, of Fitzhugh Lee’s Brigade, on a wild charge that broke past the dismounted Union troopers. In response, Gregg ordered the 7th Michigan to counter-charge. As the 1st Virginia raced past the dismounted Federals, portions of the 5th Michigan and 3rd Pennsylvania fired into their flanks. Soon the charging regiments ran into a fence separating the two antagonists. Both sides wildly fired their pistols at each other until the 7th Michigan fell back when Hampton sent reinforcements forward. As the 7th retreated, dismounted bluecoats continued to devastate the Rebel horsemen with carbine fire blunting their attack. Now rallied, the 7th Michigan launched another charge that pushed back their enemies. This success was met with another Rebel counter-charge. Hampton ordered the 1st North Carolina and Jeff Davis Legion forward. Galloping towards the exhausted 7th Michigan the Rebels once again sent the regiment reeling. With the Wolverine regiment routed, Hampton saw an opportunity to charge the Union batteries at the far end of the field.

Realizing the artillery was threatened, Gregg called upon the 1st Michigan to make a counter charge. With the Rebels coming on hard the Federal ordnance rifles

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68 Murphy, “Slashing Sabers at Rummel Farm”, 41-42; Wittenberg, “East Cavalry Field”, 58-60; Miller, Battles & Leaders, 403.

opened up a devastating fire cutting huge holes in Hampton’s line, but the artillery failed to halt the charge. Custer, just returning from leading the 7th Michigan, was determined to halt the Rebel charge and personally assuming command of the 1st. As Custer's troopers began charging they were aided by intense dismounted fire and multiple counter charges against the Rebel flank. With the Confederates taking an enormous amount of fire the 1st Michigan slammed into them. A melee of saber blows and pistol shots ensued. Under enormous pressure the Southern horse soldiers retreated to Cress Ridge. Hampton barely escaped with his life as he sustained a number of saber wounds. With the charges over the battle ended as Stuart withdrew.\textsuperscript{70}

Although the cavalry battle on the far right of the Union flank had ended another was starting along the far left. General Kilpatrick, marching around the Union line during the day with Farnsworth’s Brigade, finally linked with Merritt’s Reserves of the 1st Division. At 5:30, Kilpatrick ordered an unnecessary charge of the Rebel flank. Kilpatrick attacked over rocky ground, and against an entrenched position. General Elon Farnsworth, although objecting to the order, carried it out regardless. Immediately, his troops ran headlong into Rebel infantry positioned behind a stone wall. As a result, Farnsworth was killed and his troopers were decimated. Farther to the west, Kilpatrick ordered Merritt to attack over open ground. Merritt followed orders but attacked with dismounted troops, sending the 6th Pennsylvania forward. The reserve brigade fared better than Farnsworth’s as a concentration of carbine and artillery fire was brought to bear, but indecisive results were achieved against the defending Rebel infantry.\textsuperscript{71} After

approximately four hours of skirmishing the reserve brigade pulled back and the battle of Gettysburg ended for the Union cavalry.

During the Gettysburg campaign the Union cavalry finally established itself as a combat-worthy force. The extensive use of dismounted tactics coupled with direct artillery support established the foundation for tactical flexibility. Most officers did not rely solely on mounted combat any longer nor did they need close infantry support. Troops were now receiving good carbines, and the Spencer rifles carried by the 5th and 6th Michigan regiments were used effectively in two separate engagements. More importantly the cavalry showed it could act decisively on the defensive against infantry, and that the experience of Brandy Station was not a fluke. With the exception of Kilpatrick’s reliance on old European tactics the cavalry used flexible tactics in each situation. They engaged the enemy dismounted, feigned charges when needed, and attacked mounted when the situation dictated. The battles at Brandy Station and Gettysburg provided a foundation for the Union cavalry to build upon. As the eastern cavalry made great strides during 1863, the mounted forces of the Union armies out west were maintaining a similar pace.

After capturing Murfreesboro at the beginning of January 1863, Rosecrans halted all offensive operations. Deploying the cavalry to protect supply lines and fend off Rebel raids, the army remained stationary for six months. As June arrived Lincoln and the rest of the Union high command were becoming disillusioned with the conservative general, and began prodding him to launch an offensive.72 With Grant besieging Vicksburg and the Army of the Potomac in the midst of pursuing Lee’s invading army Rosecrans finally


72 McPherson, Battle Cry of Freedom, 669; Starr, The Union Cavalry, volume 3, 234-235.
advanced on Bragg's army, which was located south of the Duck River around Tullahoma. “Old Rosy” devised a plan of deception. Ordering his cavalry under General Stanley, already fifteen miles west of the army, to make a feint towards Shelbyville Rosecrans wanted Bragg to believe this was the main line of advance. As the cavalry was making this diversionary movement the real striking force followed two separate routes. On June 24th the army began advancing. (Refer to Map C)

Leading the vanguard of George Thomas’s corps was John Wilder’s mounted infantry. The Lightning Brigade, as it was known, although attached to an infantry division was employed as a cavalry force. Wilder’s quick moving troops armed with Spencer rifles were tasked with capturing Hoover’s Gap, a strategically important area that divided the Duck and Stones River’s. By 10:00 a.m. Wilder’s brigade, already nine miles ahead of Thomas’s leading division, reached the gap. As elements of the 72nd Indiana advanced, Rebel pickets from the 1st Kentucky began opening fire. Immediately five companies dismounted and advanced on the Rebel soldiers. Firing rapidly, men from the 72nd Indiana overwhelmed the pickets driving them back upon the main Rebel camp. As the dismounted advance continued one company was deployed on each side of the road charging the Rebel camp and dispersing them with ease. Wilder, seeing the small Rebel cavalry force run, ordered his men to seize the objective. Understanding that Rebel infantry was nearby the energetic colonel decided to go on the defensive and hold the gap until General George Thomas arrived with his infantry.

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74 Sunderland, Wilder's Lightning Brigade, 37.
With the Rebel cavalry fleeing from Hoover’s Gap, Wilder wasted little time in setting up his defensive lines. Placing most of his brigade on hills to the right of the road, Wilder established a strong defensive position taking advantage of the local terrain and his superior firepower. On the right, closest to the road, was the 72nd Indiana. A little farther right, on a secondary hill, Wilder placed his four ten-pound Rodman guns. These guns were supported by the 123rd Illinois. On the extreme right were four companies of the 17th Indiana. To the left of the road, tasked with covering the flank, two companies of the 98th Illinois were deployed. Held in reserve, behind the artillery, were eight companies of the 98th and six companies of the 17th along with the 123rd.  

With dispositions completed, the Spencer-carrying bluecoats did not have to wait long for the Rebel infantry to attack. Two Rebel brigades from Stewart’s division of Hardee’s Corps soon arrived. Infantry from William Bate’s brigade began deploying along Wilder’s main line, while Rebel artillery began firing. In response to the Confederate shells the supporting ten-pound Rodman guns returned fire, silencing the Rebel cannon. With his artillery silenced, Bate sent his four regiments of infantry forward. With their Spencers ready to unleash a fury of lead the troopers held their fire as the Rebels approached under the constant barrage of canister fire. As the artillery provided direct fire support Wilder’s men unleashed their Spencers, inflicting a devastating fire upon the advancing infantry. The Confederate advance broke. Quickly rallying the Rebels shifted their advance towards the 17th Indiana. In response remaining elements of the 17th were shifted to support their regimental comrades. As the reinforcements arrived bolstering the firing line, the Indianans held their fire until the

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76 Ibid., 458; Sunderland, *Wilder’s Lightning Brigade*, 39.
Rebels reached the bottom of the hill. The 17th then unleashed a volume of fire that broke the assault. The Rebels did not rout, as Bate reformed his line and attempted to hit the extreme right flank of the 17th. For the third time the Rebels advanced, and with the 17th nearly depleted of ammunition the Hoosiers began falling back. Wilder ordered the 98th Illinois to support the beleaguered 17th. As the 17th fell back they were met by the troopers from Illinois who immediately began firing on the advancing Rebels. The Spencer fire broke the Confederate assault once again.77

With his infantry again reeling under the superior firepower of the Lighting Brigade, Bate decided to launch one final assault this time with the support of Bushrod Johnson’s infantry. A general assault by five Rebel regiments commenced. Once again superior firepower from the Spencers and artillery halted the assault. The Rebels fell back all along the line ending the day’s battle. By 7:00 p.m. the lead elements of Thomas’s infantry began to arrive, and relieved the Lighting Brigade. In his official report Wilder praised his officers and men for their effort, stating they understood the importance of seizing and holding Hoover’s Gap.78

The battle of Hoover’s Gap, although limited in numbers, does illustrate the value of firepower, and how effective the Spencer rifle was. By producing a high volume of small arms fire combined with artillery support mounted infantry, in reality cavalry, was able to withstand determined infantry assaults. Hoover’s Gap reasserted the validity of dismounted tactics and the cavalry’s ability to fight on the defensive that Gettysburg laid down. Bate later declared that he had approximately seven hundred men in action that


day citing the use of only three regiments. Wilder on the other hand reported that he was attacked by five regiments of infantry. The actual numbers of Rebel infantry are unknown since the official strength returns for Hardee’s division are not available. Bate, though, did acknowledged the superior fire of the Union troopers. It seems Bate was unaware that the Lighting Brigade was using Spencer rifles, attributing the amount of fire his men faced to being outnumbered.\footnote{Ibid., 459, 585-586, 612-613.} Regardless of the number of troops engaged, the battle provides another example illustrating the growing tactical flexibility of the Federal mounted forces, while showing that superior weaponry was making a difference in dismounted fighting. The battle of Chickamauga in September would reinforce the cavalry’s ability to fight Rebel infantry and cavalry on the defensive, and the growing reliance on dismounted tactics. (Refer to Map G)

On September 18\textsuperscript{th}, the grand battle at Chickamauga began as the mounted brigades of John Wilder and Robert Minty delayed the advance of Braxton Bragg’s army. Bragg was attempting to turn the Union flank and destroy three Federal corps individually. The previous day both colonels were ordered to move their horse soldiers to separate bridges. Wilder to Alexander’s Bridge and Minty two miles further north to Reed’s Bridge along the Chickamauga River.\footnote{OR, series I, vol. XXX, pt. I, 447, 922.} Both officers fought delaying actions that were successful in allowing Rosecrans to gather his army, while foiling Bragg’s plan.

When dawn broke on the 19\textsuperscript{th} of September the Lightning Brigade, once the extreme left of the Union line, was holding the right-center between Crittenden’s XXI and McCook’s XX Corps. Wilder was positioned at the edge of a field just west of the
Chattanooga-Lafayette Road behind a fence. The battle opened that morning as skirmishers from Thomas’s Corps, to the north, made contact with the lead elements of Bragg’s assault. Methodically the battle began shifting south as each sector of the line became fully engulfed. During the morning, while Wilder’s men held the line, Minty’s Brigade was moved towards the rear and left of the line, protecting the supply trains. By 1:00 p.m. Wilder heard heavy firing to his front. Witnessing a Federal infantry division under the command of General Jefferson Davis retreating in disarray on his right, Wilder ordered the Lightning Brigade to hold the line. The 123rd Illinois and 72nd Indiana were ordered right. Opening a furious fire with their Spencers the Rebel advance was repulsed and a battery from the 2nd Wisconsin was saved. While the 123rd and 72nd repulsed the infantry from General Hood’s division, Federal infantry along Wilder’s left flank began retreating. Deploying the 98th Illinois and 17th Indiana along with Lilly’s battery, Wilder prepared to stem the Rebel advance. Dismounted, these two regiments opened a rapid fire into the Rebel flank decimating their line and forcing a withdrawal. Within a short period of time the Lightning Brigade had used dismounted tactics and superior firepower to prevent the Union line from collapsing. Their actions allowed the routed Federal infantry to rally and return to the battle line.

Once Wilder relieved the pressure on his left flank, Hood launched another assault on Davis’s infantry to his right. Federal infantry began streaming to the rear again. To prevent his right flank from being turned, Wilder shifted his forces hitting Hood’s infantry with a fire that produced a “...terrible slaughter” forcing them to retreat. As

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Hood rallied his troops, General Philip Sheridan, commanding an infantry division, replaced Davis. Sheridan’s infantry took up a position in the woods located two hundred yards ahead of Wilder’s men. As the bluecoats positioned themselves they were hit by three Confederate brigades and sent reeling. Wilder’s dismounted troopers witnessed Sheridan’s infantry running from the woods, and prepared to receive the Rebel assault. Outnumbered almost two to one the troopers from Illinois and Indiana worked their Spencer rifles with the utmost vigor, producing what Major Williams of the 17th Indiana called “…a destructive fire.” The fire of the Spencer rifles combined with Lilly’s artillery annihilated Hood’s third assault. With Hood’s final assault repulsed the fighting in Wilder’s sector ended.82

During the night of the 19th the Lightning Brigade was moved to the rear and right flank of the army, covering the gap between the infantry of McCook’s division and General Mitchell’s cavalry. The 92nd Illinois, the fifth regiment of the brigade, was reattached, and deployed on the right flank after seeing considerable action farther to the north during the afternoon’s battle. At daybreak the battle resumed as Thomas’s XIV Corps was again attacked by Bragg’s infantry and cavalry. Rosecrans, receiving false reports that one of his infantry divisions was not in its designated positions, ordered infantry moved northward to cover what he believed was a huge gap in the line. By redeploying his infantry Rosecrans created a gap in the line which Longstreet quickly poured troops through. As the Federal infantry was deploying, Rebel soldiers came charging through the thick woods and underbrush rolling over the unsuspecting infantry. Longstreet’s attack caused the whole Union line to split. The only brigade not routed was

Wilder’s mounted infantry. Dismounting, the Lightning Brigade moved off Missionary Ridge with their Spencers fully loaded, and into the heat of combat. Moving into Sheridan’s old position, since the infantryman had to move left to contain Longstreet’s attack, Wilder unlimbered Lilly’s battery and began strafing the field. Hitting two Alabama regiments with heavy artillery and rifle fire the Lightning Brigade sent them retreating. Supporting the Lightning Brigade was another Spencer wielding mounted unit, the 39th Indiana from General McCook’s XX Corps. Just like Wilder’s men, General Thurston dismounted his troopers and sent them on the attack. Thurston recalled the crux of the battle: “Wilder, coming up on our right also attacked. Wilder had two regiments armed with the same repeating rifles. They did splendid work.” Longstreet told Wilder after the war that the steady and continued racket of these guns led him to think an Army Corps had attacked his left flank. During the 20th Wilder’s five regiments were able to use their superior firepower effectively in an attempt to hold the Union line. 83

With the army being routed along the line Rosecrans, McCook, and Crittenden ran towards Chattanooga, leaving Thomas to fight a desperate battle to save his Corps. Never one to surrender, Wilder planned to mount his brigade, forming them into a box formation with Lilly’s battery in the middle, and cut their way through to Thomas. The colonel, after repulsing a number of Rebel attacks with brilliant dismounted tactics, ordered his tired troops to mount. Wilder asked Sheridan and his remaining infantry to accompany him, but the shocked infantryman declared he was retreating with the rest of the army. Unwilling to abandon his brethren to the north Wilder planned to advance

regardless, but was countermanded by a hysterical Assistant Secretary of War Charles Dana. At 4:00, Wilder left the field as Thomas was fighting a valiant battle, which would earn him the nickname the “Rock of Chickamauga”. Thomas never forgot Wilder’s attempt to break through later writing he should be promoted to Brigadier General. Unfortunately for Wilder his promotion would never come as he would leave the army due to illness.54

As 1863, came to a close the Union cavalry had made giant strides in their combat abilities. Although the Confederates still regarded their blue coated opponents as inferior, General John Imboden declared that although the Federal cavalry had fought well in 1863, they still had not “…inspired the Confederates…with any serious dread of that arm,” there clearly was an increase in the combat potential of that arm.55 The Union cavalry, prior to 1863, had been restricted by the tactics it used and the arms they carried. By the middle of 1863, with better carbines and repeaters making their way into the ranks, the combat ability of the cavalry comparatively increased. To take advantage of these new firearms tactical systems employed by cavalry commanders became more flexible.

Officers were now willing to engage in dismounted combat where artillery support and good single shot carbines would provide a devastating rate of fire. No longer did the majority of Federal officers follow the outdated West Point or European tactics. The devastating results of relying solely on mounted combat were not forgotten. Seeing

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maintaining accuracy combat capabilities increased substantially. This can be seen in the cavalry’s ability to fight on the offensive against Rebel mounted troops, while also on the defensive against Confederate infantry. With good firearms and artillery support leading to tactical flexibility the cavalry now fought in ways older theorists, such as Cooke, Halleck, Mahan, Jomini, and the current European officer corps never believed was possible. The advances of 1863, led to a Federal mounted force that eventually surpassed the Rebel cavalry in effectiveness, while also creating the most impressive mounted force in the world at that time.
CHAPTER V
THE CULMINATION OF POWER: FEDERAL CAVALRY DURING 1864 AND 1865

In March, President Lincoln called Ulysses S. Grant east. When Grant arrived he recognized that the cavalry corps lacked a competent commander and immediately relieved Alfred Pleasonton.¹ To remedy the situation the newly promoted Lieutenant-General ordered one of his most trusted subordinates east, Philip Sheridan. The infantry commander, at first unaware of his assignment, was “staggered” with his promotion and the great responsibility it entailed. Having not commanded a cavalry regiment since 1862, Sheridan was initially unsure and upset about his command, but decided to make the best of the situation.²

Luckily, for the Union cavalry, Sheridan quickly accepted his post, and began planning operations aimed at destroying the Rebel cavalry. Arriving at cavalry headquarters on April 5th, Sheridan immediately went about reorganizing his command. The controversial Irishman immediately began bumping heads with General Meade, who remained commander of the Army of the Potomac. Sheridan believed that the cavalry should not be strung out on picket and outpost duties since the constant work overburdened both men and horses. Instead his horse soldiers should be concentrated to engage Stuart’s cavalry.³ Meade completely disagreed but ultimately relented, relieving most of the cavalry from picket duty. Along with duty changes the inexperienced cavalryman began reorganizing divisional commands. General Alfred Torbert, previously

¹Sheridan, Personal Memoirs, volume 1, 339; Longacre, Lincoln’s Cavalrymen, 247.
²Sheridan, Personal Memoirs, volume 1, 340, 342.
³Sheridan, Personal Memoirs, volume 1, 354.
an infantry commander with no cavalry experience from the VI Corps, was transferred to
the mounted arm and given command of the 1st Division. The infantryman replaced
Wesley Merritt who returned to command the Reserve Brigade. Torbert's tenure as
commander of the 1st Division was tenuous at best since he was often absent from his
post, suffering from various ailments. Command of the 2nd Division, containing two
brigades under General Henry Davies, Jr. and Colonel Irvin Gregg, remained under
General David Gregg. Replacing Hugh Judson Kilpatrick, who was sent to General
Sherman as a divisional commander, was James H. Wilson a freshly promoted brigadier
general at the age of 27 who possessed no cavalry experience. 4

In January 1864, Wilson was promoted to the chief of the cavalry bureau, which
had been established in July of 1863, and tasked with the mission to provide the Federal
cavalry with better horses, supplies, equipment and firearms. Prior to the bureau's
establishment the procurement of horses and arms for the cavalry had been inefficient.
Wilson acted as chief of the bureau from the end of January until April 7th. During this
period the hard working officer made two important contributions. The first was severely
curtailing the corruption of horse dealers, finally allowing for the procurement of healthy
horses. The second was adopting the Spencer carbine as the standard arm of the cavalry. 5

Next to Christopher Spencer there was no greater proponent of the Spencer carbine than
James H. Wilson. Wilson wholeheartedly believed the Spencer repeating carbine was the
best small arm available. Wilson, like other officers who positively reported on the
weapon's durability, range, accuracy, and rapidity of fire, firmly believed in the combat

4Longacre, Lincoln's Cavalrymen, 251-253; Sheridan, Personal Memoirs, volume 1, 349-353;
Starr, The Union Cavalry, volume 3, 448-449.

5Adna Chafee, "James Harrison Wilson," Journal of the United States Cavalry Association 34
ability of the repeater after testing it himself. Although spending less than four months as chief of the cavalry bureau Wilson fixed many of the problems plaguing the inefficient bureaucracy.

Grant, after coming east, was determined to provide his young protégé a field command, and by early April Wilson was given the 3rd Division. Writing after the war the aggressive cavalier recalled his newer regiments were “...greener than grass. They were armed with Smith’s carbines, and it took pretty near all the 5th New York and the 1st Vermont to drive those poorly armed and poorly equipped men into action.” With inexperienced troops carrying poor carbines Wilson decided to procure Spencer carbines. Once receiving the repeaters, Wilson witnessed an immediate increase in his men’s combat efficiency “There was not a man in the division who faltered from the moment they got their new carbines in hand. They seemed to be entirely and absolutely changed and as anxious to get into a fight as anybody...” Under Wilson’s guidance the Spencer carbine was distributed heavily during 1864 to regiments in both the east and west.

The Ordnance Department in August 1864, delivered a report to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton providing details about the current number of Spencer carbines and rifles on hand. As of August 9th, the Ordnance Department had received over 31,000 Spencer repeating arms, of which more than 20,000 were carbines designated strictly for cavalry units (it should also be noted Spencer rifles were distributed to cavalry and mounted infantry regiments like the 5th and 6th Michigan and the Lightning Brigade). General

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7Wilson, The Cavalry of the Army of the Potomac, 78.
George Ramsey, chief of ordnance replacing the conservative Ripley in September 1863, also informed Stanton that another 21,000 repeating carbines were due to arrive by the end of the year. With the Spencer factory running at maximum capacity a contract was signed with the Burnside Arms Company to retool their production capability so Spencer carbines could be produced. The Burnside Arms Company was unable to start production because the change took longer than expected. Even with this setback Spencer carbines continued arriving at Ordnance depots, and were shipped to anxious troopers in the field.

A specific problem with the Spencer carbine concerned reloading time. Although the weapon could fire all seven rounds in about ten seconds (a soldier could fire eight rounds when a bullet was placed into the breech prior to loading) the reloading process was cumbersome. One of the weapon’s great design features was that the ammunition was kept in the butt-stock. To reload the Spencer a metal handle, fitted along the rear of the stock, was turned unlocking the magazine. After extracting the firing tube and spring coil the trooper placed seven rounds down the stock. Once all seven rounds were loaded, the spring and tube were replaced, and the mechanism was relocked by turning the handle upwards. On average, considering the motions needed to reload the gun, an experienced soldier in the heat of battle could probably fire, reload, and fire again within a minute, getting off fourteen shots. Despite the slow reloading process a rate of fire almost five times that of standard muzzle-loaders was attained. One invention, appearing in the middle of 1864, helping reduce reloading time was the Blakeslee cartridge box.

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9 McAulay, Carabines of the Civil War, 9.

10 Gershom M. Barber. Manual of Arms for the Spencer Repeating Rifle. (Boston: J.H. Eastburn’s Press, 1864), 10-14; Bilby, A Revolution in Arms, 123; McAulay, Carabines of the Civil War, 10; Fuller, The Breechloader in the Service, 205.
The Blakeslee box was a wooden ammunition box containing six, ten, or thirteen individual slots holding tin tubes of the standard Spencer load of seven rounds. The trooper would still have to turn the locking mechanism and remove the magazine tube and coil, but instead of placing each individual round into the stock he could just tip the tube over, pouring the rounds into place.\textsuperscript{11} The cartridge box did reduce the time needed to reload, but exactly how much time is unknown. Regardless of the exact numbers, since reloading times varied based upon the nerves of the soldier, Federal cavalrymen could still produce a rate of fire that out produced anything the average Rebel infantryman or horse soldier could.

Despite these advantages, the Blakeslee boxes were available in limited quantities. A major complaint about the box was that the wood swelled under hot conditions making it impossible for the tubes to be removed. Also, constant riding caused some rounds to explode. Spencer ammunition, being the first self-contained cartridge, was prone to prematurely exploding when one round struck the bottom of another causing the fulminate to ignite. Stephen Starr described this problem in his 3\textsuperscript{rd} volume covering the Federal cavalry, but the issue must have been limited in scope since none of the field reports consulted in the National Archives mention this problem. Despite these complaints, which Blakeslee said could be overcome by drying the wood better, or placing rubber at the bottom of the box to reduce the shock of riding, approximately 3,200 boxes actually reached troopers. The Ordnance Department ordered 33,000 boxes, but most of these along with Spencer rifles were purchased by France in 1870.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11}Bilby, \textit{A Revolution in Arms}, 210-213; McAulay, \textit{Carbines of the Civil War}, 10.

\textsuperscript{12}Bilby, \textit{A Revolution in Arms}, 210-212; McAulay, \textit{Carbines of the Civil War}, 10.
At the beginning of May, with the cavalry reorganized under new but less experienced leadership the Union began its first offensive under Grant. The Wilderness campaign opened with Wilson immediately experiencing his baptism of fire at Craig’s Meeting House where his green division was almost captured. Using dismounted tactics and mounted charges Wilson’s men held back the advances of Rebel cavalry under the command of Thomas Rosser. Soon his blue troopers were out of ammunition, and forced to retreat once information was received that the 5th New York, ordered to hold Parker’s Store, was attacked by Longstreet’s Corps. Colonel John Hammond of the 5th New York led a stubborn defense for six hours with his Spencer wielding troops against an enemy who outnumbered him 40 to 1.¹³ Once out of ammunition his troops were forced to retreat, eventually linking with V Corps. After the 5th New York had been pushed aside and the Rebels advanced, Wilson almost found his command isolated. Mounting his troops, he made a dash for Todd’s Tavern where General Gregg, with the 2nd Division, was waiting in support. Gregg’s veterans, after allowing Wilson’s retreating troops to pass, unleashed an intense volley of carbine and artillery fire halting the Rebel pursuit. The inexperienced general and his troops escaped the closing trap.¹⁴ Wilson soon received another opportunity to prove his combat worth as Sheridan led the cavalry on their first independent operation. (Refer to Map H)

On May 8th the already stressed relationship between Meade and Sheridan fractured as the hot tempered cavalryman came barreling into his superior’s headquarters. The argument concerned Meade’s decision late on the 7th to issue orders directly to

¹³Longacre, Lincoln’s Cavalrymen, 257.

Sheridan's divisional officers, Gregg and Merritt, without informing the cavalry commander. As a result, late on the 7th and early on the 8th, large traffic jams ensued between the infantry and cavalry resulting in the cavalry's failure to capture Spotsylvania. When Sheridan arrived at Meade's Headquarters a heated exchange took place with the cavalryman proclaiming he could "...whip Stuart if he (Meade) would only let me...," and that Meade could now command the cavalry himself. Once making his position clear Sheridan walked out. Meade immediately went to Grant, informing him of Sheridan's insubordination. After hearing about the exchange Grant sided with Sheridan, and unleashed his cavalry.

Late on the 8th Sheridan received orders to concentrate his cavalry, move south, engage the Rebel cavalry, and link with General Benjamin Butler's Army of the James. By 5:00 a.m. on May 9th Sheridan's cavalry was on the march. General Gregg's division was leading the vanguard, followed by Merritt and Wilson. With over 10,000 troopers forming a marching column thirteen miles long the new cavalryman launched his first independent mounted operation. Sheridan intended to move towards Richmond, hoping that by threatening the Rebel capital Stuart would follow. It did not take long for Stuart to pursue, but instead of taking his full command of seven brigades the dashing Virginian only took three and his horse artillery.

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Over the next few days as one of Stuart’s brigades harassed the rear of Sheridan’s column, the *Beau Sabreur*, as the Confederate cavalier was nicknamed, made a mad dash south with his remaining forces. Eventually, Stuart bypassed the Union cavalry forming a line of battle at a road junction by Yellow Tavern.\textsuperscript{18} At Yellow Tavern, Stuart made his final stand as commander of the veteran Rebel cavalry.

The engagement took place on May 11\textsuperscript{th}. In the days preceding the battle, the Union cavalry had destroyed Confederate rail lines and supply depots at Beaver Station, while liberating four hundred prisoners of war. On the 10\textsuperscript{th} the 5\textsuperscript{th} U.S., after being ordered to guard a ford the Rebels had already crossed, fought their way out of a tactical encirclement as they attempted to reunite with the cavalry corps. Using dismounted tactics to probe the Rebel positions around a bridge they needed to cross the commanding officer, Captain Abraham Arnold, led his regulars on a charge that succeeded in carrying the bridge. During the day the 5\textsuperscript{th} U.S., once two hundred and fifty soldiers strong, lost sixty-eight enlisted men and two officers.\textsuperscript{19}

After leaving Ashland, Merritt led the advance with Wilson supporting and Gregg bringing up the rear. Sheridan’s bluecoats reached the outskirts of Yellow Tavern at 11:00 a.m. As the Federal cavalry marched south they found Stuart’s cavalry deployed to their left, prepared for battle. Facing five brigades of Union cavalry were two brigades of Rebel horsemen, dismounted and supported by artillery. The brigade of Lunsford Lomax was facing south and just east of the Telegraph road, while Wickham’s brigade was

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formed a bit north and west. Sheridan quickly made his dispositions. Placing Devin’s Brigade on the extreme right flank with Alfred Gibbs’s reserve brigade to their left and Custer’s men next to them, Sheridan’s mounted soldiers prepared for combat. Supporting Merritt was Wilson, who placed his troops to the left of Custer starting with Chapman’s then McIntosh’s Brigade. Gregg was kept in the rear, keeping the harassing Rebels under General John Gordon at bay.  

Merritt, dismounting the majority of his command, ordered all three brigades to advance. Quickly, Devin, supported by the reserve brigade, forced the defending Rebels to retreat under a withering fire from two of his regiments using predominantly Sharps carbines. Soon, the veteran colonel of the 2nd Brigade outflanked the Rebels, and seized the road junction by Yellow Tavern. As Devin was advancing Custer, dismounting his two Spencer wielding regiments the 5th and 6th Michigan, began assaulting Rebel positions in the woods to his front. After advancing a short distance the two regiments became engaged in a firefight. Using their Spencers with great effect both Wolverine regiments then charged the Rebels forcing a retreat. As the Confederates reformed on a hill just beyond the woods the Union advance halted for the moment. Now that the woods were cleared, and the other two brigades of the 1st Division turned the Rebel left flank, Custer made a personal reconnaissance of the enemy’s position. 

From the cover of the woods, Custer determined that the Rebel batteries along the ridgeline were vulnerable on their right. Deploying the 5th and 6th Michigan in the woods

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the gambling brigadier decided to hit the Rebel position with dismounted fire, while sending the 1st Michigan on a charge directed at the Rebel right. Custer, who knew his troopers would have to tear down a series of fences and cross a bridge, believed that a successful mounted attack would carry the day. Supporting the 1st Michigan was the 1st Vermont from Chapman’s Brigade. To assist in covering the mounted advance the 5th and 6th Michigan engaged the Rebel cavalry and batteries with their Spencer rifles.

Immediately, Wickham’s troops responded with carbine and canister fire. While Custer’s dismounted men were trading a heavy fire, the 1st Michigan and 1st Vermont maneuvered into position without being noticed. Once deployed, the charge was launched. As the Federal cavalrymen charged the entrenched position, the Rebels were unable to change the facing of their cannon. Custer’s gamble paid off. The men from Michigan and Vermont ripped through the Rebel right flank causing the whole line to disintegrate. Both regiments were then supported by a general assault along the whole line, causing a rout. During the melee J.E.B Stuart, attempting to rally his broken cavalry, was shot and mortally wounded by John Huff a trooper from the 5th Michigan.22

With Stuart wounded and his troops in full retreat, Rebel resistance suddenly vanished. To the rear, General Gregg, who had been hard pressed by Gordon’s cavalry all day finally gained the upper hand when Irvin Gregg’s Brigade launched a successful mounted attack, forcing the Rebels to retreat. With the Rebel cavalry soundly defeated Sheridan had fulfilled his objective. The victory though was not a complete one, since less than half of Stuart’s cavalry were engaged. As a result Stuart’s cavalry, through no

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fault of Sheridan’s, remained a potent force. Sheridan, though, had fulfilled his goal of defeating the Rebel cavalry on the field of battle. The fact that Stuart pursued with only half of his mounted force was beyond the Irishman’s control. Regardless of the forces involved the Union cavalry had achieved two important victories at Yellow Tavern. The first was the complete rout of the Rebel cavalry, something unseen before in the eastern theater. The second, and probably more important, was the death of J.E.B Stuart. Stuart’s loss is significant since he was the face of the Rebel cavalry. Under Stuart’s tutelage the Confederate cavalry became a mounted force that ruled the battlefield for over two years. Stuart’s death and the defeat at Yellow Tavern signify the complete changing of the cavalry guard in the eastern theater.

Tactically, the engagement again illustrates the benefits of using a combination of mounted and dismounted action with artillery support. By possessing superior Sharps and Spencer carbines and rifles the dismounted cavalrymen of Sheridan’s 1st Division were able to push back entrenched Rebel cavalry. Then, seizing an opportunity, a mounted charge was made on the right flank, succeeding because dismounted action continued to occupy the Confederate battle line. Custer knew cover was essential for the 1st Michigan as they worked their way over broken ground to get into position. To provide that cover both Spencer regiments remained dismounted and engaged, providing the necessary distraction for the mounted units to deploy. By engaging the enemy with dismounted fire the 1st Michigan and 1st Vermont were able to charge without coming under concentrated artillery fire that would have decimated their ranks. Merritt’s division was not the only force employing flexible tactics. The reliable David Gregg also used dismounted action
during the afternoon, keeping Gordon’s attacks at bay. Then, when the opportunity to stabilize his position presented itself, a charge was ordered.

These same tactics proved useful the following day. Sheridan, deciding to continue marching on Richmond, eventually maneuvered his cavalry into a trap. Prior to the engagement at Yellow Tavern, Richmond became alerted to the advance of the Federal cavalry. As a result local militias were called up to fill the defenses. Late on the 11th Sheridan ordered his cavalry to continue heading south. Rain and torpedo (land mines) laden roads caused the Union advance to halt. A local guide, whom Wilson believed a spy, directed the Union advance attempting to cross the Chickahominy. Instead of directing the cavalrmen to the bridge the local citizen led Wilson’s troops closer to the defensive works, where an engagement with Rebel forces ensued. Sheridan quickly told Wilson to hold his position, as Merritt found the Meadow Bridge dismantled and in need of repair. To Sheridan’s front was Rebel infantry, to the rear was Gordon’s cavalry, the Chickahominy River was to the left, and the Richmond defenses to the right. Making matters more difficult was that General Fitz Lee had reorganized the remnants of Stuart’s cavalry, and taken up defensive positions across the Chickahominy River.23

With his troopers surrounded, Sheridan had no choice but to hold his position until Merritt repaired the bridge. Throughout the day, by using overwhelming artillery and carbine fire, the veterans in blue dismounted and kept the Rebels at bay. Custer, meanwhile, was ordered to remove Lee from the opposite bank. Wilson dismounted his men and took up defensive positions to repel any infantry attack from the Richmond defenders. Merritt deployed the remainder of his men against the Richmond defenses,

while Custer acted against Lee. Gregg, dismounting both of his brigades and placing his horse artillery along high ground, also took up defensive positions. Gregg faced the stiffest Rebel assaults of the day by Gordon's cavalry and infantry. Despite repeated attacks the dismounted cavalrymen held the line. Wilson did likewise, as accurate and unrelenting artillery fire halted Rebel advances. By 4:00 p.m. Merritt's men had repaired the bridge, and Sheridan began to withdraw. The reserve brigade crossed first, with orders to support Custer's dismounted men. Following the reserve brigade were two regiments from Devin's command, the 17th Pennsylvania and 9th New York, who charged Lee's flank and routed the Rebels. Fleeing to another entrenchment dismounted troopers of the 1st New York pressed forward, forcing Lee to retreat. With Lee's men routed Sheridan was able to extricate the rest of his command.24

Within two days Sheridan had rendezvoused with Butler's army, his first independent campaign was completed. Overall, the Yellow Tavern expedition was a success. The Federal cavalry had set out with a goal to engage and defeat Stuart's cavalry, and this they did. Along the way blue troopers destroyed a large amount of Confederate supplies, train tracks, and locomotives at Ashland. They had been engaged in two fierce firefights, and performed well each time. At Yellow Tavern the cavalry showed a striking capability unseen until now. The following day the mounted troopers proved their defensive capabilities by fending off persistent attacks by Rebel cavalry and infantry. For the first time in the war the Federal cavalry effectively employed both dismounted and mounted action as a tactical alternative. The presence of excellent single shot Sharps carbines and Spencer carbines and rifles produced an overwhelming amount

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of firepower that was augmented by the 3-inch ordnance rifles. This firepower helped pave the way for successful mounted charges. A month later the cavalry would find themselves embarking on another raid, engaging their old foe with a new commander.

On the 6th of June Sheridan received orders to take two cavalry divisions on a raid north, linking with General David Hunter's Army at Charlottesville. Grant hoped that by sending two cavalry divisions on a raid the Rebel horsemen would pursue, allowing the army to secretly pass around Lee's flank to the south. Only Wilson's 3rd Division remained to screen the army. With the 1st and 2nd Divisions Sheridan decided to march on Trevilian Station where he would destroy the Virginia Central Railroad, curtailing the flow of foodstuffs to the Confederate army. With 6,000 horse soldiers the Trevilian Station raid began the following morning. (Refer to Map I)

The Rebel cavalry, under Wade Hampton, were soon in hot pursuit. By riding hard Hampton bypassed Sheridan's long column. By the 10th of June Sheridan was camped a few miles from Trevilian Station, where Hampton was deployed. The Confederate commander separated his force. Hampton retained three brigades to defend his position, while sending Fitz Lee, with two brigades, a few miles east to Louisa Court House. As Merritt, with his brigade of reserves, advanced down the Clayton Store Road at 5:00 a.m. on July 11th his men engaged entrenched Rebel pickets. Without pause, troopers from the 2nd U.S. charged the pickets driving them back one mile until encountering Hampton's main body. Once engaged with the Rebel cavalry Federal troopers, after initially retreating, began dismounting in the woods on both sides of the road. Moving up on the left of the 2nd U.S. was the 1st U.S. On their right the 1st New

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25 Longacre, Lincoln's Cavalrymen, 276-277; Sheridan, Personal Memoirs, volume I, 413-416.

26 Longacre, Lincoln's Cavalrymen, 277.
York Dragoons and 6th Pennsylvania were deployed. In reserve, supporting the artillery was the 5th U.S. With Merritt's Brigade deployed and carbine fire filling the woods, Devin's 2nd Brigade was brought forward and placed to the right of the reserves. Meanwhile, the 4th New York was detached and moved to the extreme left of the Union line. With both forces now entangled in the dense underbrush that littered the battlefield the engagement shifted.

With Merritt and Devin battling Hampton's cavalry to the front, Sheridan ordered Custer around the Union left flank and into the Rebel rear. Advancing on a road that cut through the forest the young general's movements were unknown to both Hampton and Lee. Hidden by the surrounding terrain Custer's Wolverines slipped in between the separated Rebel forces, arriving in Hampton's rear unnoticed. Reaching the outskirts of Trevilian Station Custer was informed that Hampton's supply train was vulnerable. Without hesitation the ambitious twenty-four year old sent the 5th Michigan on a dash. As Wolverines charged with sabers in hand the 6th Michigan was ordered to follow in support. Before the 6th could advance the brigade was struck by elements of Lee's cavalry from the rear. In response to the Rebel attack Custer dismounted his command, and ordered the 7th Michigan to push back the Rebel attack, which they accomplished.

Hampton was soon informed that Federal cavalry were in his rear. Deploying Rosser's Brigade to engage Custer, the Rebel cavalry withdrew from the main battle line moving south to gain a position that boxed the Federals into an open field. Unable to fall back, and with the 5th Michigan now cut off, Custer decided to advance. As his men

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moved forward a large force of enemy cavalry and artillery was gathering to the right. In response, Custer unlimbered his artillery and ordered the 7th Michigan to charge once the ordnance rifles began firing. Supporting the 7th was the 1st Michigan, which was ordered to hit the left flank of that Rebel force but could not as they were holding off Lee's assaults. At this point Custer's Brigade, now one regiment short, was pressed on three sides. Federal troopers soon formed a crescent shape defensive position, holding off the repeated assaults. Using overwhelming dismounted and artillery fire, while constantly shifting men and cannons to meet threatened sectors, Custer successfully defended his position. At one point during the engagement a gun from Pennington's horse artillery was captured. Custer sent troopers form the 7th Michigan to recapture the gun, but they were immediately repulsed. Unwilling to give up one of his precious 3-inch rifles the brigadier ordered every other horse holder dismounted, and personally led a charge of thirty men recapturing the piece.29

While the Wolverine Brigade was fighting for its survival, Sheridan planned an assault to save his trapped horsemen. Bringing up John Gregg's Brigade and placing them on the Union left the aggressive Irishman launched a general assault along the whole line. Dismounted Federal troopers pushed back Hampton's outnumbered men. Soon the orderly retreat turned into a rout as the unrelenting fire from Federal carbines and artillery continued. Hampton attempted to rally his line short of Custer's position, but the continued pressure of the Federal assault was too intense. Fitz Lee, falling back from

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the dismounted assault of Davies's troops, captured Custer's wagon train, and fended off a personal counter-charge by the Union commander.\textsuperscript{30}

The next day Sheridan attempted to continue his advance on Charlottesville. Following a sharp engagement with the reformed Rebels, and learning that General Hunter was not marching south Sheridan decided to retreat. Over the course of the two day engagement Sheridan lost approximately one thousand soldiers or one-sixth of his force. His retreat was burdened with hundreds of wounded and prisoners.\textsuperscript{31} The battle of Trevilian Station was a significant engagement. Flexible combat tactics, built upon the foundation of strong firepower, was becoming the trademark of the cavalry corps. By this point in the war the Federal mounted soldiers were beginning to assert their overall tactical and firepower superiority over the Rebel cavalry.

The cavalry, by early June 1864, had achieved a complete reversal from 1862, when the battle of Gaines's Mill was fought. No longer were cavalry officers attempting to build a European styled mounted force. Instead, a new type of cavalry was being forged one that could fight under any circumstances by employing a variety of tactics. Soon, Sheridan and his cavalry received new orders to move into the Shenandoah Valley. Out west, as Sheridan was wreaking havoc in the Shenandoah, General Wilson reorganized Sherman's cavalry, and greatly assisted in destroying John Bell Hood's Rebel army at Nashville.


When James Wilson arrived at Sherman’s headquarters on October 22nd the recently promoted Major General (as of October 5th) quickly realized the cavalry needed a complete overhaul. Unlike their compatriots to the east the Federal mounted forces in the west were underused. The main reason behind the cavalry’s lack of combat experience was Sherman’s own disdain for mounted troops, and unfamiliarity with how they should be handled. The first large scale cavalry operation conducted out west during 1864 was George Stoneman’s raid during the Atlanta campaign in July. This three pronged raid, which was supposed to cut the southern rail lines into Atlanta, failed miserably as two of the three cavalry contingents were destroyed. Stoneman, already disgraced from his operations while with the Army of Potomac, was leading one of the cavalry columns when he was captured, and his small 2,100 man force was decimated north of Macon, Georgia. The following month General Kilpatrick led another raid with the intention of destroying the rail lines south of Atlanta. Leading 4,500 mounted soldiers, the reckless Union commander soon found his force surrounded by Rebel infantry pressing his front and cavalry cutting off his rear. Kilpatrick’s troopers jumped into their saddles, deployed in columns, and charged the Rebel cavalry. The charge was successful and Kilpatrick’s men rejoined Sherman’s lines. On the heels of two failed cavalry raids Sherman’s confidence in his mounted arm continued to fall.

The other problem plaguing the Federal armies out west was lengthy supply lines that needed to be secured. Unlike the eastern theater, where the supply lines from

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Washington to the Army of the Potomac were relatively safe, armies out west were deployed over multiple states. With Rebel cavalry running rampant the Federal mounted forces were tasked with keeping those lines secure, but they could not. With cavalry units scattered, an inefficient command structure, and drastic supply problems that needed fixing Wilson went to work immediately.

Between October 24th, when the 27 year old cavalry officer became the chief of cavalry for all mounted forces in the Military Division of the Mississippi, which included the armies of the Cumberland, Tennessee, and Ohio, and November 9th the entire cavalry structure was transformed. Seven divisions of cavalry were organized, troops were sent to depots for remounts and new arms, weaker officers were removed and replaced with younger, more capable soldiers. By the second day of November, Wilson left Sherman’s army, deciding to make his headquarters with General George Thomas at Nashville. By the end of November Hood’s army, instead of pursuing Sherman, invaded Tennessee. Although Wilson’s cavalry corps looked impressive on paper, the actual numbers were less than inspiring as most men were still being remounted and refitted. Regardless of Wilson’s manpower problem the young general had pulled off an amazing feat, transforming an unorganized, ill-equipped cavalry structure into a cohesive, better led, and armed force in two weeks.

On the last day of November, Hood launched an attack upon Schofield’s Corps, of Thomas’s Army of the Cumberland, entrenched at Franklin, Tennessee. Supporting

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36 Keenan, Wilson’s Cavalry Corps, 18-27.
37 Ibid., 27; Chaffee, 282-283;
Schofield to the east along the north bank of the Big Harpeth River was Wilson with some cavalry. Opposing Wilson was the feared Rebel cavalry under Nathan Bedford Forrest. At 10:00 a.m., Forrest began driving back the blue troopers along the Lewisburg Pike. A Federal brigade of cavalry, under the command of John Croxton, held firm against the Rebel charges. By the middle of the afternoon Croxton’s men were facing Rebel infantry, which replaced Forrest who crossed the Harpeth River at Hughes Ford. In response, Croxton crossed the river and deployed two regiments to his left engaging Forrest’s cavalry. Supporting Croxton’s 1st Tennessee and 2nd Michigan, which were armed with Burnside and Spencer carbines, were elements of General Edward Hatch’s 5th Cavalry Division. Together, these forces dismounted and charged the Rebel cavalry occupying the hills to their front and left flank. Firing their carbines with great effect the troopers pushed two divisions of Rebel cavalry across the Harpeth River. While the Rebel cavalry was being checked, Hood threw his army against the entrenched Union infantry around Franklin and was soundly defeated. That evening Schofield pulled out of Franklin and moved north towards Nashville. By early morning on December 2nd, the combined force reached the defensive works at Nashville. Wilson’s men immediately went into a bivouac across the Cumberland River where they stayed for two weeks, remounting and refitting.  

Following the retreating Federals at a distance was Hood’s ragged army. Upon reaching the outskirts of Nashville, Hood dug in along the hills south of the city preparing for a siege. As the Confederates erected their defenses, General Thomas planned an assault. Thomas, though, was unwilling to move until Wilson’s cavalry was prepared. A

prewar cavalry officer, Thomas was one of the few generals who understood the potential of cavalry armed with repeating rifles.\textsuperscript{39} Facing mounting pressure from Grant and the military hierarchy Thomas planned to attack on the 9\textsuperscript{th}, but inclement weather and icy roads prevented the assault. Finally on the 12\textsuperscript{th}, Wilson marched into Nashville and placed his cavalry on the extreme right of the Union line. Wilson possessed three divisions of cavalry and one extra brigade, totaling twenty-eight regiments or almost 12,500 men of which 3,500 were without horses.\textsuperscript{40} (Refer to Map J)

Deployed on the extreme right of the Union line was Johnson’s 6\textsuperscript{th} Division. To Johnson’s left was Croxton’s Brigade, and to his left was Hatch’s 5\textsuperscript{th} Division connecting with the infantry. Supporting the lead elements was General Knipe’s 7\textsuperscript{th} Division. Each divisional commander deployed his soldiers in a similar manner. Dismounting portions of their command, while leaving some regiments or brigades mounted to exploit any break in the Rebel line. The advance was to begin at 7:00 a.m., but a dense fog and premature infantry movements delayed the assault. Once the Federal soldiers began moving forward at 11:00 a.m. the cavalry quickly realized they could not be stopped. Armed mostly with Spencer, Sharps and Burnside carbines, along with a minority of lesser reliable carbines, the cavalry advanced dismounted.\textsuperscript{41}

Moving on the infantry’s left, along the Hardin pike, cavalry from the 5\textsuperscript{th} Division quickly engaged entrenched Rebel cavalry. Hatch immediately ordered his dismounted


cavalrymen from the 1st Brigade to attack the Confederate rifle pits, which they successfully accomplished routing the Rebels. As the dismounted troopers of the 1st Brigade pushed forward, the baggage train of Confederate cavalry commander, James Chalmers, became vulnerable. Not wishing to see the prize escape Hatch ordered the 12th Tennessee on a mounted charge. With Rebel cavalry running before the dismounted onslaught the 12th Tennessee charged the baggage train adding to the panic. The charge ended quickly as the baggage train was captured, along with over forty prisoners.42

With the Rebel left flank in disorder the 5th Division moved east, turning their attention towards Hood’s infantry. As Hatch’s 2nd Brigade kept moving east the 1st Brigade continued to pursue the fleeing Rebel cavalry with support from Croxton’s mounted troopers. Supporting Hood’s left flank was a series of five redoubts and breastworks. The 2nd Brigade quickly began approaching the first redoubt from the flank, but instead of immediately attacking the defensive position Hatch brought up artillery support. Once the horse artillery began dueling with the entrenched Rebel guns, dismounted troopers charged the redoubt. Withholding their fire until within three hundred yards the cavalrymen then let loose a volley which was answered by canister and musketry. Despite taking a heavy fire, four regiments of the 2nd Brigade kept advancing. The 2nd Iowa was the first regiment to scale the redoubt. With Yankee cavalry securing the defensive position the Rebel infantry began retreating. As they fell back bluecoats turned the abandoned artillery pieces around and opened fire. Once the redoubt was captured, troopers came under fire from another Rebel position about six hundred yards away located atop a bluff and surrounded by strong earthworks. Without hesitation Hatch ordered his troopers to charge the next redoubt. Exhausted but determined the

dismounted regiments of the 2nd Brigade, supported by the 1st, advanced. As before the Federal troopers absorbed a heavy amount of artillery and rifle fire, but with infantry supporting their advance they continued moving forward. Their determination was rewarded as elements of both the 1st and 2nd Brigades captured the redoubt, sending the Rebels running again. Unwilling to halt after capturing two heavily defended entrenchments the commander of the 2nd Brigade, Colonel Datus Coon, led two regiments from the 1st Brigade on a third assault. By using overwhelming dismounted fire, while absorbing an intense fire the 12th Missouri and 11th Indiana captured a third Rebel redoubt. With darkness approaching the advance of the 5th Division halted.43

While Hatch's troopers were storming Rebel fortifications, General Richard Johnson's 6th Division was engaging Rebel cavalry along the right flank of the Union army. When the cavalry began advancing Johnson, leaving one brigade mounted and the other dismounted, quickly became engaged with Rebel artillery. Keeping the mounted brigade in reserve the divisional commander unlimbered his artillery and deployed his dismounted troops. Unable to make any advances with his troopers since, according to Johnson, they were not accustomed to acting like infantry and their sabers were weighting them down the mounted troopers were sent forward. Writing after the war Louis Philippe-Albert D'Orleans Comte de Paris, an officer in the Federal army, noted that the cavalry since they often fought dismounted devised a system where troopers' attached their sabers to the saddles.44 Thus being free from the burden of a heavy cavalry sword the mounted soldier could easier engage in dismounted combat. For some reason


the dismounted soldiers in Johnson’s Division decided to carry their heavy cavalry swords rather than leaving them behind. Once the charge was ordered the 5th Iowa dismounted and began firing on the Rebel position. As the 5th Iowa laid down a covering fire the 16th Illinois charged the Rebel position, but were halted by a stone wall. As the men from Illinois began tearing down the wall, the Rebels limbered their artillery and retreated. With the Confederate cavalry retreating, a pursuit ensued with the 5th Iowa, 7th Ohio, and 16th Illinois until the Rebels established a strong defensive line. Instead of continuing the attack Johnson halted, deciding to renew the offensive in the morning since he had already accomplished the day’s goals.45

By the end of the day Hood’s army was battered. Wilson’s cavalry had accomplished much. The Rebel left flank had been pushed back four miles, while a number of artillery pieces, prisoners, and supplies were captured. Wilson met an elated Thomas that night who ordered his young cavalry commander to continue pressing the Rebel flanks and rear the next day. That night the 7th Division, under General Knipe, took up a position on the extreme left flank and rear of the Rebel army along the Granny White Pike, while the 5th Division was to their left. The following day Thomas renewed his assault by using his infantry as a hammer and Wilson’s cavalry as an anvil to destroy Hood’s reeling army.46 This is an original and interesting tactical approach to fighting a battle considering the cavalry was traditionally not to be used in this aggressive manner. According to the West Point or European tradition the cavalry should have been held in reserve, waiting to exploit the success of the infantry. Instead, Thomas realized his


cavalry, now armed with technologically advanced firearms and under aggressive leadership could be used in a flexible way.

The next morning Thomas cautiously advanced, wary about what the ultra-aggressive Hood might do. As Knipe’s two cavalry brigades dismounted along the Granny White Pike they were attacked and thrown back by Rebel cavalry. It did not take long for the brigade commander, General John Hammond, to rally his troops and counter-attack. As Federal cavalymen unleashed a furious fire the blue troopers pushed back the Confederates, regaining the pike. To support the 7th Division Wilson ordered Hatch to move his men right to link with their engaged compatriots. Within a few hours Wilson’s cavalry was on the offensive, gaining a position in the Rebel rear. Bringing up horse batteries and placing them on a wooded hill the Yankee horse soldiers opened a devastating combination of carbine and artillery fire, rocking the Rebel line. With enormous pressure being generated on Hood’s front and rear the Rebel line broke at 4:30 p.m. and a rout ensued. Wilson, with most of his command fighting dismounted, ordered Croxton’s mounted troopers to pursue the retreating Confederates. With his brigade Croxton initiated a pursuit that was maintained through the night.^[47]

When evening came Thomas had thoroughly routed Hood’s army. For the first time since Chickamauga the cavalry had played an important role in a major engagement. Wilson, implementing a combination of dismounted action with artillery support and mounted reserves, established tactical flexibility within the western cavalry. Nashville, like the other case studies, provides an important glimpse into the growth of the cavalry as a battlefield force. Writing after the war Wilson reflected on the effects Nashville had

on his men stating “Up to that time the cavalry in the west had been reserved for independent operations, and had rarely been seen assaulting fortified positions. Such work had been by common consent, left for the infantry; but now under the influence of organization and discipline, the cavalry, with their Spencer repeating rifles, felt themselves equal to any task.” The battle of Nashville also revived Wilson’s hopes for arming all cavalrymen with Spencer carbines or rifles. Writing a few days after the engagement to an inspector of cavalry Wilson stated “The recent active operations of this command have shown that this arm excels all others in use, durability, rapidity of fire and general effectiveness.” The cavalry had again taken a giant step forward in their combat ability. Now, the mounted trooper out west was able to fight on the offensive against an entrenched enemy supported by artillery. Just like their brethren in the east the western trooper had now established his dominance after years of hard fighting.

As 1864, ended and 1865, began the Union cavalry, regardless of theater, had achieved a level of combat capacity few mounted soldiers had ever attained. Even at their height, the cavalry of Stuart, Wheeler, and Forrest although feared horsemen, could not equal the battlefield flexibility of the Yankee cavalry. As 1865, progressed two significant battles were fought that ultimately illustrated the tactical flexibility of the Union cavalry. The first was Five Forks where Sheridan’s cavalry turned Lee’s flank at Petersburg, accelerating the Confederate surrender.

On March 26th, 1865, Sheridan, with his exhausted and spent cavalry, finally returned from the Shenandoah Valley. Rejoining the Union lines surrounding Lee’s army

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48 Battles and Leaders, volume 4, 468.

at Petersburg, the cavalry quickly remounted and refit. With Sheridan’s arrival came another series of organizational and structural changes. The 2nd Division, which had remained with Grant, now had a new commander. General David Gregg, exhausted from the strains of war, tendered his resignation which was accepted by Lincoln in early February. Taking over temporary command was General Henry Davies, of the 1st Brigade. Upon Sheridan’s arrival Grant and Meade attempted to fill the vacancy with a number of men, mostly infantry commanders, but they could not agree. Finally, a consensus was reached. General George Crook, formerly commander of the VIII Corps during the Shenandoah campaign, close friend of Sheridan, and recently returned to the army after a prisoner exchange was given the job. With the 2nd Division returning to Sheridan’s command the Irishman was informed by Grant that the cavalry was now an independent force only receiving orders directly from him. No longer would Sheridan take orders from Meade. For the first time since late July 1864 the cavalry was a consolidated force, although Sheridan retained the Shenandoah title for Merritt’s 1st and 3rd Divisions.50

Three days after arriving at Petersburg Grant sent his reconstituted cavalry force on a mission to probe Lee’s right flank and capture Five Forks, a road network southwest of Petersburg. Sheridan began moving his command, which he placed at 9,000 troopers, on the 29th of March despite an unrelenting rain that turned the roads into mud. The following day lead elements of Thomas Devin’s 1st Division, supported by Crook’s men reached Dinwiddie Court House, dispersing a small Rebel cavalry force. Upon reaching

Dinwiddie Merritt ordered Devin north towards Five Forks to ascertain the Rebel strength. As the bluecoats of the 1st Division marched on Five Forks they soon encountered Rebel infantry manning the entrenchments surrounding the area. After engaging in a spirited skirmish Devin, realizing the enemy was strongly posted, withdrew to Dinwiddie where they camped for the evening.\(^5\) (Refer to Map K)

The next morning Merritt, with orders to capture Five Forks, led the advance of Devin and Crook’s divisions. As the Federal horse soldiers approached, a strong force of Rebel infantry and cavalry, under the command of General George Pickett, were moving west of Five Forks on Sheridan’s flank. Soon the cavalry collided with Pickett’s men and a desperate firefight ensued. Merritt that morning had deployed one brigade of cavalry, from the 2nd Division, west to cover the left flank along the Chamberlain Creek. Three brigades of mounted troopers, two from Devin’s Division and one from Crook’s, meanwhile pushed on Five Forks, while two brigades were held as a mobile reserve.

Custer and his division were still south of Dinwiddie Court House protecting the supply wagons and artillery which were struggling to move over the muddy roads.\(^5\)

By early afternoon Rebel cavalry along the Chamberlain Creek began pressing the dismounted brigade of Charles Smith, which was holding firm. The area of battle was not conducive to mounted fighting as the terrain was heavily wooded and swampy. This meant the cavalry would fight mostly dismounted, an advantage for the Federals since they were carrying Spencer carbines. As Smith held his position, Henry Davies’s Brigade

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was sent to reinforce the pressed bluecoats. Turning left, Davies was assaulted by Pickett’s force, over 14,000 strong. Unable to defend themselves the brigade retreated, and ran into the horse soldiers of Stagg’s and Fitzhugh’s Brigades, which dismounted in a futile attempt to terminate the Rebel attack. Pickett’s men moved rapidly isolating the three leading Federal brigades, which barely escaped the onslaught. By using brute strength the Rebel force pushed the surprised blue cavalry out of the way. Pickett now had a clear path into Grant’s extreme left flank where General Governor Warren’s V Corps was positioned. Merritt, realizing the gravity of the situation, ordered the Reserve Brigade to dismount, hitting Pickett’s exposed flank. As three regiments of regulars, assisted by the 2nd Massachusetts and 6th Pennsylvania, attacked the Rebel line Pickett wheeled his entire column to engage the Yankees. Soon the reserve brigade was falling back on Dinwiddie with the brigades of Smith and Irvin Gregg following. Pickett’s entire combined force of cavalry and infantry pursued relentlessly. Sheridan realized he needed to stem the Rebel advance, and ordered up Custer’s division, minus one brigade, and the artillery.

Three-quarters of a mile north of Dinwiddie, Sheridan formed a defensive semicircle. With Picket now focused on destroying the Federal cavalry the three trapped brigades of Stagg, Fitzhugh and Davies fell back by moving around the Rebel infantry. Although those isolated regiments would not fight again this day, Merritt’s decision to attack the Rebel flank, and Pickett’s subsequent turn of direction saved these cavalrmen from complete destruction. As the remainder of the assault force formed defensive lines behind barricades and breastworks Custer arrived, and deployed his troops to their left.

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53 OR, series I, vol. XLVI, pt. 1, 1102-1103, 1117, 1130; Sheridan, Personal Memoirs, volume 2, 149-151; Longacre, Custer and His Wolverines, 270-271; Longacre, Lincoln’s Cavalrymen, 325-326; Coffey, Sheridan’s Lieutenants, 110; National Archives, Record Group 108, Entry 77, 3 volumes.
The horse artillery quickly unlimbered and began firing as Pickett continued attacking. As Custer’s men gained their defensive positions the Rebel cavalry charged as the infantry advanced on the Federal right and center. Withholding their fire until the charging Rebels were close the entrenched bluecoats unleashed a lethal fire with their Spencer and Sharps carbines, throwing back the Confederate line. With 3-inch ordnance rifles providing devastating artillery support, Pickett’s attack was halted. The intense fighting then ceased, but instead of retreating or attacking Pickett remained on the field. Sheridan immediately realized that, if he could hold Pickett to his front, the Rebel general was susceptible to an attack on his left flank by Warren’s V Corps.54

Grant informed Sheridan that Warren would be in position at midnight. “Little Phil,” though, had been arguing for Horatio Wright’s VI Corps to be placed under his command. Despite these pleas Grant sent Warren, whose Corps was in the best position to destroy Pickett. By 3:00 a.m., Sheridan was seething as the V Corps was still missing. Muddy roads had slowed Warren’s movement to a crawl. When dawn broke on the 1st of April Sheridan was ready to advance, but neither his infantry support nor Pickett’s force were present. During the evening Pickett had pulled back to Five Forks, reentering the entrenchments. Unwilling to wait any longer Sheridan sent orders to Warren telling him to maneuver his infantry towards Pickett’s left flank. The aggressive horse soldier decided to advance with his cavalry, now at full strength as Custer’s third brigade arrived along with the isolated three brigades. The plan was to deploy his veteran cavalry on Pickett’s center and right flank, while Warren moved into position as the cavalry kept

Pickett's attention with dismounted skirmishing. Once V Corps was in position, a general assault would be launched destroying Pickett and turning Lee's far right flank making his position around Petersburg untenable.\(^55\) (Refer to Map L)

Leaving Crook's 2\(^{nd}\) Division at Dinwiddie, Sheridan and Merritt advanced in the morning with Devin on the right and Custer on the left. The cavalry proceeded to engage Rebel pickets, each time successfully driving them from their positions. By 2:00 p.m., all of Pickett's troops were falling into the main line of entrenchments. As the cavalry advanced dismounted Sheridan told Merritt to have his divisional commanders feint attacks along the center and right of the Rebel line until V Corps launched their assault. After V Corps engaged the Rebel left the cavalry was then to attack the Rebel line. As Merritt followed his orders, Sheridan personally marched off to observe the advance of V Corps. Not until 4:00 did Warren's infantry arrive at its position and assault the Rebel line. Once underway, Sheridan realized one division was not advancing toward their target, and he quickly moved to realign their attack. Infuriated with Warren because of his snail-like advance and poor dispositions Sheridan, using the power Grant provided him, relieved the infantryman. As Warren was being relieved his infantry breeched the Rebel left. With Pickett's left flank crumbling the cavalry, as ordered, charged the Rebel line as the sounds of battle raged to their right. Devin's dismounted troopers threw themselves forward against the Rebel entrenchments. Firing their carbines, troopers quickly scaled the Rebel positions and pursued the breaking Confederates. Farther to Devin's left Custer, mounting some of his troops, initiated a combined mounted and dismounted attack. The young, aggressive divisional commander immediately penetrated

the Rebel right flank. With Pickett's tired force now being pressured in the center and on both flanks his force disintegrated and Lee's line at Petersburg was turned.\textsuperscript{56}

As a result Lee was forced to abandon Petersburg, and within a week the Army of Northern Virginia surrendered. Wesley Merritt later wrote "The results of the day- two of the enemy's best and strongest infantry divisions, together with all his boasted cavalry broken, captured or routed - are just cause of congratulations, and the cavalry, already famous in the history of the war for the brilliancy of its success, feels proud to share with the infantry of the Army of the Potomac the glory of striking the blow that decided the fate of the Army of Northern Virginia..."\textsuperscript{57} The cavalry at Five Forks had performed brilliantly although almost suffering a serious defeat on the 31\textsuperscript{st} of March. Instead of defeat the cavalry's tactical flexibility and technologically advanced arms allowed the blue troopers to fight an impressive defensive battle against a superior infantry force. Then, following up their well-fought defensive action, these battle-tested horse soldiers fought a successful headlong attack on the center and right of Pickett's entrenched force. Five Forks illustrated how far the Federal cavalry had come since their inglorious showing at Gaines's Mill three years earlier. Benjamin Crowninshield, an officer in the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Massachusetts, later wrote about the Appomattox campaign "No one can doubt today that the final surrender at Appomattox was due very largely to the cavalry, which constantly, during those splendid days, pressed against the Confederate army in front,

\textsuperscript{56} OR, series I, vol. XLVI, pt. 1, 1104-1105, 1117, 1130; Sheridan, Personal Memoirs, volume 2, 158-159, 171; Longacre, Custer and His Wolverines, 272-273; Wittenberg, Little Phil, 119-124; Longacre, Lincoln's Cavalrymen, 327.

\textsuperscript{57} OR, series I, vol. XLVI, pt. 1, 1118.
flank, and rear; never hesitating to inquire whether the force in their way was cavalry or infantry.\textsuperscript{58}

The Union cavalry had defied every mounted maxim written before the war. Theories that cavalry could not fight dismounted, could not hold vital positions, could not defend itself against infantry, and should only use the saber were all obliterated. The once laughable Union cavalry had turned into an efficient battlefield army, which unfortunately vanished just as quickly as it appeared. Five Forks though was not the only engagement where the Union cavalry showed its superior fighting ability during April 1865. A day after the successful battle concluded, James Wilson led his mounted forces on an assault against the heavily fortified and defended Rebel city of Selma, Alabama.

On April 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 1865, two divisions of cavalry, led the by the twenty-seven year old Major General James Wilson approached the fortified military town of Selma. By 4:00 p.m., this cavalry force, one historian labeling it an invading army, found itself confronting a dense line of fortifications held by militia, and the battle-hardened soldiers of Nathan Bedford Forrest's cavalry.\textsuperscript{59} The city of Selma, located along the banks of the Alabama River, was one of the last important military manufacturing centers of the Confederacy. In February, General Grant as part of his final offensive to destroy the Rebellion devised a strike aimed at Mobile and southern Alabama. To relieve some of the pressure on this invasion Grant ordered General George Thomas, the victor at Nashville, to send a cavalry expedition into northern Alabama. Their mission was to destroy the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[58] Crowninshield, "Cavalry in Virginia During the War of Rebellion," 22.
\end{footnotes}
munitions complex at Selma and Tuscaloosa. After being chosen by Thomas to lead this mounted army, Wilson proceeded to spend the next month remounting his horse soldiers and arming them with Spencer carbines. The persistent youngster persuaded regiments not part of the raid, but possessing Spencers, into giving their arms to units tabbed for the invasion. Requests were sent to ordnance officials asking Spencer shipments be sent to local depots so regiments not armed with these firearms could be. Wilson’s hard work at reequipping his cavalry resulted in the overwhelming arming of his soldiers, with the exception of the 4th U.S., with Spencer carbines.

Approximately 14,000 heavily armed troopers, of whom 1,500 were dismounted and acting as train escorts, began the move towards Selma on the 22nd of March. Wilson marched on three different routes, hoping to confuse Forrest about his objective. By the first day of April Wilson entered the town of Plantersville, a day’s march from Selma. While his troops rested, the aggressive cavalry officer benefited from some good luck as an English engineer, who helped erect the fortifications around Selma, surrendered to General Emory Upton, commander of the 4th Division. Providing Wilson a detailed sketch of Selma’s defenses the general now believed he could carry the heavily defended city with his dismounted cavalry. Wilson led a personal reconnaissance of the entrenchments that evening, and found the Englishman’s sketch was accurate. The next morning the march began as General Eli Long’s 2nd Division, consisting of the veteran


Lightning Brigade and Saber Brigade, led the advance. By mid-afternoon the cavalry reached Selma\(^63\) (Refer to Map M)

Facing the Federal force were 6,000 cavalrymen and militia under the command of Nathan Forrest. Wilson, Emory, and Long had decided on a battle plan before reaching the town. Long’s 2\(^{nd}\) Division would dismount northwest of the city. Meanwhile, Emory would move farther east, cross a swamp, dismount and attack the entrenchments from the north. By 4:00 p.m. Long was ready to fight with Oliver Miller’s Lightning Brigade and Minty’s troopers, connected to their left. To signal the assault one round from a horse artillery battery was to be fired. Unfortunately, as so often happens in war, the original plan was aborted when the mule train was attacked by Rebel cavalry. Already two regiments short of a full force, Long redeployed the 4\(^{th}\) Michigan to the rear along with four companies of the 98\(^{th}\) Illinois. With pressure mounting Long ordered his soldiers forward without waiting for the artillery signal, fearing the Rebel attack would prevent the Federal assault.\(^64\)

Awaiting the two Federal brigades were 1,500 dismounted cavalry under General Frank Armstrong. Not only did the Union cavalrymen endure a heavy concentration of artillery and musket fire before reaching the eight foot high parapets, but they had to circumvent a number of other obstacles. At the base of the first line of Rebel entrenchments was a ditch five feet deep and four feet wide, filled with water and wooden stakes. Before reaching the water-filled ditch troopers had to cross a field,

\(^63\) OR, series I, vol. XLIX, pt. 1, 359; Keenan, Wilson’s Cavalry Corps, 168; Longacre, From Union Stars to Top Hat, 206.

\(^64\) OR, series I, vol. XLIX, pt. 1, 360, 438, 447; Sunderland, Wilder’s Lightning Brigade, 203-205; Longacre, From Union Stars to Top Hat, 206-207; Keenan, Wilson’s Cavalry Corps, 170; Jones, Yankee Blitzkrieg, 86-87.
approximately six hundred yards long of which the final two hundred was covered with wire cages and torpedoes. The Selma defenses were vast, dense, and deadly.  

Already short three plus regiments and leaving their horse holders behind, a force of 1,550 dismounted troopers began streaming towards the Rebel works. As the blue horse soldiers emerged General Long recalled that at six hundred yards a “...rapid and destructive fire of musketry and artillery...” was unleashed. Undeterred, the veteran troops of Hoover’s Gap and Chickamauga withstood the hail of lead. Withholding their fire the soldiers grimly moved forward, until coming within yards of the Rebel position when they raised their Spencers and delivered a deadly response. With blue soldiers firing away, others charged into the water removing the wooden stakes and climbing the eight foot high earthwork. As men trudged up the steep defenses a melee ensued. Soon the Rebel cavalrmen broke and a retreat ensued.

Further to the north Emory, hearing the roar of gunfire, realized that Long had attacked before the signal was given. Without hesitating he ordered his dismounted troopers forward. Just like Long’s men the soldiers of the 4th Division captured the first line of Rebel fortifications. With Rebels streaming to the rear, Wilson personally led a mounted charge with the 4th U.S. as horse batteries galloped forward, unlimbered, and began firing canister and shrapnel. Long’s division, despite suffering twenty percent casualties, kept pushing forward, charging the uncompleted interior entrenchments. They were soon joined by Emory and Wilson. Unable to halt the tide of the Federal advance,

65 Chaffee, “James Harrison Wilson”, 286; Sunderland, Wilder’s Lightning Brigade, 205-206; Keenan, Wilson’s Cavalry Corps, 169; Longacre, From Union Stars to Top Hat, 206; Jones, Yankee Blitzkrieg, 87.

the Rebels broke from their secondary entrenchments, and were in complete retreat. Forrest was able to escape the Union onslaught, but Selma fell. The entire battle lasted twenty-five minutes.67

Selma, although extremely short in duration when compared to the other case studies, was a decisive battle. Forrest’s cavalry had been destroyed, and the Confederacy’s last major industrial center had been captured. The engagement provides an excellent example illustrating how far the Union cavalry had advanced. Using overwhelming firepower and determination, the dismounted troopers were able to attack a heavily fortified position held by a similar number of soldiers routing them completely. During the American Civil War a ratio of three to one was determined to be the proper amount of attackers to defenders when an entrenched position had to be taken.68 At Selma the ratio equaled one to one in Long’s sector. The increased rates of fire the Spencers produced provided the Federal cavalrymen with an advantage greater than what a three to one numerical superiority would have. Wilson later recalled “I regard the capture of Selma the most remarkable achievement in the history of modern cavalry, and once admirably illustrative of its new powers and tendencies.”69

Five Forks and Selma both illustrate the tactical flexibility of the Union cavalry by 1865. Federal cavalrymen were able to produce a volume of fire more destructive than that of infantry, while maintaining their role as mounted fighters with the saber in hand. The Union cavalry had proven it was more than traditional cavalry or mounted infantry.


With technologically advanced firearms at their disposal, battle-tested cavalry officers adopted tactics that took advantages of their equipment’s strength. No longer was the cavalry bound to a single tradition. Through trial and error, the Union cavalry developed into a mounted force that could fight an enemy under any circumstances. With the ability to produce a high rate of fire the cavalry was no longer an auxiliary arm of the army, but arguably the first elite force within the United States military. By combining the power of infantry with the mobility and striking power of cavalry the Federal mounted force had become something never seen on the battlefield before. Their evolution, from relying on rigid European theory to adopting tactical flexibility was an amazing feat. The foundation for this tactical achievement is due to the procurement of the very best technologically advanced arms available. Had unreliable small arms remained the backbone of the Union cavalry the Federal mounted force would never have reached the heights it did. The Union cavalry was the only branch in either army that made significant tactical strides during the war by taking advantage of the modern breechloaders and repeaters available. As a result the Yankee cavalry became an unrivaled offensive force.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

As the last vestiges of the Confederacy surrendered during the spring of 1865, the Federal cavalry achieved a tactical height few other mounted force in history had ever attained. Union officers eventually came to realize the advantages of breech-loading and repeating arms, and how these new weapons provided a distinct battlefield advantage. With young officers unwilling to rely solely on traditional tactical concepts, the use of dismounted action with technologically advanced arms was perfected. As tactics were honed and better arms procured, the cavalry, once mocked and ridiculed, quickly became the preeminent force on the Civil War battlefield. By the end of the war the Federal cavalry could accomplish any given mission. Officers like Sheridan, Wilson, Merritt, Custer, Long and Minty turned their men into multifaceted soldiers. It no longer mattered if the cavalry was fighting on the offensive or defensive, confronting infantry or cavalry, attacking an entrenched position or fighting behind breastworks. The Federal cavalry, in both the east and west, had evolved to a point where they more than a supporting force, but independent armies that could achieve great results.

The cavalry’s foundation was built upon the procurement of technologically advanced firearms. Without Spencer repeaters and Sharps carbines filling the ranks the cavalry’s growth would have been considerably stunted. These firearms not only provided a volume of fire that could not be equaled, but also instilled individual troopers with a confidence that less reliable carbines could not. General James Wilson, the most outspoken proponent of the Spencer carbine, consistently cited the great advantages this
weapon provided. Writing in late 1864, A.B. Dyer, chief of the Ordnance Department, reported that the war proved breech-loaders were superior to muzzle-loading rifles, and the entire military should adopt them as the standard arm.\(^1\) Even General Sherman, a critic of the cavalry throughout the war, stated in his memoirs that the cavalry made important strides when armed with the Spencer and Sharps carbine.\(^2\)

The presence of reliable, fast-firing carbines allowed the cavalry to develop a sense of tactical flexibility as officers realized the advantages of dismounted fighting. Troopers could now dismount and fight like infantry to hold or gain vital positions, while maintaining their traditional mounted role to follow up victory with a pursuit or by outflanking an enemy. By possessing excellent firearms the cavalry expanded its combat abilities, resulting in a force that challenged and broke all conventional precepts about the mounted role in war.

Although the American cavalry was never deployed again in terms of sheer numbers after the war, the lessons learned were never relinquished by regular officers. Combat never left their lives. Experienced regular officers and troopers were immediately returned to the frontier, fighting their historical enemy the Native Americans. By 1866, as hostilities between the government and tribes escalated Congress enlarged the size of the cavalry to ten regiments, a number lasting until the Spanish American War.\(^3\) As the cavalry battled various tribes out west, soldiers continued implementing tactics used during the Civil War. The experience of the Federal cavalry finally established a mounted

\(^1\)OR's, series III, vol. I, pt. II, 971.


tradition within the United States military. This tradition was further enhanced when the *Cavalry Journal* appeared in 1888, and subsequent debates concerning the evolving role of firearms and tactics were discussed.

With debates raging amongst the officer corps concerning the types of arms soldiers should carry and the tactics they should use one constant theme remained, every officer realized the advantages of both mounted and dismounted combat. Although some officers, like Wilson, would declare that the war had proven the saber was no longer a viable weapon, others argued that troopers should be armed with numerous pistols, while some believed that the cavalry should evolve into a mounted infantry force. Despite the debates most officers realized that the cavalry was best served when it could act decisively using all forms of combat. One caution many officers urged was not to rely solely on dismounted combat, while neglecting or disregarding the cavalry’s mounted role. Officers continued to argue that, although the war showed the importance of possessing good firearms and fighting dismounted, the mounted charge with saber in hand was still viable. The war had proven the advantages of tactical flexibility because, without it, cavalry would then become one dimensional and vulnerable.

Unfortunately for the soldiers in blue their accomplishments would merit little consideration outside the United States. In Europe the American Civil War was generally neglected as a conflict worthy of study, although foreign observers did travel with

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Federal and Confederate armies. The achievements of the Union and Confederate mounted forces were dismissed as the work of mounted infantry, not proper cavalry. For Europe the reliance on shock tactics would continue, despite the bloody experience of America’s war. It would take decades for most of traditional Europe to realize the importance of providing mounted soldiers with good firearms, while preaching tactical flexibility.

The arguments vary as to why Europe neglected America’s war as a conflict worthy of study. Some argue the reason lay in Europe’s intellectual hubris, believing they were experts at waging war while American’s were novices. Others believe that since Europe recently experienced modern warfare (The War of Italian Unification in 1859, the Danish-Prussian War in 1864, the Austro-Prussian war of 1866, and the Franco-Prussian was of 1870-1871) those lessons were more valuable than studying the American conflict. Of the two interpretations the most plausible reason probably lay in the middle, especially in regards to the study of cavalry operations and tactics. The Europeans never gave due credit to the successful mounted operations of the Federal cavalry. They always termed the Union cavalry as mounted infantry because of their propensity to engage in dismounted action. Unwilling to acknowledge the mounted conduct of Federal cavalryman, or the evolving technological advances on the battlefield Europeans, for the most part, remained content with retaining their time honored traditions and tactics. A British cavalry officer Major General Michael Smith writing in 1868 stated the he still

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believed "...an assault of well-organized body of cavalry in good order will carry everything before it, more particularly if preceded by the immediate action of artillery."\textsuperscript{7}

After a disgraceful performance during the war with Austria in 1866, the Prussian chief of staff Helmuth Von Moltke overhauled his cavalry. Dissolving most of his heavy regiments and assigning his cavalry the mission of vigorously scouting the enemy the Prussians still did not practice dismounted action. Instead of massing his mounted forces for epic and reckless saber charges the cavalry were instead dispersed in order to gain intelligence about the enemy’s strength and disposition. The cavalry was no longer a combat arm, but more of a screening and reconnaissance force.\textsuperscript{8} While the Prussians reorganized their cavalry the French remained idle, maintaining their large cavalry divisions and heavy cuirassier regiments for the purpose of shock warfare. Both sides remained unwilling to bow to the changing battlefield, which made it necessary for the cavalry to carry good carbines and engage in dismounted actions when necessary. Instead, the French strengthened their armor plating, while the Prussians deployed their troops in small numbers, severely reducing their combat potential.\textsuperscript{9} During the short Franco-Prussian War the French cavalry destroyed itself by making foolhardy charges into the ranks of unbroken infantry, which was armed with the older, but still effective, needle-gun. The Prussian cavalry also charged French infantry, armed with the advanced


Chassepot rifle, resulting in heavy casualties. The war once again illustrated the folly of shock tactics in an age of new weapons and entrenchment.

With the Franco-Prussian War finally settling the argument whether cavalry could still rely solely on the mounted charge, Europe slowly moved towards accepting dismounted action as an acceptable form of combat. By 1881, the Germans accepted dismounted action as a necessary component in war. Writing a tactical manual, Major-General Carl Von Schmidt stated "Independent and successful action of cavalry divisions is not conceivable unless such cavalry is capable of maintaining a combat with firearms, offensive of defensive." By the late 1890s, and early 1900s, the cavalry hierarchy in Europe finally accepted that mounted soldiers must fight dismounted if they wished to retain their position. Although officers feared becoming mounted infantry there was a begrudging acceptance that arming troopers with excellent carbines, while promoting marksmanship and dismounted tactics, were necessary steps forward. Finally, although never recognizing it, the American mounted experience did affect Europe's changing cavalry tactics.

The Federal cavalry from 1861, to 1865, experienced an incredible evolution. Unwilling to remain confined to older tactical theories, young, aggressive cavalry officers saw the advantages of modern firearms, and successfully adopted their tactics as a result. Maximizing their firepower capabilities, the Federal cavalry achieved a tactical flexibility that allowed it to engage in any type of combat after 1863. The cavalry's defensive

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actions at Gettysburg and Chickamauga illustrate their ability to stand up to good infantry. The offensive actions at Hoover's Gap, Yellow Tavern and Trevilian Station show the independent ability of the cavalry to seize vital positions and defeat their Rebel adversaries. Nashville, Five Forks and Selma show both the cavalry's defensive and offensive prowess. Not only could they hold infantry and cavalry at bay, with little or no infantry support, but they could successfully attack an entrenched enemy.

The Federal cavalry made the greatest tactical strides of any arm, on either side, during the war. Utilizing modern firearms the Federal cavalry became the preeminent striking force in the world. It possessed the firepower to engage in any type of combat situation, while maintaining the ability to fight mounted. The cavalry's mobility allowed for independent actions, the seizure of vital road networks and towns, raids on supply and communication lines, and the holding of strategic points. U.S. Grant, the great-grandson of the former Civil War hero and President declared Sheridan's cavalry was the precursor of the modern armored corps. Similar to tank armies during the Second World War, the Federal cavalry became a lethal battlefield force by combining speed, firepower, and shock. Unfortunately, its superiority was short lived. As mounted forces in the east and west were making their mark in military history the war suddenly ended. The Federal cavalry's rise ended just as quickly as it began. What remains evident is that during those last three years, a mounted force, unmatched in terms of power and celerity was born. The Federal cavalry proved to be an ideal type of mounted force during a period of military history when technological advances were severely altering the horse's role in war.

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APPENDIX

Map A:
The Battle of Gaines's Mill
June 27th, 1862

Map B
Engagement at Booneville, Mississippi
July 1st, 1862

Legend
- = Union Cavalry
- = Rebel Cavalry
X = Regiment

Map drawn from author's own readings of the sources.
Map C
Battle of Hoover’s Gap
June, 24th 1863

Map based upon Glen Sunderland’s sketch in *Wilder’s Lightning Brigade*, 38.
Map D
Battle of Brandy Station
June 9th, 1863: Battle lines during the afternoon

Legend
1 = Union Cavalry
2 = Union Infantry
3 = Rebel Cavalry
4 = Artillery
X = Regiment

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Map E
Battle of Gettysburg
June, 1st 1863: Gamble’s Fight

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Map F
Battle of Gettysburg
July 3, 1863: Cavalry Battle

Map based upon sketches in Daniel Murphy's "Slashing Sabers at Rummel Farm," 40.
Map G
Battle of Chickamauga
September 19\textsuperscript{th}, 1863: Wilder's counter-attacks\textsuperscript{7}

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\textsuperscript{7}Peter Cozzens. \textit{This Terrible Sound: The Battle of Chickamauga.} (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1992), 209.
Map H
Battle of Yellow Tavern
May 12th, 1864

Map based upon sketches in Edward Longacre's *Custer and His Wolverines*, 212.
Map I
Battle of Trevilian Station
June 11th, 1864

Legend:
- = Union Cavalry
- = Rebel Cavalry
X = Regiment
XX = Brigade

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*Longacre, Custer and His Wolverines, 231.*
Map J

Battle of Nashville
December 15th & 16th, 1864: Wilson’s cavalry

[Map of the Battle of Nashville with notes and labels]

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Map K
Battle of Dinwiddie Courthouse
March 31st, 1865

Map L
Battle of Five Forks
April 1st, 1865

Legend
- = Union Cavalry
= Union Infantry
- = Rebel Cavalry
- = Rebel Infantry

12Official Military Atlas of the Civil War, 177.
Map M
Battle of Selma
April 2nd, 1865

Legend
- Union Cavalry
- Rebel Cavalry
- Rebel Infantry
- Artillery
- Regiment

13Jones, *Yankee Blitzkrieg*, 77.
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