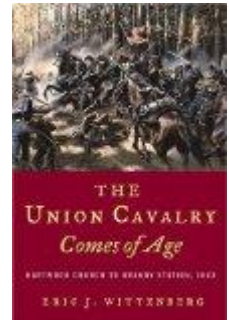


Eric J. Wittenberg. *The Union Cavalry Comes of Age: Hartwood Church to Brandy Station, 1863.* C.: Brassey's, Inc., 2003. xvii + 388 pp. \$21.95, paper, ISBN 978-1-57488-650-4.



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Skirmishes into Battles: Evolving the Federal Cavalry

The American Civil War has yielded perhaps the most robust body of literature in United States history, and today's authors often struggle to find a nugget of fresh material. Eric J. Wittenberg is no exception. As a respected cavalry historian who has produced several excellent books, including *Gettysburg's Forgotten Cavalry Actions* (1998), he has attempted to rework conventional wisdom in his most recent effort, *The Union Cavalry Comes of Age*. Contesting the long-held assumption that the Gettysburg Campaign in the summer of 1863 was the "coming out party" for Federal horse soldiers, he instead argues that "the Army of the Potomac's cavalry turned the corner and became a powerful and effective force during the winter and spring 1863, beginning with Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker's formation of the Cavalry Corps in February" (p. xiii). He further ventures that Maj. Gen. George Stoneman, Jr. and Brig. Gen. William Woods Averell "played major roles in the development of the powerful Union cavalry force, and both have been denied the recognition they rightly deserve for their contributions" (p. xiv). Tactical analyses and

narratives of battle, as well as anecdotes from archival sources, period newspapers, memoirs, and published material, form the framework for the thesis. Well-researched and carefully detailed, this book has much to offer those who desire a snapshot of the events and people who built the Union cavalry from February to June 1863. Its fault, however, lies in placing too much weight on five months of a four-year war in an attempt to create a fresh approach to a much-covered topic.

The first chapter explores the formation of the Cavalry Corps, and sets the stage with Wittenberg's interpretation of the officers' personalities. Stoneman, of course, emerges as a quasi-hero of the political machinations surrounding Hooker's General Orders Number 6. He is a "career horse soldier," "crusty and hardbitten," who "served with distinction in the Indian and Mexican wars" (p. 14). In contrast, Alfred Pleasonton is a "con- niver, a manipulator, a man desperate to advance his own cause," who "swaggered like a bantam rooster" (p. 15). Benjamin Davis, Thomas Devin, William Averell, Alfred Duffie, Luigi Palma di Ces-

nola, among others, are also placed in context. Wittenberg situates his defense of Averell in the political sphere: "Averell's personality mirrored that of ... Maj. Gen. George B. McClellan, a trait that cost him dearly. Like McClellan, Averell was a Democrat. Averell did not trust politicians, and he certainly did not trust the Republican administration, whose bungling he blamed for the war. His haughtiness greatly hindered his career in the highly politicized environment of the Army of the Potomac" (p. 19). This chapter is an excellent resource for biographical information about the officers of the new Cavalry Corps.

The next eight chapters each focus on a skirmish, raid, or battle. Beginning with the Union humiliation at the Battle of Hartwood Church in February 1863, these short tactical narratives illustrate the mistakes, improvements, and conditions of the different cavalry regiments as they gained experience through the winter and spring. Wittenberg places a heavy emphasis on the St. Patrick's Day Battle of Kelly's Ford, stating that it "worked marvels for the morale of the blue-clad horse soldiers" (p. 99). The author views these battlefield losses as teaching points, but fails to convince the reader that they were turning points of vital resonance and greater impact than the Gettysburg Campaign. Although the book wishes to claim for General Averell a prominent place in the history of the cavalry, the explanation of his actions at Kelly's Ford simply uphold consensus about his dilatory leadership. Wittenberg admits, "Averell crossed the Rappahannock with a force nearly three times the size of Fitz Lee's. The enemy found him ... but Averell failed to defeat Lee's force in detail.... Averell contentedly remained on the defensive, ceding the initiative to Fitz Lee" (p. 99). "The critical question," according to Wittenberg, "was whether Averell would learn anything from his experiences on March 17" (p. 105). If you believe Wittenberg's thesis, you might discern a redemption of sorts in Averell's participation in Stoneman's raid, but the evidence is not very convincing. Despite the assertion that "in his zeal to

find scapegoats for the disaster that befell him at Chancellorsville, Hooker directed his wrath at the unfortunate Averell," even Wittenberg's gentle critiques of Averell reveal his incompetence more than his capabilities (p. 189).

Wittenberg continues his discussion with overviews of Stoneman's Raid, the skirmish at Alsop's field, the cavalry charges at Chancellorsville, and the Battle of Brandy Station. Here Wittenberg reshuffles the deck by placing Brandy Station at the end of the winter and spring raids, versus at the beginning of the Gettysburg Campaign. By reversing the context of this battle, Wittenberg skillfully supports his idea that the turning point for the Union cavalry came prior to June 1863.

Little fault can be found with Wittenberg's basic argument, but in his attempt to eke something new out of much-mined material, he has given greater weight to these events and people than they may actually deserve. Historians will certainly debate the placement of Stoneman, Averell, and Kelly's Ford at the center of the Federal cavalry's success, but will likely agree that the raids and skirmishes of spring 1863 were crucial to the evolution of an effective fighting force. This thesis is not as grand as the book jacket suggests; it does not really "debunk myths" or "set the record straight." It does, however, place a new emphasis on smaller, earlier skirmishes, and smaller, earlier personalities. The historical place of Stoneman and Averell has been subsumed both by their own failures and the more dynamic, aggressive, and successful leadership of later generals such as Pleasonton, Sheridan, Custer, Merritt, Farnsworth, and Torbert. Likewise, the significance of the small Battle of Kelly's Ford in March 1863 has been undermined by the size and tactical impact of the Gettysburg Campaign in June and July of 1863. Wittenberg does an excellent job focusing on the early evolution of the Union cavalry, and by ending his narrative at Brandy Station, he success-

fully avoids the later events that weaken his argument.

This book is excellent for those who seek a composite picture of the Union Cavalry prior to Gettysburg. It provides both a top-down and bottom-up perspective, utilizing the words of officers and enlisted troopers to describe events as they unfold. A conscious effort is made to concentrate on the lesser-known leaders (like Alfred Duffie and Luigi Palma di Cesnola) and emphasize their role in the development and tactical effectiveness of the Cavalry Corps. To his great credit, Wittenberg seeks new anecdotal sources in the archives, and places the standards, such as James Kidd, in the background. The text includes photographs and basic maps to support the narrative. Interesting and informative for both the cavalry specialist and the general Civil War enthusiast, *The Union Cavalry Comes of Age* will surely provoke readers to choose sides in the debate.

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