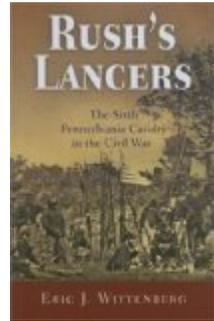


Eric J. Wittenberg. *Rush's Lancers: The Sixth Pennsylvania Cavalry in the Civil War*. Yardley: Westholme Publishing, 2007. xi + 316 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-59416-032-5.

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A Cavalry Regiment's Ride through the Civil War

Regimental histories afford the historian the opportunity to bring the past to life through the shared experience of men in military service. Using the intimate lens of the individual like a biographer while tracing the collective story of the unit and connecting it to context offers new insights and perspectives on the issues and questions raised in works of broader scope. In *Rush's Lancers: The Sixth Pennsylvania Cavalry in the Civil War*, attorney Eric J. Wittenberg argues that the regiment overcame initial obstacles and obsolete weaponry with superb training and brave fighting that earned it the reputation as one of the finest cavalry units of the war.

Wittenberg is the author of many other books about the Civil War cavalry, including several studies of the role of horse soldiers in the Gettysburg campaign *Protecting the Flanks: The Battles for Brinkerhoff's Ridge and East Cavalry Field, Battle of Gettysburg, July 2-3, 1863* (2002), *Gettysburg's Forgotten Cavalry Actions* (1998), and a biography of Philip Sheridan *Little Phil: A Reassessment of the Civil War Leadership of Gen. Philip H. Sheridan* (2005). In researching battles and campaigns, he repeatedly came back to the Sixth Pennsylvania and this added to an interest that had been kindled when he was a boy growing up in a town from which one of the regiment's companies had come. His passion for the subject and his expertise on cavalry make Wittenberg the ideal writer for a regimental history.

The regiment initially organized as Lancers when they mustered in fall 1861, and the men trained hard in learning to use the long spears that had proven so

formidable in past conflicts. Considered obsolete by the 1860s, the lance still enjoyed many supporters, including George B. McClellan, who had studied the weapon's use in Europe and urged Colonel Richard Henry Rush to adopt it for his new unit. The regiment's limited use of the lance, complete with red pennons to flutter in the breeze, soon gave way to the carbine. Despite losing the distinctive arms that had given them their identity, the unit kept its name.

That name came to mean something in the Union Army. By the end of the war, the Sixth Pennsylvania had earned respect and become a tough, hard-fighting regiment. But it was not an easy road. Most of the officers hailed from the elite families of Philadelphia, the unit was commanded by the grandson of Dr. Benjamin Rush, while others pointed to famous ancestors who had led or fought in the American Revolution. At the same time, the rank and file of the regiment was made up of young men from the lower ranks of society, including many from Philadelphia's working class. Class tensions threatened to cause real problems early on, but when Philadelphia newspapers published accounts about the few officers whose aristocratic ways grated on the enlisted men, the tensions eased. Nationalism combined with training and the personality of fine officers to overcome the dangers of class conflict in the regiment.

The real test came, of course, on the battlefield. Time after time, the Lancers rode into combat. From minor skirmishes and reconnaissance missions to raids and actions on the flanks of major battles, even full-scale cav-

alry clashes, the Sixth Pennsylvania found itself in action. In between came the tedious monotony of camp life and the inevitable hardships caused by the weather, the supply situation, and separation from home and family. Sometimes the enemy proved less dangerous than epidemics. As the months rolled into years, the Lancers developed into veterans and became a reliable unit upon whom the generals could count.

Wittenberg rightly places the regiment's history within the story of the brigade and always reminds his readers of the broader context of the war. Mistakes in decision making at the highest rank are brought to awful reality at the company, squad, and even individual levels. Familiar battles like Gettysburg are seen from the perspective of the cavalry, a view that sheds new light on the whole campaign. Instead of the usual recounting of the battle, the reader is taken to places on the flanks and rides along with the Sixth Pennsylvania as the Confederates retreat. The great cavalry battle at Brandy Station receives a well-deserved chapter as does Sheridan's 1864 Shenandoah Valley campaign. Success followed failure, disappointment followed victory. The regiment's participation in the successful Stoneman Raid was part of the campaign that led to General Joseph Hooker's defeat at Chancellorsville. Gettysburg was followed by disappointing results during Robert E. Lee's retreat. Embarrassments gave way to proud victories as the Union cavalry learned to hold its own against its counterpart, and then began to defeat the Southern cavaliers.

Throughout the book, the reader becomes familiar with the individuals whose writings make up the author's

main sources. Some of the men died, others were transferred, others were promoted, many reenlisted, and other new faces joined up. Officers and enlisted men, surgeons and chaplains are all given a voice. Some of them had the famous names of elite families, some were related to famous commanders (George Meade Jr. is the obvious example), some were wealthy lawyers, some were poor farmers, and some came from the wrong side of town. But they served together and Wittenberg allows a broad cross section of them to speak about their experiences. They served under famous generals: McClellan, Meade, John Buford, Alfred Pleasanton, George Custer, Sheridan, and Ulysses Grant. They fought against famous generals: Lee, J. E. B. Stuart, and Thomas Jackson, to name three. Wittenberg's final chapter, "Requiem," provides the stories of what happened to many of the familiar faces and brings them together in reunion celebrations.

At times, Wittenberg displays the storyteller's gift and the reader is drawn into the narrative. It is, after all, an action packed tale. But he sometimes includes so much detail that his prose slows to a plodding slog that reminds the reader of some of the Lancers' miserable rides through terrible weather. This makes the book less attractive for use in the classroom and will make it less appealing to general readers. But, it is a must read for those interested in the cavalry, buffs, readers in the Philadelphia area, and specialists in Civil War history. The book is well researched, generally well written, and the author's argument is persuasive. In the end, Wittenberg has provided a very capable regimental history that deserves a place on the shelf alongside other such studies.

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