

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

David Evans. *Sherman's Horsemen: Union Cavalry Operations in the Atlanta Campaign*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996. xxxvi + 645 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-253-32963-9.

Reviewed by T. R. Brereton (Georgetown College, Georgetown, Kentucky)

Published on H-CivWar (March, 1997)

Over the last ten years or so, the field of Civil War history has seen an increasing number of well-written and superbly documented battle studies. In the spirit of Bruce Catton, these works extensively use contemporary diaries, letters, and memoirs to achieve a "you-are-there" degree of realism, while giving voice to individual combatants who might not otherwise be heard. David Evans's *Sherman's Horsemen* adds yet another chapter to this welcome trend.

Union cavalry was decisive from the very start of the Atlanta campaign. It helped oust Joseph E. Johnston from successive southward positions along the Western & Atlantic Railroad, enabled William T. Sherman to secure a permanent position across the Chattahoochee River and, shortly thereafter, Peachtree Creek. As Sherman descended upon Atlanta itself, he turned again to mounted troops to isolate its defenders by severing rail communications to the city. As Evans points out, Sherman, contrary to Ulysses S. Grant's explicit order that Johnston's army be directly engaged and destroyed, had become transfixed instead with capturing Atlanta. To that end, Sherman systematically maneuvered his cavalry in a series of raids that he hoped would compel Johnston, and later John Bell Hood, to evacuate the city, upon which he could take Atlanta in triumph. The first of these raids, against the Atlanta & West Point Railroad connecting Atlanta to Montgomery, Alabama, brought hope that Sherman's strategy of logistics might work. Under Lovell H. Rousseau, Union horsemen rode 240 miles over five days and tore up about thirty miles of track. A second raid, under Kenner D. Garrard, was conducted against the Georgia Railroad and resulted in the destruction of a 550-foot trestle over the Yellow River.

It was during these raids that Georgians got their first taste of the sort of warfare Sherman later unleashed on his march to the sea. In addition to their ultimate purpose, Union troopers were admonished to destroy anything of military value that lay in their path; as Evans puts it, their task was to "rifle, ransack and burn" (p. 122).

Railroad depots, cotton bales and gins, storehouses, factories, and rolling stock were put to the torch. Cavalrymen liberally availed themselves of the food, horses, and personal belongings of local citizens but, in general, were better behaved than the Union hordes that later swept over the Georgia countryside. Evans is careful to note the panic and shock that consumed the towns through which the Yankees advanced. During Rousseau's raid into Alabama, a confused local citizen, informed that his mules were being commandeered, exclaimed, "Great God! Is it possible? Are these Yanks? Who ever supposed they would come away down here in Alabama?" (p. 128). Anecdotes like these bring Evans's narrative to life.

Rousseau's and Garrard's successes convinced Sherman that a final, larger raid would finish the job of isolating Atlanta and force its evacuation. The result was disappointing. According to plan, Edward M. McCook and George Stoneman rode south from either side of Atlanta, intending to converge on the Macon & Western Railroad, which they would proceed to destroy. McCook fell behind schedule and was met instead by rebel cavalry under Joseph E. Wheeler, who chased him into Alabama. Stoneman, meanwhile, chose a route "that seemed to preclude keeping his prescribed rendezvous with McCook" (p. 294) and continued south, intent on liberating Andersonville prison. Evans notes that Stoneman has drawn the condemnation of historians for what seems an act of self-glorification, but Evans exonerates him. Stoneman's route was well chosen, but only later did he learn that physical obstacles impeded his rendezvous with McCook. In Evans's account, Stoneman had little alternative but to press on. His advance toward Andersonville was cut short by rebel resistance at Macon, forcing a retreat that was blocked by strong rebel cavalry detachments. In the battle that followed, Stoneman was forced to surrender. Evans's pardon is ultimately unconvincing, for Stoneman's actions doomed the raid that was to have resulted in the destruction of the Macon railroad. Rather than vigorously attempting to find McCook, Stoneman left him to his fate and sealed his own, preferring an objective that

did not benefit Sherman's original plan. Stoneman's only saving grace was the destruction of a 700-foot trestle over the Oconee River which carried the Central Railroad to Macon. Nonetheless, the vital Macon Railroad to Atlanta remained intact. A last attempt to sever it, led by Judson "Kill Cavalry" Kilpatrick, met with equally barren results, forcing Sherman to move his entire army around Atlanta and physically occupy the railroad. Only then was John Bell Hood, who had replaced Johnston, obliged to quit Atlanta.

While broader histories of the Atlanta campaign cover these ill-starred cavalry raids, they treat cavalry operations as part of the whole. Evans is the first writer to examine them separately and in detail. He thus provides new perspectives on the implementation of those raids and a better understanding of why they ultimately failed. In general, Evans blames the cavalry's lackluster performance on a mediocre command: "Union cavalry in the Atlanta campaign simply lacked competent, aggressive leaders" (p. 475). With the exception of Rousseau, they were boastful, indecisive, timid in battle, and tactically inept. Moreover, they grossly overestimated what cavalry could realistically achieve. Evans notes that cavalry was not the best instrument for the task it was sent to accomplish. Operating deep in enemy territory, troopers had short rations and ammunition and could not afford to linger in one place for long, having not the tools, manpower, or security to rip up large sections of track. He points out that Rousseau's 30-mile success was due only to inferior railroad construction. What was destroyed was quickly repaired by rebel engineers, while supplies could be floated across rivers where bridges had been burned. Sherman gets his share of criticism, too. He had little appreciation for the shortcomings of cavalry, and he seemed to believe that once cut, railroads would stay cut, despite the ability of Union pioneers to undo similar damage. Perhaps most damning of all is Sherman's failure to draw rebel attention away from his cavalry raids. Had he staged a serious feint anywhere around Atlanta, McCook and Stoneman might not have met their ignoble fates.

Evans is to be commended for his diligent research and vigorous writing, but two problems mar this otherwise satisfactory work. In any study of battle, partic-

ularly one, like this, that covers much geography and brings into play the actions of many small units, maps are a vital tool for the reader. The maps included are quite well drawn, but they provide no information other than landmarks, towns and railroad routes. In many instances, place names mentioned in the text are not found on any map, and it is extremely difficult to locate tactical positions as they are described in the text. Of the twenty-one maps, only four show the dispositions and directions of combat units, and none indicate the overall dispositions of the Union or Confederate armies. The reviewer experienced mounting frustration and irritation with this deficiency, and it seriously detracted from an understanding of events.

A second problem is a purely personal criticism. In works such as Evans's, which has what seems "a cast of thousands," there is the temptation to include every anecdotal detail the author has run across in the interest of providing a full account. Evans has evidently succumbed to this temptation, and it appears that he has included something from every memoir and unit history unearthed during his research. His bibliography is enormous, and the notes alone run over 100 pages. Certainly no one can fault his diligence in this regard, and it is a sign of mature scholarship and skill. The danger, however, is to obscure the forest for the trees, and on numerous occasions, particularly in his descriptions of engagements, Evans's details runneth over. When combined with inadequate maps, this tendency requires the reader to backtrack, read passages several times, and visualize where a particular unit or individual was at a given moment. Over time, the repeated inclusion of minutiae becomes tedious. To be fair, however, Evans gives a true sense of the exhilaration, panic, fatigue and triumph that all soldiers experience in combat, and his is a tale well told. *Sherman's Horsemen* is the definitive work on the subject and a sign that Civil War scholarship is far from exhausting its subject.

Copyright (c) 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and to the list. For other permission, please contact h-net@h-net.msu.edu. [The book review editor for H-CivWar is Daniel E. Sutherland <dsutherl@comp.uark.edu>.]

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
<http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl>.

Citation: T. R. Brereton. Review of Evans, David, *Sherman's Horsemen: Union Cavalry Operations in the Atlanta Campaign*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. March, 1997.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=871>

Copyright © 1997 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.