



HARPERS FERRY

CIVIL WAR ROUND TABLE

PO BOX 1079, HARPERS FERRY, WV 25425

Vol. 27 April 2008 No. 8

- DATE:** Wednesday, April 9th, 2008
- TIME:** 7:00 PM - CWRT Members Dinner
(Dinner Reservations Required)
- 8:00 Speaker's Presentation and Book Raffle
(Open to the Public)
- PLACE:** Quality Hotel Conference Center (Formerly the
Cliffside, located on the east side of RT 340, .5 miles west
of the traffic light at the entrance to Harpers Ferry National Park)
- SPEAKER:** Steve French
- SUBJECT:** The Battle of Martinsburg June 14, 1863

The Subject:

Today, the Battle of Martinsburg ranks as one of the most insignificant and least remembered fights of the Gettysburg Campaign. Overshadowed by the Second Battle of Winchester, fought that same day, the number of casualties in the clash was so low that few students of the campaign have taken the time to study the all-day skirmish in depth. At the time, however, the unnecessary loss of five cannons by the Union defenders during their flight from overwhelming Rebel numbers that evening caused President Lincoln to include an examination of the retreat from Martinsburg in an order from the War Department calling for a Court of Inquiry to investigate the evacuation of Winchester.

The Speaker:

Steve French is a graduate of Shepherd College and teaches history at Martinsburg South Middle School. He is the author of "The Jones-Imboden Raid against the B&O Railroad in Rowlesburg, Va." and the soon-to-be-released "I thank God the Hour has come: Imboden's Brigade in the Gettysburg Campaign." He is also the editor of "Four Years Along the Tihance: The Private Diary of Elisha Manor," a book that chronicles the Civil War years in the Hedgesville area. His numerous articles have appeared in the Washington Times, Gettysburg Magazine, North & South, Southern Cavalry Review, Maryland Cracker Barrel Magazine, and Crossfire, the magazine of the Civil War Roundtable of Great Britain. He is a contributor to Savas Publications' upcoming Gettysburg Encyclopedia.

THE MEAL

This month's dinner special is: Lamb Stew with Rice Pilaf, Seasonal Vegetable, Salad and Fudge Brownies for desert. It is available \$15.67. That includes the cost of the special of \$12.95 plus tax and 15% gratuity. Cliffside would like each of you to order on separate checks. If you do not want to eat the special, you may order something else from the menu. The hotel has requested that we provide them with the total number coming to dinner and the number of specials. Given this, reservations are required for the meal and **must be phoned in no later than Sunday April 6th** to Allison Alsdorf, at 304-535-2101 or e-mail her at alsdorf@comcast.net. You must tell us if you are coming to dinner and if you will order the special.

"If you want to see a good time, 'jine the cavalry!"

The role of the cavalry at the beginning of the Civil War was very limited. Horsemen of both armies were initially limited to patrolling and scouting, guarding supply trains and railroads, and providing escorts to generals. They were only used in battle as shock troops, a tactic which dated back to the Romans. A favorite jibe from the infantry was: "Did you ever see a dead cavalryman?" The foot soldiers believed the cavalry to be "dandies on horseback" who never saw much fighting and always had the easy life. Certainly, the dash and spirit of the more flamboyant cavalry leaders provided the newspapers with many stories of harrowing rides and gallant duels in the saddle. Southern troopers commanded by General J.E.B. Stuart had the grandest reputations of being the best horsemen, ready to ride on a raid at a moments notice or rush to the front to do battle just as the tide was beginning to turn. Of course, truth was very different from the romantic descriptions of newspapermen. Soldiering on horseback was a hard life with plenty of danger. The cavalry's military role had dramatically changed by 1863 and the armies were making use of their horse soldiers in more combat situations. Cavalry divisions were used by commanders as advance scouts and as a mobile fighting force. These new strategies culminated in the largest cavalry battle of the war fought on June 9, 1863 at Brandy Station, Virginia. Brandy Station was the opening clash of the Gettysburg Campaign.

Union troopers of General John Buford's Division opened the Battle of Gettysburg against Confederate infantry of General Heth's Division on July 1st. The cavalrymen were limited by their numbers and the moderate range of the carbines they carried, but were able to deter the Confederate skirmishers for a few hours until Union infantry arrived. While the armies did battle around Gettysburg, cavalry units skirmished in Hunterstown, Pennsylvania, and on several roads east of town.

Cavalry were dependent on fast movement so a cavalryman's first priority was care of his horse. Each cavalry regiment had a blacksmith who shod and cared for the animals in camp. On active campaign, a trooper had to look out for his own animal and care for it. If the horse was disabled, it was easier for a northern soldier to get a new mount from the herd which usually accompanied the army. Southerners brought their own mounts with them into service and woe be to the man whose horse pulled up lame or was injured. It sometimes meant the trooper became a foot soldier until another horse could be obtained. The armament of a typical cavalryman at Gettysburg included a light steel saber, a pistol and a carbine. By the time of the Battle of Gettysburg, breech loading carbines were standard issue in all Union cavalry regiments. Two regiments, the 5th and 6th Michigan Cavalry, were armed with *Spencer Repeating Rifles*, a rifle that held a seven-round magazine. The carbine version of this weapon appeared in the Army of the Potomac after Gettysburg and made a great difference in firepower. On the cavalryman's saddle was strapped his baggage which included a shelter tent, blanket, poncho, saddle bags for rations and a canteen.

Confederate cavalrymen traveled lighter than their Union counterparts and were not usually armed with the more modern carbines. Short, muzzle-loading carbines were more common in southern regiments, including imports from England. Some Southern troopers preferred to leave their sabers behind and carried extra pistols instead of sabers, for close work. Southern arsenals attempted to mass produce breech loading carbines, even making copies of Union carbines made by the *Sharps Rifle Company*. Attempts at mass production of the weapon failed and southern cavalrymen relied upon a varied stock of captured and imported arms.

Cavalry regiments were composed of ten companies of 100 to 110 troopers each. There were five squadrons in a regiment, a squadron being a combination of two companies. This was later changed and the regiments were divided into three battalions. Cavalrymen could fight either mounted or on foot in a staggered skirmish line. Fighting on foot did eliminate some of the unit's firepower as one soldier was designated as a holder for four horses, including his own, while the other three troopers were detailed to the firing line.

The Army of the Potomac's Cavalry Corps, commanded by General Alfred Pleasonton, was made up of three divisions and included two brigades of *Horse Artillery*-batteries with enough horses for drivers and gunners alike. Each division had two to three brigades which either acted in concert with the remainder of the corps or acted as scouts and escorts when the army was on the move such as during the Gettysburg Campaign. The cavalry of the Army of Northern Virginia, commanded by General J.E.B. Stuart, was organized into one large division, divided into brigades, and accompanied by six batteries of horse artillery.