



HFCWRT Monthly Newsletter

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- DATE:** Wednesday, March 14th, 2018
- TIME:** Dinner 6:30 PM; Program 7:30 PM
- PLACE:** Camp Hill Methodist Church, Harpers Ferry, WV
- SPEAKER:** William J. Miller
- SUBJECT:** Decision at Tom's Brook: *George Custer, Thomas Rosser and the Joy of the Fight*

The Speaker:

William J. Miller is a writer, teacher, and preservationist. A former editor of *Civil War Magazine*, his books include *Mapping for Stonewall*, (Fletcher Platt Award) and the top-selling *Great Maps of the Civil War*. *Decision at Tom's Brook* is his ninth book on Civil War history.

The Subject

The story of the Oct. 9, 1864 Tom's Brook cavalry affair centers on two young men who had risen to prominence as soldiers: George A. Custer and Thomas L. Rosser. They

had been friends since West Point, but the war sent them down separate paths, Custer to the Union army and Rosser to the Confederacy. Each was a born warrior who took obvious joy in the exhilaration of battle. Each possessed almost all the traits of the ideal cavalryman: courage, intelligence, physical strength, inner fire. Only their judgment was questionable.

The Meal

A family-style meal of will be served at 6:30 PM prior to the program. The cost of the meal is \$15.00 per person. Reservations for the meal **must be made no later than Sunday, March 11th**, with Kevin Pawlak at 16kpawlak1829@gmail.com or 585-880-0425. The meal will consist of Corned Beef and Cabbage, Carrots, Potatoes, Irish Soda Bread, Rye Bread, Butter, Iced Tea, Coffee, & Dessert.

John S. Mosby, George A. Custer and the Front Royal Executions of 1864

In August 1864, Major General Phillip Sheridan launched a campaign to drive Confederate forces out of Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. Sheridan organized his Army of the Shenandoah as it was called, in the northern end of the valley, in the vicinity of Harper's Ferry, West Virginia. This was an area where Lieutenant Colonel John S. Mosby and his Partisan Rangers had been carrying out successful raids and guerilla operations against Union forces for a year and a half. Mosby immediately began attacking Sheridan's supply trains, cavalry detachments, and other targets of opportunity. Federal forces spent considerable time and effort to stop Mosby's Rangers, and at one point, the conflict turned vicious beyond the normal parameters of war.

On September 23rd, Captain Samuel Chapman and a force of about 120 Rangers attacked a Union Army wagon train near Front Royal, Virginia. Chapman thought the wagon train had no cavalry escort and would be an easy target. But as he divided his men into two columns for the attack, a brigade of U.S. Regular Army cavalry under the command of Colonel Charles Lowell, Jr. appeared.

Chapman's force was in danger of being trapped or destroyed, and he ordered the two columns to withdraw as quickly as possible. But Lowell attacked before the Rangers could get away. The Federals nearly surrounded the Rangers, but the southerners were able to push their way out and escape. The Union cavalry pursued and took six prisoners before ending the chase.

Lieutenant Charles McMaster of the 2nd U.S. Cavalry was one of the Federal casualties, killed by a bullet to the head. Some of the Union cavalrymen thought McMaster had been killed after he had surrendered. When the erroneous story reached the Federals in Front Royal. the Union men were outraged. Lowell's command arrived at Front Royal with the six prisoners, and the Federals called for revenge for McMaster's death.

Besides Lowell, senior officers present included Brigadier Generals Wesley Merritt and George A. Custer. In retaliation for McMaster's death, Merritt ordered the execution of the six prisoners. Though many, including Mosby himself, would blame Custer for the

executions, Lowell wrote that it was Merritt who gave the order. Years later, Mosby clarified his position. Custer and the other senior officers present made no attempt to stop the executions and went along with it, so in Mosby's view they shared responsibility for the incident. Also, some of Custer's men participated in the executions.

Three of the prisoners were taken out and shot immediately. Another prisoner, seventeen-year-old Henry Rhodes, was not a member of the Rangers, but wanted to be one. He had grabbed a horse and joined in the retreat of some of Mosby's men as they passed through Front Royal and was captured. Rhodes' mother begged for her son's life to no avail; in perhaps the most brutal event of the day, one of Custer's cavalymen shot Rhodes to death in his mother's presence.

Two other prisoners were interrogated and promised their lives would be spared in exchange for information on Mosby, but the two refused to talk. They were then executed by hanging. A sign was placed on one of the victims declaring "Such is the fate of all of Mosby's men."

When Mosby himself heard about the executions, he was furious and determined to retaliate. He proposed to General Robert E. Lee that he would execute an equal number of Custer's men for those Rangers executed by the Federals. Lee and Confederate Secretary of War James Seddon approved the proposal.

On November 6th at Rectortown, Virginia, 26 recently captured prisoners from Custer's command were informed that they were to draw lots to select seven men for execution (a seventh Ranger had been executed in a separate incident). Six men and a drummer boy made the unlucky draws; a second drawing was held to spare the drummer boy.

The unfortunate seven were taken a few miles away to an area near Berryville, Virginia, by a Ranger detachment under the command of Lieutenant Ed Thompson. Three of the seven were hanged and two were shot. The two who were shot were wounded, but not fatally. Two other prisoners managed to escape, and made it back to Union lines. A note was left on one of the hanged men that stated: "These men have been hung in retaliation for an equal number of Colonel Mosby's men, hung by order of General Custer at Front Royal. Measure for measure."

Although only three had actually been executed, Mosby believed he had accomplished his purpose. Mosby wrote a letter to Sheridan explaining what had happened and his reasons for retaliating. He declared that he would treat any men captured as prisoners of war unless more of his men were executed and he was forced to "adopt a course of policy repulsive to humanity".

There were no more executions by either side. Mosby's Rangers continued to fight in northern Virginia until the end of the war, when they disbanded and went home. Fighting continued in the Shenandoah Valley until March 2, 1865, when a Union cavalry division under General Custer defeated the last Confederate force of any size in the valley at the Battle of Waynesboro.

After the war, John S. Mosby summed up his reasoning for the retaliatory executions:

"It was not an act of revenge, but a judicial sentence to save not only the lives of my own men, but the lives of the enemy. It had that effect. I regret that fate thrust such a duty upon me; I do not regret that I faced and performed it." (Excerpted from *Iron Brigadier*, Civil War Information and Resources May 14, 2011)