

THE BOY GENERALS

George Custer, Wesley Merritt,
and the Cavalry of the Army of the Potomac,
from the Gettysburg Retreat Through the
Shenandoah Valley Campaign of 1864

Adolfo Ovies



Savas Beatie
California

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ISBN-13: 978-1-61121-617-2 (hardcover)

ISBN-13: 978-1-61121-618-9 (ebook)

Names: Ovies, Adolfo, author.

Title: *The Boy Generals: George Custer, Wesley Merritt, and the Cavalry of the Army of the Potomac* / by Adolfo Ovies.

Other titles: *George Custer, Wesley Merritt, and the Cavalry of the Army of the Potomac*

Description: El Dorado Hills, CA : Savas Beatie LLC, [2024] | Includes bibliographical references and index. | Summary: "The first installment in a remarkable trilogy that examines the strategy, tactics, and relationships of the leading Union army's mounted arm and its influence on the course of the Civil War in the Eastern Theater. This volume is a rich and satisfying study that exposes the depths of one of the most dysfunctional and influential relationships in the Army of the Potomac, and its long-lasting impact."
— Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2020039841 | ISBN 9781611216172 (hardcover) |

ISBN 9781611216189 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: United States. Army of the Potomac. Cavalry Corps—History. |

Custer, George A. (George Armstrong), 1839-1876. | Merritt, Wesley, 1834-1910. |

United States—History—Civil War, 1861-1865—Cavalry operations. | United States.

Army—Cavalry—History—Civil War 1861-1865. | Generals—United States—Biography. |

United States. Army—Biography.

Classification: LCC E470.2 .O93 2020 | DDC 355.0092/2 [B]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2020039841>

First Edition, First Printing



Savas Beatie

989 Governor Drive, Suite 102

El Dorado Hills, CA 95762

916-941-6896 / sales@savasbeatie.com / www.savasbeatie.com

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To my loving wife, Juliet. I am not only grateful for her invaluable insights and suggestions, but also for her encouragement and patience of this temperamental writer over the ten years that I have been working on this project. She has read each installment cover to cover and, in the process, has become quite an astute Civil Warrior.

Table of Contents

Foreword	vi
Preface	x
Prologue: Storms Beyond the Battlefield	xiii
Chapter 1: Beware of a Cornered Fox	1
Chapter 2: To Cross an Angry River	31
Chapter 3: They Became Warriors	59
Chapter 4: When the Stars Lose Their Luster	89
Chapter 5: Cussing the Whole Way	115
Chapter 6: "I Had Rather Die Than Be Whipped"	143
Chapter 7: It Does not Get Any Bloodier	171
Chapter 8: Never an End to the Killing Fields	195
Chapter 9: As Good as an Ass Whipping Gets	215
Chapter 10: We'uns Ain't Gonna Be Whupped Today	239
Chapter 11: There's Evil in the Lushest of Valleys	259
Chapter 12: Not Much Difference Between War and Murder	287
Epilogue: Trapped Astride the Shenandoah	303
Bibliography	313
Index	335
About the Author	

List of Maps

- Gettysburg Pursuit, July 4–6, 1863 8
- Hagerstown and Williamsport, July 6, 1863 22
- Falling Waters, July 14, 1863 43
- Bristoe Campaign, October 9–15, 1863 90
- Buckland Mills, October 19, 1863 102
- Custer-Dahlgren-Kilpatrick Raid, Feb. 28–Mar. 3, 1863 117
- Union Cavalry in the Overland Campaign, May 5–24, 1864 146
- Battle of Yellow Tavern, May 11, 1864 161
- Meadow Bridge, May 12, 1864 174
- Haw's Shop, May 28, 1864 187
- Cold Harbor, May 31, 1864 205
- Cold Harbor, June 1, 1864 210
- Sheridan's Raid, June 7–12, 1864 213
- Battle of Trevilian Station, June 11, 1864 219
- Trevilian Station, June 12, 1864 241
- The Shenandoah Valley 275
- Shenandoah Valley, Aug. 9–16, 1864 284
- Guard Hill, August 16, 1864 307

Photographs and illustrations have been distributed throughout the text for the convenience of the reader.

FOREWORD

Glory Can Take Different Paths

WHEN BRIG. GEN. ALFRED PLEASONTON took command of the Cavalry Corps in late May 1863, he continued the organizational structure of the command, put in place earlier in the year by his predecessor, Maj. Gen. George Stoneman. Not until June 11, two days after the momentous battle at Brandy Station, did Pleasonton begin to re-mold the corps to fit his vision as to who would lead the cavalry going forward. Seventeen days later, Maj. Gen. George Meade took command of the Army of the Potomac. Meade had been given the authority “to appoint to command as you may deem expedient,” and, at Pleasonton’s request, Meade asked the War Department to promote three captains, George Custer, Wesley Merritt, and Elon Farnsworth to the rank of brigadier general. Within hours, Meade issued Special Order 175, confirming their promotions, cementing Pleasonton’s vision for the cavalry, and forever linking George Custer and Wesley Merritt.

Alfred Pleasonton had begun measuring Merritt and Custer for command well before June 28, 1863. Pleasonton and Merritt had spent time together during the long journey east made by the 2nd Dragoons in the summer and fall of 1861. They had crossed paths numerous times during the Peninsula Campaign the following year, when Pleasonton commanded the re-designated 2nd Cavalry, attached to Maj. Gen. George McClellan’s headquarters, and Merritt served as an aide to Maj. Gen. Phillip St. George Cooke, commanding the Regular or Reserve Brigade. George Custer would have met Pleasonton and Merritt many times during the campaign, after he joined McClellan’s staff in late May, and he met and possibly fought alongside Pleasonton’s cavalry during the Maryland Campaign.

After a stint as an aide to Maj. Gen. Samuel Heintzelman, commanding the Defenses of Washington, Merritt, now a captain, returned to the Army of the Potomac in April 1863, as an aide to George Stoneman, commanding the Cavalry Corps. Stoneman, who had met Merritt during the Peninsula Campaign, quickly saw something in his young aide. During his raid in late April and early May, Stoneman tasked Merritt with taking 50 men and destroying bridges along the South Anna River. Detached from the main command for two days, Merritt led his men on a 100-mile march and proved himself as a leader and as an officer to be counted on.

After a long absence, Custer returned to the army in early May, too late to rejoin his regiment prior to Stoneman's Raid. Instead, he renewed his acquaintance with Pleasonton and accepted an invitation to join his staff. Immediately after replacing Stoneman at the head of the Cavalry Corps, Pleasonton took advantage of an opportunity to test Custer's mettle, as Stoneman had tested Merritt's. Joseph Hooker, commanding the army, sent a cavalry force to intercept an enemy mail delivery near Urbanna, on the Rappahannock River. Custer, at the request of Hooker and Pleasonton, accompanied the detachment, and like Merritt earlier in the month, proved himself during a brief stint in independent command. When the raiders returned, Hooker called for Pleasonton to meet with him, and he specifically directed the corps commander "to have Capt. Custer accompany you." Both senior officers seemed pleased with the affair, and Custer, who had been seeking command of the 5th Michigan Cavalry at the time, earned hearty recommendations from Hooker and Pleasonton, as well as their thanks for his efforts.

On June 10, 1863, more than 70 officers of Col. Judson Kilpatrick's brigade submitted a petition requesting his promotion to brigadier. The next day, Pleasonton sent Kilpatrick to Washington to plead his case and he sent Custer to deliver a captured battle-flag and other documents to General Hooker. Pleasonton had requested a special train to carry both men as far as Alexandria. From there, Custer took a boat and another train, both probably chartered by Pleasonton and/or Hooker, to ease his journey, while Kilpatrick continued into the capital. Hooker and Pleasonton both sought to instill youth, vigor, and aggression into the Cavalry Corps, and the corps commander had again found a way to bring Custer to the attention of the army commander.

During the fighting in the Loudoun Valley, the Reserve Brigade had fallen under the command of two disappointing commanders, and Pleasonton now saw an opportunity to do for Merritt what he had done for Custer and Kilpatrick. Seeking to stabilize command of the brigade, the corps commander asked that Merritt, who had only taken command of the 2nd U.S. Cavalry a few weeks

earlier, be promoted to brigadier and given command of the brigade. “Give me good commanders and I will give you good results,” Pleasonton promised.

Lieutenant Custer, whose contributions at Brandy Station had already been rewarded, had again gained Pleasonton’s notice in the Loudoun Valley, participating in several charges at Aldie, and again at Upperville, where Pleasonton almost certainly saw him in action. On June 23, Pleasonton gained his second star, which allowed Custer to again pin on the shoulder straps of a captain.

Five days later, on June 28, General Meade, at Pleasonton’s request, successfully petitioned the War Department to promote Merritt and Custer, along with fellow aide, Elon Farnsworth to brigadier. In less than two weeks, Pleasonton had seen the three captains, along with Judson Kilpatrick, elevated to positions of senior command within his corps, while also introducing the youthful vigor and aggression he sought. Pleasonton had carefully overseen their stunning rise to command within the Cavalry Corps, and in doing so he had, unintentionally, sowed the seeds of a rivalry between Merritt and Custer. A rivalry that, arguably, followed the men even after Custer’s death in 1876.

During the last several decades, most every author or reviewer of a new book on George Custer asks, “Why do we need another Custer book?” The question is valid, and in some cases, more valid than others. But authors willing to dig into the sources continue to find new information and new ways to present known information. Adolfo Ovies has found a new way to examine the military career of Custer and taken on a near Herculean task in the process. Intrigued by the success achieved by Wesley Merritt and Custer, as well as their personal rivalry, Al began asking questions. Considering Merritt’s background in the dragoons or heavy cavalry, and the belief held by many that Custer may have been one of the best light cavalymen of the war, Al wondered how the two men had achieved such success when they often fought side by side? How had they applied their differing beliefs in the crucible of combat? How had they worked together after Merritt became Custer’s superior officer? And why has Merritt, who retired as a major general in the regular army in 1900, largely disappeared from history, while Custer, who died in 1876 as a lieutenant colonel in a bloody and controversial last stand endures? What traits did they share and what traits drove their rivalry? Mr. Ovies attempts to answer such questions, while also giving his readers a military biography of both men.

In the first installment of his trilogy, *The Boy Generals: George Custer, Wesley Merritt, and the Cavalry of the Army of the Potomac*, Al Ovies introduces his thesis, as well as his two protagonists and brings them through the three-day battle at Gettysburg. In the second installment of his dual biography, *From the Gettysburg Retreat Through the Shenandoah Campaign of 1864*, Al follows Custer and Merritt

through the near constant combat of the long retreat from Pennsylvania to Virginia, action beginning just six days after they received their stars. He takes us through the drawn chess match between Culpeper and Centreville in the fall of 1863, the daily bloodletting of the Overland Campaign, and concludes with us on the doorstep of the Shenandoah Valley in 1864. Enjoy the ride.

Bob O'Neill

PREFACE

THE HORRIFIC SIGHTS WITNESSED during the Civil War traumatized most soldiers. Even that most hardened of warriors, William Tecumseh Sherman, would be forever known for his statement that war was hell.

But there were those who viewed the Civil War as an opportunity to touch the wand of glory. George Custer was one of those. On the third day of Gettysburg, his charge into the teeth of the Confederate cavalry on East Cavalry Field attained that for him. His subsequent actions on the battlefields of that great war were driven by his continued thirst of that quest. Ahead lay countless battles, countless opportunities. Ahead lay glory such as few fighting men would attain during the war. His death at the battle of the Little Big Horn is attributed by many to his overriding desire for that unsatiable need.

Yet to come in my trilogy are battles in which he added to his luster in the pages of our country's military history. Buckland Mills, Haw's Shop, Third Winchester, Cedar Creek, Five Forks, Saylor's Creek and countless others added to a record which few cavalymen would achieve.

Merritt's achievements, while never earning the headline-grabbing actions of Custer, the "glory seeker," propelled him steadily up the ladder of high command. He was, and would continue to be, far into his long career, a visionary. He recognized, early on, that the modern weaponry available to the cavalry demanded a drastic change in the tactics employed by the Federal horsemen. He never lost the faith his superior officers had in him. He wore the mantle of division and cavalry corps commander with easy grace. Never idolized by his men, yet he received the respect of all. All except Custer. Theirs was a battle for the soul of the cavalry.

In the second installment of *The Boy Generals*, we pick up the battle between the two men as the sun set on the third day of the battle of Gettysburg.

Acknowledgments

As the trilogy of *The Boy Generals* moves into its second installment, in addition to the great historians, organizations, digital groups, and publishing team acknowledged in the first installment, I want to thank those whose supplementary contributions have greatly enriched the continuing saga of the deterioration of the relationship between George Custer and Wesley Merritt.

First and foremost, I would like to give recognition to my editor, Joel Manuel. We met at a conference in Gettysburg and hit it off immediately. He proofread the first installment and has done a superb job in the second installment. I would also like to thank Walter West for the fine job he did in proofreading this installment. His suggestions for modifications to grammar and punctuation have improved the flow of the manuscript.

I want to thank Theodore P. Savas of Savas Beatie for giving me the opportunity to present my work to the Civil War community. His faith in my work has been outstanding—everything an author would wish for from his publisher. Special thanks are also due to the incredible SB ladies on his staff: Sarah Keeney, Lisa Murphy, Donna Endacott, Sarah Closson, Veronica Kane, and Angela Morrow. Each in their own way has worked tirelessly to make sure my book is widely available. Ted, thanks for taking a chance on a fledgling author. Lee Merideth provided the excellent index in record time. Thank you, all.

Robert O’Neill, with his wealth of knowledge of cavalry operations contributed in so many ways to this story. Chapter by chapter, comment by comment, his willingness to share the fruits of his research with me will never be forgotten.

Then there is the stalwart of all things Custeriana, Professor Gregory J. W. Urwin. He has been teaching history for over 40 years, and no, I am not one of his students. But his book, *Custer Victorious*, was probably the most influential book that set me on the path I am on now. He has never failed to respond to a question I have asked and supplied more information than I could ever have attained on my own. Professor, thank you ever so much. Incidentally, if there is an image of Custer out there that he hasn’t seen or shared, I challenge anyone to produce it.

Scott Patchan is considered by many to be the authority on the Shenandoah Valley campaigns. He certainly proved it to me. As my story moved into the Valley

Campaign of 1864, he steered me into directions I might not have gone. Much of the third installment concerns the Valley Campaign of 1864.

For avid television watchers, you repeatedly hear the phrase, “in no particular order.” So, for that reason, I mention Eric Wittenberg last. Eric has been my friend for nearly 20 years, and I am proud to call him my mentor. His imprint on *The Boy Generals* begins with page one of the first installment and extends to the last page of the third installment. It is safe to say that without his unstinting assistance, *The Boy Generals* might never have seen the light of day. Eric, you are not just my friend and mentor, but someone I look up to with the greatest admiration.

My sincerest appreciation to all.

Storms Beyond the Battlefield

Why Do They Call Me “Kil-Cavalry?”

AS HEAVY RAINS PELTED the exhausted, bloodied Union and Confederate armies spread out near Gettysburg, Pennsylvania on July 4, 1863, Brig. Gen. H. Judson Kilpatrick, never one to pass up the opportunity for a stirring speech to his officers, summoned them to his headquarters. Major Luther Trowbridge found himself “listening to a very inspiring little speech from that officer, who told us that we were to move at once to get around the flank of Lee’s army, and reach his trains, as he was retreating to Virginia. I remember well the shout that was given by the men of the regiment when I reported what Genl. Kilpatrick had said.” The inspiring nature of Kilpatrick’s speech contrasted with the tragic outcome of the orders that had led Brig. Gen. Elon Farnsworth to his death the previous day. These orders would put Kilpatrick’s legacy in jeopardy.¹

Farnsworth’s death became the cornerstone of an unflattering reputation that Kilpatrick had already begun to establish amongst the officer corps of the Army of the Potomac. Despite the negativity that surrounded the action on South Cavalry Field, the potential of what might have been did not escape everyone. In Capt. Henry C. Parson’s opinion, Kilpatrick’s attacks still “drew two [Rebel] regiments out of line and held them permanently in new positions, breaking the Confederate front and exposing it to an infantry charge if one had been immediately ordered.” For

¹ Luther S. Trowbridge to J. Allen Bigelow, undated letter, copy on file, Park Library and Research Center, Gettysburg National Military Park (GNMP), 1.



Brigadier General H. Judson Kilpatrick commanded the 3rd Cavalry Division. His men had given him the sobriquet of "Kil-cavalry." *Library of Congress*

the remainder of his life, Parson defended Kilpatrick's actions. "It was not 'a charge of a madman with a mad leader.' We believed, and yet believe, that Farnsworth's charge was wisely ordered, well timed, well executed, and effective." Looking at it in retrospect, Parson's view is not that far-fetched. That the charge was considered a disaster boiled down to the controversial, tawdry death of Elon Farnsworth. In counterpoint, the actions of Farnsworth's compatriot in the charge, Col. William Wells of the 1st Vermont Cavalry, earned that officer the Medal of Honor.²

Brigadier General Wesley Merritt's men, however, had a different view. "It was understood among us that Farnsworth was killed in a charge made by a fresh body of Rebel Infantry," reported Pvt. Samuel J. Crockett of Company A, 1st U.S. Cavalry, with a hint of reproach directed at Farnsworth's men. As the remnants of Farnsworth's charge struggled back to their lines, they uncovered the right flank of Merritt's brigade and forced his troopers into a retrograde movement. A much chagrined Crockett lamented the outcome of this phase of the action, for "we knew we should have thrashed them if our flank had not been turned."³

In the short span Merritt spent under Kilpatrick, he came to understand that they were at great odds in their tactical philosophies. Kilpatrick's doctrine went against the grain of Merritt's beliefs, especially with respect to the care of the command's horses. Kilpatrick would ride a horse into the ground if it got him a foot closer to the enemy, and in fact had done so in at least one well-documented instance. Many officers recognized this flaw. "He worked his division as usual beyond its capacity, and took but little care of his horses," Brig. Gen. James Wilson wrote, "which all good cavalymen know are the principal factor in the efficiency of the mounted service." Always opinionated, Wilson compared Kilpatrick to Confederate Maj. Gen. James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart, who "generally overworked his men and horses in useless raids."⁴

Kilpatrick was not just a blowhard as some believed. Like all controversial figures, he had his adherents as well. Even Wilson admitted that the hot-headed cavalryman was "[f]ull of enthusiasm and romance, he naturally loved streamers, guidons, and banners, and rejoiced in the bugles, the racket, rattle, and fanfaronade of the cavalry service. No enterprise was too dangerous to appall him, no odds too great to deter him from the charge." Contrary to popular belief, expounded

2 Henry C. Parsons, "Farnsworth's Charge and Death," Robert U. Johnson and Clarence C. Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (New York, 1884-89), 3:396.

3 Samuel J. Crockett to John B. Bachelder, December 27, 1882, in David L. Ladd and Audrey J. Ladd, eds., *The Bachelder Papers: Gettysburg in Their Own Words*, 3 vols. (Dayton, OH, 1994), 2:917-918.

4 James H. Wilson, *Under the Old Flag: Recollections of Military Operations in the War for the Union, the Spanish War, the Rebellion, Etc.* (New York, 1912), 1:372, 409.

Dr. James Moore, “Kilpatrick’s success greatly depended on the care he took of his men, and the discipline they were subjected to. Their arms, equipments, clothing, subsistence, and, in a word, everything in which the welfare of the soldier is concerned, he looked into with anxious solicitude, and what was lacking he supplied as far as lay in his power.” One Michigander added that “Kilpatrick had many traits that commended him to soldiers.”⁵

Company A of the 1st Ohio Cavalry acted as Kilpatrick’s escort. An admiring Ohioan wrote of this as “the service upon which the Ohio squadron mostly prides itself.” He remarked that Kilpatrick who could always be found on “the skirmish line, or in a saber charge, never lost an opportunity of throwing his favorite squadron into the fight to carry some part of the line or dislodge some ugly knot of skirmishers.” Another Ohio trooper wrote that “Kilpatrick is the most daring and skilful officer we have yet met. He fights the rebels as we expected to fight them when we enlisted. His ability to get his men out of tight places . . . has won the confidence of all his men. . . . Whatever may be said about General Kilpatrick, he certainly has wonderful skill in managing his men in the excitement of battle.” Captain Henry C. Parsons recalled Kilpatrick’s dramatic appearance at Hanover on June 30, 1863, and his initial meeting with the 1st Vermont. Kilpatrick “rode with a sergeant beside him . . . carrying his flag, coming at a furious rate, distancing his bodyguard and all his staff.” For sheer theatrics, it could not be beat. Kilpatrick skidded to a halt in front of the 1st Vermonters, who had never laid eyes on him, “seized the flag, and standing in his stirrups, without drawing reins, cried out ‘Men of Vermont; you don’t know me; I don’t know you. To-day we make an acquaintance on the battlefield. I know I shall like you; I think you shall like me.’”⁶

Nonetheless, in the minds of the higher echelons of the army, Kilpatrick’s nebulous reputation started to crystallize. One staff officer, Col. Theodore Lyman, described Kilpatrick as “a frothy braggart, without brains . . . whom it is hard to

5 Ibid., 1:370. Though Kilpatrick did not drink or gamble, he was notorious for his foul-mouthed ways. Once, early during their courtship, Libbie Bacon admonished Custer, “And yet, love, there is a stain on your character. Mother told me Father told her someone told him that Genl. Kilpatrick used an oath with every sentence he uttered, and that General Custer was not much better. I know this is exaggerated. But . . . God cure you of it.” For that reason, Libbie’s criticisms of Kilpatrick, scattered throughout her memoirs, are perhaps the most scathing of all. Marguerite Merington, ed., *The Custer Story: The Life and Intimate Letters of General Custer and His Wife Elizabeth* (New York, 1950), 76-77; James Moore, *Kilpatrick and Our Cavalry: Sketch of the life of General Kilpatrick, with an Account of the Cavalry Raids, Engagements, and Operations Under His Command, from the Beginning of the Rebellion to the Surrender of Johnston* (New York, 1865), 201-202; Asa B. Isham, *An Historical Sketch of the Seventh Regiment Michigan Volunteer Cavalry* (New York, 1893), 40.

6 W. L. Curry, *Four Years in the Saddle: History of the First Regiment Ohio Volunteer Regiment* (Columbus, OH, 1898), 239; Samuel L. Gillespie, *A History of Company A, First Ohio Cavalry, 1861-1865* (Washington C. H., OH, 1898), 163, 175; Henry C. Parsons, “Gettysburg: The Campaign was a Chapter of Accidents,” *National Tribune*, August 7, 1890.

look at without laughing.” As the campaign dragged out, Kilpatrick’s command style began to work against him, for nothing worse can happen to a commander than to lose the faith and loyalty of his troops. Obscenely long casualty lists will make that happen faster than anything else. Soon his time with the Army of the Potomac would come to an abrupt end with his transfer west to join Maj. Gen. William T. Sherman’s army. For many within the division, “it was not without regret we saw him go away.”⁷

On his last day, Kilpatrick assembled the division and swore up and down “that the appellation ‘Kill cavalry’ had been unjustly applied to him; that the welfare of his troops had been ever prominent in his mind, and that if the losses in his division had been heavy, it was because the exigencies of the service had engaged them more constantly in conflict with the enemy than other divisions of the cavalry.” But the sobriquet stuck with him and he never shook it. The deterioration of his reputation among his men is evident in the turnaround of the opinion of Capt. James H. Kidd, who on July 3 had written home, ecstatic with his new officers: “We were all proud of our new commanders, for it was evident that they were fighting men. . . . It must also be said that a strong feeling of ‘pride in the corps’ had taken root. Men were proud that they belonged to Kilpatrick’s division.” By the time Kilpatrick left for Sherman’s army, Kidd had turned on him as well. “[It] was not because men were killed while under his command,” he wrote of a soldier’s fate, “for that was their business and every trooper knew that death was liable to come soon or late, while he was in the line of duty, but for the reason that so many lives were sacrificed by him for no good purpose whatever.”⁸

General Wilson, who took over the 3rd Cavalry Division following Kilpatrick’s removal, noted that the division had declined dramatically under his predecessor’s command: “Its camps were badly placed and badly policed; its horses were overworked and exhausted; its equipment and clothing nearly used up, and its heterogeneous collection of carbines dirty and out of order.” In the interest of telling a good story, Frederick Whittaker, Brig. Gen. George Armstrong Custer’s first biographer, wanted readers to believe that Wilson’s critique did not apply to the Michigan Cavalry Brigade. Whittaker asserted that the Michiganders were a spit and polish outfit from the onset of Custer’s tenure in command. But an extensive report filed by F. W. Armstrong, the acting assistant inspector general of the 3rd Division, written on October 30, 1863, hardly lends credence to

7 George R. Agassiz, ed., *Meade’s Headquarters, 1863-1865: Letters of Colonel Theodore Lyman from the Wilderness to Appomattox* (Boston, 1922), 76, 79; Isham, *Seventh Michigan Cavalry*, 40.

8 Isham, *Seventh Michigan Cavalry*, 40; James H. Kidd, *Personal Recollections of a Cavalryman with Custer’s Michigan Cavalry Brigade in the Civil War* (Ionia, MI, 1908), 165, 166.

Whittaker's premise. "At the monthly inspection of this division the condition of the Second Brigade was found not at all creditable to the Commanding Officer," wrote Armstrong. He concluded, "There are great deficiencies yet existing in the proper clothing of the men. . . . Of the condition of the arms, no language can be too strong to express the almost general rusty and dirty appearance of the pistols and carbines."⁹

In all fairness, not everything in the report shed a poor light on Custer. "The horses upon inspection were generally in very good order and showed care in grooming." Armstrong also noted that "the horse equipments mostly appear to be sound and strong." Nonetheless, the disparaging tenor of the report not only rankled Custer, but certainly wounded the pride he felt for his command. Colonel Alvred Bayard Nettleton of the 2nd Ohio Cavalry, who would serve under Custer in the 3rd Cavalry Division in the latter stages of the war, wrote of Custer, "There was nothing of the military scold in his nature. By timely praise, oftener than by harsh criticism, he stimulated his subordinates to fidelity, watchfulness, and gallantry." Though not a martinet, Custer had the reputation of a strict disciplinarian, equally adept at applying the stick as the carrot. After receiving Armstrong's report, he applied the stick to his officers. "With chagrin and mortification the GC [Commanding General of] the Brigade has read the accompanying Inspection report," he chastised them. "He had hopes, that the remembrance of Gettysburg, Falling Waters, Culpepper, Brandy Station, and other well contested fields, would forever, prevent the officers and men of this command from falling into habits of gross neglect and inattention to duty, in this hope he has been disappointed."¹⁰

Custer was never one to suffer fools easily, and in this case, he was not willing to take the sole blame for the sorry state of affairs present in his brigade. In the politically riddled atmosphere of the higher echelons of the Army of the Potomac, it is often hard to determine when the fragile relationships of the high command

9 Wilson, *Under the Old Flag*, 1:372-373; Wilson got this information from a report by Lt. Col. C. Kingsbury, AAG of the Cavalry Corps, dated April 17, 1864; *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, D.C., 1880-1901), Series 1, vol. 33, pages 891-892, hereafter cited as *OR*. All references are to Series 1 unless otherwise noted. Custer's Michigan Cavalry Brigade was officially designated as the 2nd Brigade of Kilpatrick's 3rd Cavalry Division; "Inspection Report, F. W. Armstrong, AAG 3rd Cavalry Division to Brigadier General Judson Kilpatrick, October 30, 1863," RG 94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780-1917, Muster Rolls, Regimental Returns, and Miscellaneous Papers, 1st Vermont Cavalry, NARA, Washington, D.C.

10 "Inspection Report, F. W. Armstrong"; Frederick Whittaker, *A Popular Life of Gen. George A. Custer: Major-General of Volunteers, Brevet Major-General U. S. Army, and Lieutenant-Colonel of the Seventh U. S. Cavalry* (New York, 1876), 612; "Circular, Brigadier General George A. Custer to 2nd Brigade, 3rd Cavalry Division, October 31, 1863," RG 94, Records of the Adjutant General's Office, 1780-1917, Muster Rolls, Regimental Returns, and Miscellaneous Papers, 1st Vermont Cavalry, NARA.

begin to deteriorate. Lord knows, in the later stages of the war, Kilpatrick gave Custer enough reasons to come to loggerheads. A good starting point for Kilpatrick and Custer would be August 21, 1863. On that date, Custer received a blistering rebuke from Kilpatrick over what Custer considered to be a minor infraction. "I am not satisfied with your letter relating to the conduct of Lt. North. I directed you to investigate the matter. You have not done so," the bristling division commander informed Custer:

Instead of doing as you were directed you saw fit to give your opinion and that in a manner most disrespectful to your commanding officer. I have noticed lately in your communications to these headquarters some feeling to me, unaccountable. . . . From you, General, I have hoped for much assistance & most certainly a cheerful compliance with orders. I hope that no erroneous ideas will induce you to forget that it is impossible for me to command the division without the willing support of my brigade commanders.¹¹

The Finger Points at Merritt

For Wesley Merritt and the Reserve Brigade, their part in the three-day battle of Gettysburg ended relatively quickly and mercilessly, hopefully to be obscured by the inevitability of time. Counting neither the losses incurred by the 6th U.S. Cavalry at Fairfield nor the 100 men detached for service with Capt. Ulric Dahlgren, the brigade lost 49 men, killed, wounded, or missing of the 1,321 officers and men listed as present and ready for duty on South Cavalry Field.¹²

It would be simple enough to point the finger of blame at Wesley Merritt for the defeat at Fairfield, and he can be justly criticized for his lack of aggression on July 3. With prompt action and full utilization of its resources, Merritt's Reserve Brigade possibly could have turned the Rebel right flank. Such a move would have ended all discussions regarding Kilpatrick's true intentions. At 8:00 p.m. on July 2, Kilpatrick was ordered "to move to the left of our line and attack the enemy's right and rear with my whole command and the Regular Brigade." Contemporary evidence suggests that Southern commanders at both the division and corps levels were uncomfortable with the thin cordon of skirmishers present in Bushman's Woods when Farnsworth's lead squadrons began to penetrate the timber. Rebel

11 "Brigadier General Judson Kilpatrick to Brigadier General George A. Custer, August 21, 1863," RG 393, Records of the United States Army Continental Commands, 1821-1920, Part 2, Entry 1593, Letters Sent, 3rd Cavalry Division, August 1863-June 1865, NARA.

12 Wittenberg, "Merritt's Regulars," 122.



Brigadier General Wesley Merritt in the regulation frock coat of a brigadier general. "In him a fiery soul was held in thrall to will," wrote Eben Swift, an officer on Merritt's staff. He was "never disturbed by doubt, or moved by fear, neither circumspect nor rash." *Library of Congress*

pickets wasted little time in abandoning the woods and falling back on their support. Had Merritt's brigade, albeit depleted by losses and detachments, arrived on the western end of the battlefield in a timelier manner, Kilpatrick's objectives might have taken form. Cavalry historian Edward G. Longacre has chastised Merritt for failing to reach the Confederate right flank until three in the afternoon, "following a slow march from Emmitsburg."¹³

Other historians have taken Merritt to task. Eric J. Wittenberg cut the young general little slack at this early stage in his career. "Wesley Merritt deserves much of the blame" for Fairfield, Wittenberg has critiqued. "The Fairfield debacle embarrassed Merritt. . . . He made unwise decisions in both phases—in the timing of his attacks on South Cavalry Field and in sending the 6th U.S. to disaster at Fairfield. Merritt indeed was new to the role of brigadier general and lacked experience in this capacity; he had held brigade command for less than four days. At Fairfield, he made a mistake. Out of who knows how many options faced him, he chose the wrong one."¹⁴

Following his promotion to brigadier general in the aftermath of the Aldie-Middleburg-Upperville campaign through July 2, the focus of Merritt's brigade had been reduced to the most elemental components of cavalry doctrine; it was either "obtaining information of the enemy's movements," or "preventing the enemy's cavalry from obtaining similar information." In addition to guarding the army's wagon train, much of the brigade was on outpost duty. Because of this detached duty, Merritt's horse soldiers did not participate in the first two days of the battle of Gettysburg. "We remained encamped here [Mechanicstown]," recorded the Rev. Samuel L. Gracey, "guarding the trains, and patrolling to Harman's Gap, in the Catoctin Range, and on the direct road through the mountains from Hagerstown to Baltimore. On the 2d of July we moved to Emmitsburg, and patrolled and picketed through the mountains. The whole brigade was on duty here."¹⁵

In November 1888, "Operations of the Cavalry in the Gettysburg Campaign," a lengthy essay by Capt. George B. Davis of the 5th U.S. Cavalry, appeared in the *Journal of the United States Cavalry Association (JUSCA)*. Davis felt duty-bound to expound on what he perceived to be the "lessons taught by this campaign." His viewpoint is of interest in that it touched directly on the schism that developed

13 OR 27, pt. 1, 992; Edward G. Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg: A Tactical Study of Mounted Operations During the Civil War's Pivotal Campaign, 9 June-14 July 1863* (Rutherford, NJ, 1986), 240.

14 Eric J. Wittenberg, *Gettysburg's Forgotten Cavalry Actions: Farnsworth's Charge, South Cavalry Field, and the Battle of Fairfield, July 3, 1863* (El Dorado Hills, CA, 2011), 138-139, 152.

15 George B. Davis, "The Operations of the Cavalry in the Gettysburg Campaign," *Journal of the United States Cavalry Association*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (November 1888), 329; Samuel L. Gracey, *Annals of the Sixth Pennsylvania Cavalry* (Philadelphia, 1868), 178.

between Custer and Merritt. “In the first place, what may be called the ‘science of outposts,’ was developed as it had not been before in the history of war,” he concluded:

While there was much fighting on foot, it was not so generally successful as has been supposed. . . . Command was most frequently and uniformly successful which was most skillfully handled as a mounted force—dismounting only to accomplish a temporary purpose, or, as in Buford’s case at Gettysburg, when it was necessary to oppose infantry, or to hold a point of great strategic importance until the infantry could arrive.¹⁶

The Northerners Had a New Hero

In the aftermath of the battle on East Cavalry Field, Brigadier General Custer became known to the American reading public, his persona a natural for the limelight. His flamboyant personality added color to the grim, black newspaper headlines; a quick scan of the casualty lists had become a part of everyone’s daily routine. Over the ensuing years, James Kidd worked at refining the image he had crafted of Custer through his writings. His first comments appeared in the letters he wrote home. After the war, Kidd performed yeoman’s duty, speaking at dedications, funerals, and meetings of the Grand Army of the Republic, in addition to writing for the Military Order of the Loyal Legion of the United States and lecturing on Custer and the great war. He collected all his writings and published *Recollections of a Cavalryman with Custer’s Michigan Brigade*. Later, he distilled the essential Custer in his publication, *Historical Sketch of General Custer*, which covered the general’s entire military career.

According to Kidd, “A keen eye would have been slow to detect in that rider with the flowing locks and bright necktie, in his dress of velvet and gold, the master spirit that he proved to be,” adding:

Brave, but not reckless; self-confident yet modest; ambitious but regulating his conduct at all times by a high code of honor and duty; eager for laurels, but scorning to wear them unworthily; ready and willing to act, but regardful of human life; quick in emergencies, cool and self-poised, his courage was of the highest moral and physical type, his perceptions were intuitions. . . . He was the most brilliant and resourceful cavalry officer of his time.¹⁷

¹⁶ Davis, “The Operations of the Cavalry,” 346-347.

¹⁷ James H. Kidd, *Historical Sketch of General Custer, Reprinted from Ceremonies Attending the Unveiling of the Equestrian Statue to Major General George Armstrong Custer* (Monroe, MI, 1978), 15.



Brigadier General George A. Custer in his black velveteen battle outfit. He was described by Col. Theodore Lyman, of Gen. George Meade's staff, as "a circus rider gone mad." *National Photo Institute, Smithsonian Institution Library*

One could say that in this aspect of mounted warfare, Custer was cut from the same cloth as Kilpatrick, though lacking Kilpatrick's total disregard for the welfare of his mounts. Merritt's philosophies and guidance concerning cavalry on the march were at first based on Philip St. George Cooke's precepts on the care of horses and were later distilled through the prism of his own experiences as set forth in his dictum, "Marching Cavalry," published in *JUSCA*. From Merritt's writings we can ascertain his guiding principles with respect to the movement of long columns of cavalry. Merritt's efforts to maintain his mounts at peak efficiency eventually became the end rather than the means.

But what about Custer? Where did the horse fit in with Custer's fighting style? Where did the horse fit in with his tactical philosophy? To get to that point, we must overcome several preconceived ideas regarding "Custer the Horseman," which have been repeated and exaggerated over the course of the Custer legend but have presented a public image that steers the reader away from a true understanding of a cavalryman in the process of mastering his craft. Many reports emanated from West Point attesting to his incredible attributes as a horseman. We have read about how Custer always kept a stable of half a dozen horses, many captured from Southerners, who had a fine taste for horseflesh. We have heard the stories of the races and the amount of money gambled on whose horse could go the fastest. Custer the Horseman and Custer the Cavalryman are two distinct entities. However picturesque he might have been on horseback, Custer's assistant adjutant general, Capt. Jacob L. Greene, reminds us that "he was a born soldier, and specifically a born cavalry man. . . . He knew the whole art of war. But its arts and instruments . . . were the means and the tools, in the terms of which and by the use of which his distinct military genius apprehended and solved its practical and fateful problems."¹⁸

It is an old axiom that in war only the relentless succeed, and Custer soon earned a reputation for being hell on horseflesh. "A large part of Custer's success was due to the fact that he was a good pursuer," disagreed Alvred Nettleton. "Unlike many equally brave and skillful officers, he was rarely content to hold a position or drive his enemy; he always gathered the fruit, as well as shook the tree of battle. He regarded his real work as only beginning, when his enemy was broken and flying." James Wilson, whose antipathy toward Custer dated back to West Point, believed otherwise. "Custer was never rated as a great general, for, although full of dash, enterprise, and experience, he never acquired the habit of properly measuring the

18 Cyrus Townsend Brady, *Indian Fights and Fighters* (New York, 1904), 391-392.

endurance of men and horses. . . . defects of character that led to the final and fatal blunder which ended his brilliant career.”¹⁹

The thirst for battle permeated Kilpatrick’s entire command. Custer was a willing participant, for he shared the same love of combat, of the pomp and ceremony so vital to military life. Custer’s exuberance, recalled Theodore Lyman, a staff officer attached to the Army of the Potomac’s headquarters, placed him among those “officers who of their own choice and impulse will dash in on formidable positions . . . but fighting for fun is rare; and unless there is a little of this in a man’s disposition he lacks an element. Such men as . . . Custer and some others, attacked whenever they got the chance, and of their own accord. . . . It requires a peculiar disposition to ‘go in gaily.’”²⁰

Inevitably, some of the negativity that enshrouded Kilpatrick would also attach itself to Custer. It did not take long. Inadvertently, Custer helped to tar his own reputation by not repudiating Kilpatrick and his methods. Unfortunately, not only did Custer share Kilpatrick’s methods of warfare, but Custer’s nature would not allow for a disavowal of his commander’s actions. After the war, rumors circulated to the effect that Custer and Kilpatrick had had a major falling out, more than likely over the role assigned to Custer by Kilpatrick in Col. Ulric Dahlgren’s abortive raid on Richmond in late February 1864, which had nearly gotten Custer killed.

Custer’s triumphant return to the army after his successful diversion in support of Kilpatrick and Dahlgren’s foray was marked by glory and good news. He must have been shocked when he learned of the casualties incurred by the hand-picked men of the Michigan Cavalry Brigade who had participated in the ill-fated raid. The official reports filed by the officers of Custer’s brigade contain almost no information on the casualties sustained. Overall, reports of the raid remain sketchy at best, with the preponderance of the information coming from the Confederate side. As best as can be determined, the 5th Michigan suffered 49 officers and men captured, missing, or wounded. The 6th Michigan returned almost unscathed, listing one man as having been taken prisoner. Records for the 7th Michigan show approximately 40 officers and men missing or wounded. In his memoirs, James Kidd, who participated in the raid, noted that three members of the regiment were killed.²¹

19 Whittaker, *A Popular Life*, 612; Wilson, *Under the Old Flag*, 1:102.

20 Agassiz, *Mead’s Headquarters*, 139.

21 John Robertson, compl., *Michigan in the War: Report of the Adjutant General* (Lansing, MI, 1882), 593; Kidd, *Personal Recollections*, 452-471. No one from the 1st Michigan participated. At the time of the raid, the regiment had gone to Michigan on veteran furlough to recruit and bring the unit back up to strength.

The bitter political infighting that characterized the officer corps of the Army of the Potomac remained a facet of military life that Libbie Custer, protective wife that she would become, never grew accustomed to. “Of course my husband endured the penalty that all successful men pay,” she confided mournfully to her diary:

[He] was obliged to have his victories, after some of the hardest struggles, ascribed to “luck,” etc., or overbearing ambition. In after years, when apparently every upward step of his career was contested by enemies, I comprehended . . . that some unjust, uncalled-for attack of a jealous enemy had driven him to think out the situation and, if necessary, plan a defense.²²

Libbie’s accurate assessment would play out repeatedly. Carol Bundy, biographer of Col. Charles Russell Lowell, described the interplay of emotions between Custer and Merritt. “Lowell had known Custer on McClellan’s staff, but they had never been close,” her research revealed. “Custer was brave and clever and knew how to get the best from his men, but Lowell found him too much of a dandy, too self-regarding, too fond of publicity. Wilson, Merritt, and Lowell all loathed Custer. No one questioned his abilities, but it was insufferable to be around him.”²³

Custer did not strike all Regulars negatively. Lieutenant George B. Sanford, a man of unquestioned loyalty to Wesley Merritt, retained vivid and warm memories of Custer. Sanford warned his peers to look beyond the glitter and the velveteen battle jacket. Lurking beneath the superficiality of his dress, he declared, resided a real soldier. “It would be a great mistake to suppose that Custer was a braggadocio or anything of the kind. . . . The beginning of the war opened for him a career of wonderful brilliancy and made him the recipient of such boundless adulation as would certainly have turned a weaker head.”²⁴

How Do I Get the Job?

All wars, no matter how long, eventually end. Regular army officers knew that this war—their war—would eventually end, and that the U.S. Army would downsize dramatically in its wake. Wartime provided a young general the

²² Reynolds, *Civil War Memories*, 38-39.

²³ Carol Bundy, *The Nature of Sacrifice: A Biography of Charles Russell Lowell, Jr., 1835-1864* (New York, 2005), 413.

²⁴ E. R. Hagemann, ed., *Fighting Rebels and Redskins: Experiences in the Army Life of Colonel George B. Sanford* (Norman, OK, 1969), 226.

opportunity to secure his place in the postwar military. One Civil War historian described the situation faced by many a young officer. “When the fighting was over and the Army once again reorganized,” wrote E. R. Hagemann, “the brilliant young *temporary* generals (i.e., of volunteers)—those who did the hard fighting and campaigning and won the war for the Union—with few exceptions, stepped down to permanent ranks as low as captain and started their upward climb all over again. . . . Regimental seniority was the rule.” This resulted in a high level of competition amongst the army’s professionals. Ambitious and eager for glory, a competitive spirit sprang up between Custer and Merritt. To Kidd, it readily became evident that “between [Merritt] and Custer there was, it seemed, a great deal of generous rivalry.”²⁵

Custer and Merritt shared the stage. These two men, so different in so many ways, each had exercised command at a much higher ranking than they had a right to expect given their age and experience. Both had fought in the most momentous battle in American history. Army politics intensify exponentially when that coveted first star is sewn on the uniform. Unfortunately, in the case of Merritt and Custer, their spirited rivalry accelerated exponentially as well. The depths of their mutual antipathy were yet to be plumbed. The battles on South and East Cavalry Fields were the first real points of divergence between Custer and Merritt. Because the two actions were separated by distance, and of such a vastly different character of warfare, they were not in and of themselves intrinsic to the animadversion their relationship took. The seeds of jealousy in Merritt, watered by the inordinate amount of press bestowed on Custer, were just beginning to bud.

But a deep irony ran throughout their relationship, for their actions resulted from their adherence to the same ordered world that mandated the duties of every professional soldier. In the end, both Merritt and Custer would be judged by the same rule that governed anyone who takes the next hurdle up the army’s high command structure. In a letter to Judge Daniel Bacon, Libbie’s father, Custer shared the cold, harsh, glaring truth about promotions in the military. “The Government,” he declared, “has been in the habit of laying on the shelf all the unfortunate Generals who have failed to do ‘just so.’ When I was a mere Lieutenant or Captain I was safe, but now that I have changed the bars for a star I might for some mismanagement be displaced.”²⁶

25 Ibid., 4-5; Kidd, *Personal Recollections*, 238.

26 Merington, *The Custer Story*, 63.

The Press Is Just as Much the Enemy

The press, with its increasingly powerful hold over the American reading public, became the ultimate judge. Just before he was relieved as commander of the Army of the Potomac, Maj. Gen. Joseph Hooker had a nasty altercation with the press corps. On June 18, 1863, Hooker sent a strongly worded missive to newspaper editors throughout the country. "Under no circumstances should be published the location of any corps, division, brigade, or regiment," he admonished the competitive press, whose responsibilities now included maintaining the secrecy necessary for the movements of his army, "and especially is the location of my headquarters never to be named excepting during a fight." Maddeningly, the next day, the *New York Herald* published, in splendid detail, the location of every command, including the far-flung cavalry. Hooker complained bitterly to Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck in Washington, but the cagey Halleck took a step backward, thought about every encounter he had had with Washington's own rapacious horde of correspondents, and dropped the whole matter right back into Hooker's lap. "I appreciate as fully as yourself, the injury resulting from newspaper publications of the movements, numbers, and position of our troops," he commiserated, "but I see no way of preventing it as long as reporters are permitted in our camps. I expelled them all from our lines in Mississippi. Every general must decide for himself what persons he will permit in his camps."²⁷

Hooker moved quickly to show the reporters that he was serious. On June 20, he had Nathan G. Shepherd, a correspondent for the *New York Tribune*, arrested by the provost marshal. The miscreant was accused of publishing a report that disclosed the position of several of the corps. Shepherd, upon his unceremonious escort from the lines, was ordered to never return. The arrest of W. D. Wallach, the owner of the *Washington Star*, followed in quick succession; the order came straight from the war department. "Hooker's action, coupled with that of the War Department," wrote historian J. Cutler Andrews in his definitive work on the northern press and reporters, "proved highly efficacious. During the remainder of the campaign General Robert E. Lee was able to gain very little information about the movements of the Army of the Potomac from the news columns of the Northern press." As a result of Halleck's indecisive reply to Hooker, press relations in the Army of the Potomac became complicated at best. The antiquated army staff system could not deal with a group of correspondents born and bred in the age of the telegraph, railroads, and photography. Censorship had been tried and though some semblance of a program remained in place, the hard-riding, hardship-inured

²⁷ OR 27, pt. 3, 192; J. Cutler Andrews, *The North Reports the Civil War* (Pittsburgh, 1955), 411.

reporters continued to file their stories. As a last resort, Hooker insisted on having the reporters who accompanied his army attach their names to each article they published. He wanted to know whom to take punitive action against if such became necessary. Individual commanders determined the degree to which access would be granted to members of the press. Both Kilpatrick and Custer worked at establishing a compatible relationship with reporters; Merritt, on the other hand, never tried, and thus never did.²⁸

Merritt received effusive praise from his superiors. Brigadier General John Buford closed his report on the Gettysburg campaign by stating, “To General Merritt and Colonels Gamble and Devin, brigade commanders, I give my heartfelt thanks for their zeal and hearty support. Neither of them ever doubted the feasibility of an order, but on its reception obeyed its dictates to the letter.” Major General Alfred Pleasonton, too, was lavish with his praise: “Brigadier-Generals Merritt and Custer, brigade commanders, have increased the confidence entertained in their ability and gallantry to lead troops on the field of battle.”²⁹

Edward A. Paul of the *New York Times* held the position of dean of the correspondents reporting on the Union cavalry. He had been covering Kilpatrick’s division when Stuart attacked the rear of his column at Hanover and watched in horror while the battle raged up and down the town streets and civilians scampered to get out of the line of fire. Paul gravitated to Custer’s mess tent, not just as a source for information but for the atmosphere of fellowship that Custer extended to him. Like many others, he would be mesmerized by the Custer persona, and as a result forsook much of a newsman’s vaunted objectivity.

A few weeks later, Paul published an eight-column story covering the 3rd Division’s activities from June 30 through July 14, when the last of General Lee’s men scampered up the southern bank of the Potomac. J. Cutler Andrews noted that in the breathlessly paced piece of writing, Paul “graphically delineated the feverish pace of a sixteen-day period in which the cavalry division he accompanied fought fifteen battles, destroyed, so he claimed, one-half of Stuart’s cavalry force, and thoroughly demoralized the remainder.” Paul also managed to demoralize the men and officers of the 1st and 2nd Cavalry Divisions, for much of the article concentrated on the activities of the Michigan Cavalry Brigade. But in a pointed warning, prolific letter writer Charles Francis Adams, Jr., wrote to his brother, John Quincy, that many of the important stories remained hidden and unreported. “Of course you know well enough that your newspapers tell you nothing but lies and

28 Andrews, *The North Reports the Civil War*, 411.

29 *OR* 27, pt. 1, 930, 918.

that ‘the cavalry’ as depicted by them all is all a figment of a poet’s brain. If you don’t I tell you so now and know it in the future.”³⁰

The nature of Pleasonton’s character loomed large the night Merritt went to his headquarters to thank him for his promotion to brigadier general. The usually stoic Merritt, overwhelmed with emotion, approached Pleasonton and, “with tears in his eyes,” thanked the Cavalry Corps commander for the opportunity he had given him. Pleasonton’s reply was terse. “I promoted you to fight,” he informed Merritt curtly, “and if you don’t fight, I will break you as quickly as I made you.” There is nothing to indicate that Pleasonton did not have faith in Merritt’s ability to live up to the high expectations that had been placed on him. But it is not too far-fetched to believe that Pleasonton used Merritt’s promotion in an effort to appease Buford and the rest of the Regular Army officers who viewed Custer’s and Farnsworth’s promotions from captain to brigadier general with jealousy.³¹

30 Andrews, *The North Reports the Civil War*, 435; Charles Francis Adams, Jr., to John Quincy Adams, July 12, 1863, in Worthington Chauncey Ford, ed., *A Cycle of Adams Letters*, 2 vols. (Boston, 1920), 2:44-45.

31 William B. Styple, ed., *Generals in Bronze: Interviewing the Commanders of the Civil War* (Kearny, NJ, 2005), 120.