

# THE BOY GENERALS

George Custer, Wesley Merritt,  
and the Cavalry of the Army of the Potomac,  
from the Shenandoah Valley to the Surrender at Appomattox

Adolfo Ovies

Unedited Excerpt



Savas Beatie  
California

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

## FOREWORD

### Theirs Was More Than a Spirited Rivalry

**ADOLFO** “AL” OVIES HAS continued his intriguing voyage into the military lives of Generals Wesley Merritt and George A. Custer and their men, telling the story of the late war campaigns from the Union Cavalry’s perspectives and experiences. Ovies picks up the action in the early stages of the Shenandoah Valley action chronicling the cavalry’s daily actions in the period known as the “Mimic War.” Make no mistake, though, there was nothing fake about it, especially for the Union cavalry who skirmished and fought small-scale engagements almost daily, carried out the emotionally difficult task of burning civilian farms and mills, and fought a controversial war within a war against the vaunted Col. John S. Mosby and his Rangers. Forgotten engagements such as Summit Point, Halltown, Leetown, Berryville, and more are well documented and placed in the proper historical perspective for this misunderstood portion of the Valley Campaign.

Throughout the action, Ovies ensures that the reader understands the relationship between Merritt and Custer, but also delves into some of their subordinates as well. He picks up on the rivalry between the two men, which reaches a peak in the aftermath of the Battle of Cedar Creek where the book’s namesakes vied with each other for trophies on the battlefield and just as fervently in their post battle reports and correspondence.

Both Merritt and Custer emerged from the fall campaign of 1864 with promotions earned on many fields of battle. In 1865, the two men continued their activities, with Custer taking the leading role in eliminating the last vestiges of Lt. Gen. Jubal A. Early’s Army of the Valley District at Waynesboro on March 2.

Custer's division bore the brunt of the engagement and added to their already large haul of trophy battle flags and artillery pieces.

Al next takes us with Sheridan's "Boys" over the Blue Ridge to Petersburg in time for the cavalry to play a decisive role in the Appomattox Campaign. Custer and Merritt once again covered themselves in glory as they tormented the Army of Northern Virginia in its futile effort to escape. Through it all, Al provides detailed accounts of the maneuvers and battle actions through firsthand accounts from the Union horsemen who did so much to bring that army to bay and end the war.

Scott C. Patchan, author of *The Last Battle of Winchester*

## PREFACE

# Heroes on the Fields of Glory

**I**N THE MANY PRESENTATIONS I have made over the past few years, I have stated that the relationship between George Armstrong Custer and Wesley Merritt was a struggle for the soul of the cavalry of the Army of the Potomac. The first and second installments of my trilogy, *The Boy Generals: George Custer, Wesley Merritt, and the Cavalry of the Army of the Potomac*, have set the stage for the bitter, dysfunctional relationship that arose between the two “boy generals.”

James H. Kidd, who served under both Custer and Merritt, once characterized their relationship as a “generous rivalry.” The difference in their personalities, however, made them enemies. In a way, it came down to a sense of humor. Custer had one, for as Elizabeth “Libbie” Bacon wrote, her husband, when not on duty, was a “brimful of fun.” Whether or not Merritt had one is debatable. He was austere, no-nonsense, a stickler for regulations, and considered by some to be a martinet. Custer’s men adored him; Merritt was respected and admired.<sup>1</sup>

Though the differences in their personalities played a major role in the schism that developed between the two premier cavalrymen of the Army of the Potomac, it was their widely divergent tactical philosophies that is the core of the third installment. George Custer was a hussar; Merritt was a dragoon. Custer was a firm believer in the shock value of the mounted charge; Merritt maintained that the horse was but a means of transporting the trooper to the battlefield, where

<sup>1</sup> James H. Kidd, *Personal Recollections of a Cavalryman With Custer’s Michigan Cavalry Brigade in the Civil War* (Grand Rapids, MI, 1969), 238; Arlene Reynolds, ed., *The Civil War Memories of Elizabeth Bacon Custer* (Austin, TX, 1940), 116, hereinafter cited as *Custer Memoirs*.

he would fight on foot with his carbine. Wesley Merritt and George Custer were destined to clash.

The second installment ended with Custer's stunning victory at the Battle of Guard Hill, or Crooked Run, on August 16, 1864, a mere six days after Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan's appointment to the command of the Army of the Shenandoah. In the ensuing months, bloody battles against Confederate Lt. Gen. Jubal A. Early's Army of the Valley District would take place. The third installment's accounts of the battles of Winchester, Tom's Brook, Cedar Creek, and Waynesboro—the Shenandoah Valley campaign's final battle—constitute the backbone of the opening chapters of the narrative.

The third installment delves into the effect the attention of the press had on this strained relationship. After Winchester, no less than five sketches of Custer and his part in the final cavalry charge appeared in the nation's dailies, while Merritt's part was largely ignored. Merritt simmered with resentment. Sketch artists James E. Taylor and Alfred Waud both produced depictions of Custer at the Battle of Tom's Brook. Though Merritt had been just as successful on the Valley Pike as Custer had been on the Back Road, yet again, his efforts were hardly mentioned. It was in the aftermath of Cedar Creek that the relationship was irretrievably, and very publicly, fractured. When Custer issued a congratulatory missive to his 3rd Division on the capture of 45 of the 48 guns taken in the battle, Merritt sent a stinging denunciation to the Cavalry Corps' assistant adjutant general. Merritt's protest was published subsequently in several of the nation's leading newspapers.

This was very uncharacteristic of Merritt, who believed that what happened in his beloved army should stay within the army. He never made any effort to pander to the press. His distaste for publicity, however, was hurtful to the morale of his men, who thirsted for national recognition. Conversely, Custer worked hard at establishing a rapport with the press. Reporters found a hot meal at his mess and companionable conversation on military matters. As a result, his name was featured prominently in the papers. It was no wonder that Custer quickly became the darling of the Northern reading public.

The issue of seniority rankled Custer well into the postwar years. Merritt, by dint of his graduation from West Point ahead of Custer, was senior to Custer, and thus his superior officer. Custer continuously flouted Merritt's authority, addressing him as "acting chief of cavalry." After the winter of 1864–65, Custer embarked on a programme of insubordination that culminated during the Appomattox campaign, when he deliberately ignored Merritt's orders. Though Sheridan and Merritt were drinking friends, Sheridan made no effort to hide his admiration of Custer, which was very much on display when he purchased the table on which Ulysses Grant wrote the terms of surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia

and presented it to Libbie. “Permit me to say, Madam,” Sheridan wrote in a note accompanying the table, “that there is scarcely an individual in our service who has contributed more than your very gallant husband.”<sup>2</sup>

The third installment of *The Boy Generals* concludes with chapters on the battles of Dinwiddie Courthouse, Five Forks, Sailors Creek, and Appomattox Courthouse, as well as the Grand Review in Washington.

## Acknowledgments

First and foremost, I want to thank Theodore P. Savas of Savas Beatie LLC for giving me the opportunity to present my work to the Civil War community. His faith in my work has been everything an author would wish for from his publisher. Special thanks are due to the incredible work of the ladies on his staff, who have worked tirelessly to present my manuscript for public consumption. Ted, thanks for taking a chance on a first-time author.

What I wanted to write about Eric J. Wittenberg appears in the dedication of this installment. The one concept Eric banged into me was that it is impossible to understand the flow of battle without walking the actual field, trekking in the paths of those stalwart horsemen.

Professor Gregory J. W. Urwin, despite his busy schedule, made time to read all three installments from cover to cover. His detailed comments about my work influenced much of the final product. His book, *Custer Victorious: The Civil War Battles of General George Armstrong Custer*, is, and always will be, my bible.

Many thanks are due to Joel Manuel, who edited all three installments of *The Boy Generals* over the last five years. His unerring eye corrected my tendency to use the passive tense.

Additional thanks to MaryBeth Allison for her copyediting work and sincere enthusiasm for the book; to Ryan Quint for his detailed indexing; and to Ed Alexander and Mark A. Moore for their excellent maps.

Special thanks go out to the Cincinnati Historical Society, which granted me access to the writings of Roger Hannaford, a trooper in the 2nd Ohio Cavalry of Custer’s 3rd Cavalry Division. A prolific writer, Hannaford’s diary entries on the time he spent under Custer’s command are an integral part of the narrative I present.

The articles of the *Journal of the United States Cavalry Association* (JUSCA), the organization founded by Wesley Merritt, provided a rich insight into not just

2 Marguerite Merington, ed., *The Custer Story: The Life and Intimate Letters of General Custer and His Wife Elizabeth* (New York, 1950), 159.

the man himself, but into the men who fought with him and came to honor and respect him. If you are ever going to understand just what a great soldier Merritt was, the evidence will be found in the countless articles he wrote, or were written about him, in the JUSCA volumes. Unfortunately, no great treasure trove of Merritt's personal correspondence has ever been found.

We live in a modern, digital world, and I cannot help but thank the many members of the various Civil War and Custer groups I belong to on Facebook. Reading their posts is a part of my daily life and their insights are integral to the story I am telling. I cannot mention them all due to space restrictions; however, the following are among my favorites: Shelby Foote and the American Civil War, the General George A. Custer History Forum, the Little Big Horn Associates, the Little Big Horn Discussion Group, *Guerra Civil Americana en Español*, the Original Civil War Buff, and the Civil War Book Market.

There are so many other organizations that I have sought information from that it seems a crime not to mention them. For that I am truly sorry. To all of them I owe my gratitude.

## PROLOGUE

### A Measured Response

ON AUGUST 7, 1864, the Adjutant General's Office issued Order Number 240, consolidating the Middle Department and the departments of Washington, the Susquehanna, and West Virginia into the Middle Military Division as a prelude to the forthcoming operations in Virginia's Shenandoah Valley. The order also gave command of the Middle Military District and the Army of the Shenandoah, which consisted of three infantry corps and three cavalry divisions, to Philip Sheridan. It was a tremendous responsibility for someone Secretary of War Edwin M. Stanton deemed to be too young, too inexperienced. "[T]he defeat of my army might be followed by the overthrow of the party in power," acknowledged Sheridan, "which event, it was believed, would at least retard the progress of the war, if, indeed, it did not lead to the complete abandonment of all coercive measures. Under circumstances such as these I could not afford to risk a disaster."<sup>1</sup>

On August 9, 1864, Sheridan had elevated Brig. Gen. Alfred T. A. Torbert to the post of Cavalry Corps commander. Brigadier General Wesley Merritt had replaced Torbert in command of the 1st Cavalry Division. Serving under Merritt were Brig. Gen. George Armstrong Custer in command of the 1st Brigade—the famed Michigan Cavalry Brigade, and the 2nd Brigade commanded by Brig. Gen. Thomas C. Devin.

1 *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies*, 128 vols. (Washington, DC: 1880–1901), Series 1, vol. 43, part 1, 719, hereinafter cited as *OR*; all references are to Series 1 unless otherwise noted; Philip H. Sheridan, *The Personal Memoirs of P. H. Sheridan*, 2 vols. (New York: 1888), 1:464.



On August 7, 1864, Maj. Gen. Philip H. Sheridan was placed in command of the Middle Military Division and the Army of the Shenandoah. *Library of Congress*

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Uncharacteristically for the aggressive Sheridan, prudence became his watchword. By mid-August, Sheridan found himself in a quandary. A reconnaissance on August 13 found Jubal Early's Army of the Valley District firmly entrenched in a commanding position on Fisher's Hill, just north of Strasburg. Lieutenant General Ulysses S. Grant's edict to follow Early "to the death" was no longer feasible. Sheridan's concerns were further exacerbated when Colonel Norton P. Chapman brought news from the War Department of the impending reinforcement of



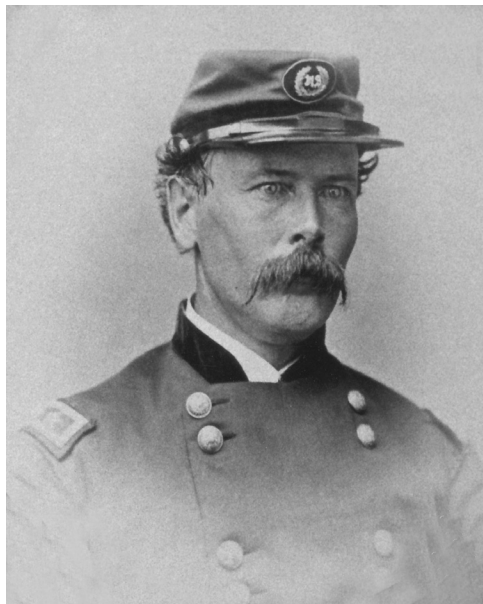
Brigadier General A. T. A. Torbert was appointed to command the Cavalry Corps of the Middle Military District just prior to the start of the Shenandoah Valley Campaign.  
*Library of Congress*



Wesley Merritt graduated from the United States Military Academy in the Class of 1860. Before the Civil War, he served with the 2nd U.S. Dragoons on the western frontier. He was promoted to Brigadier General of Volunteers on June 29, 1863, and given command of the Reserve Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division. *Library of Congress*



George Armstrong Custer was a graduate of the West Point Class of 1861. He was promoted to Brigadier General of Volunteers on June 29, 1863, and given command of the Michigan Cavalry Brigade, 3rd Cavalry Division. *Library of Congress*



Brigadier General Thomas Devin commanded the 2nd Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division. During the Gettysburg Campaign, because of his no-nonsense leadership style, he was known as “Buford’s Hard Hitter.” *Library of Congress*

Early’s army. This intelligence caused Sheridan “much solicitude,” as, advancing through Chester Gap, the Confederates would be able to strike Sheridan’s left and rear, thus cutting him off from his supply base at Harpers Ferry.<sup>2</sup>

On September 14, Sheridan ordered Brig. Gen. Thomas Devin’s 1st Brigade, 1st Cavalry Division, to

Front Royal “to watch for such a movement.” That evening, he issued orders for the army to withdraw to Halltown. Even as the order was issued, Devin’s and Brig. Gen. George A. Custer’s brigades attacked Lt. Gen. Richard Anderson’s force as it attempted to ford the Shenandoah River at Crooked Run. Custer’s Spencer-armed regiments inflicted heavy losses in this confrontation.<sup>3</sup>

The Army of the Shenandoah began its long withdrawal to Halltown in the pre-dawn hours of August 17, 1864. Brevet Major General William H. Emory’s XIX Corps had moved the day before and was congregating around Winchester as Brig. Gen. George Crook’s Army of West Virginia and Maj. Gen. Horatio G. Wright’s VI Corps abandoned their positions south of Cedar Creek. Enjoined by Grant to act cautiously and appreciative of Early’s aggressive nature, Sheridan had stressed to his top commanders “that care be taken to-night that nothing is done to indicate that a movement is to take place, such as striking tents before dark or by unusual fires after dark.”<sup>4</sup>

Early that morning, the Rebels “became aware that we were retiring down the valley, and at once made after us,” reported Sheridan. From Winchester, Emory reported to Sheridan, “This place is entirely indefensible; it is a basin surrounded

2 Ulysses S. Grant, *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, 2 vols. (New York: 1885-86), 2:318; Sheridan, *Memoirs*, 1:490.

3 Samuel L. Gracey, *Annals of the Sixth Pennsylvania Cavalry* (Philadelphia, 1868), 285.

4 Sheridan, *Memoirs*, 1:490.

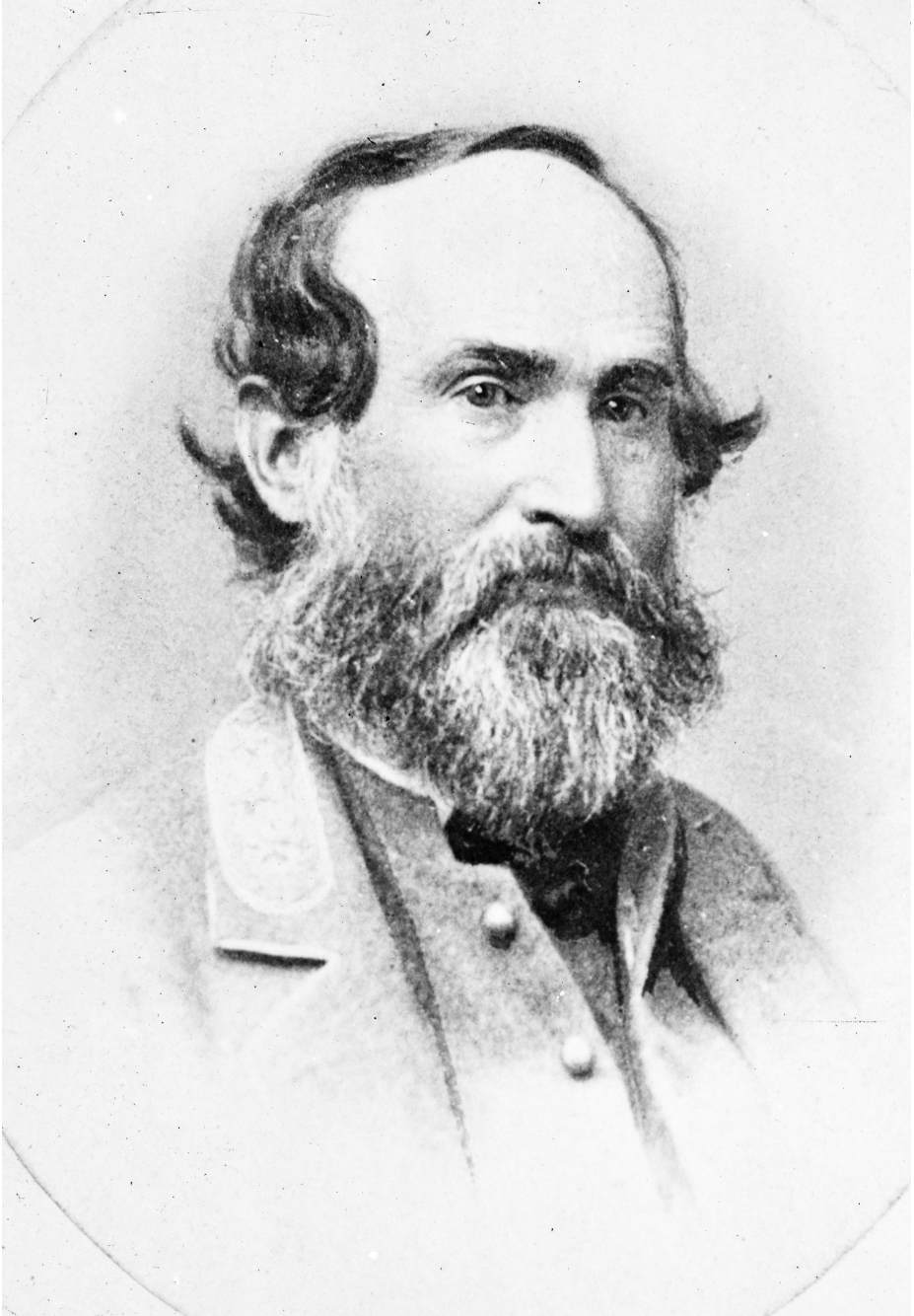
by heights which are commanded by other heights.” Emory also suggested “that the crossing of the Opequon is a better position.” His corps was ordered to move to Berryville, while the VI Corps and the Army of West Virginia pushed on to Clifton. Brigadier General Alfred Torbert, who had been appointed to command the cavalry of the Middle Military District, had left orders requiring his cavalry commanders to have their troopers on the move no later than 5:00 a.m. The first rays of dawn revealed the horsemen stretched out in a thin cordon across the valley floor.<sup>5</sup>

Pursuant to Grant’s August 26 orders to Sheridan, the cavalry was charged with the dual tasks of protecting the army’s rear and devastating the countryside in the upcoming campaign. The Michigan Cavalry Brigade wheeled about and, with the 6th Michigan facing the enemy, began moving back down the Shenandoah Valley. They drove all the livestock before them and destroyed all the grain and foodstuffs that could not be carted away. “The day had been an unpleasant one, the weather was hot and the roads very dusty,” wrote Samuel Gracey of the desultory work. No soldier ever really becomes inured to the death and devastation of the battlefield, but the trail of flame and the thick, black clouds that marked their progress down the Valley tugged at their heartstrings. The orders issued to Sheridan’s cavalry would create a firestorm. As soldiers, they obeyed their orders; as men, they came to abhor the task they had been given. One of them, when queried as to the necessity of the wanton destruction, replied, “Yes . . . I am one of the ‘barnburners,’ destroyers of homes, etc. . . . I don’t like such work. . . . It is not civilized war. Although much is military necessity, much could be avoided. Harshness is never of any use. We lose by this.”<sup>6</sup>

War was not new to the citizenry of the Shenandoah Valley, which since its earliest settlement had been characterized by religious, cultural, and political differences. Since 1861, both Federal and Confederate armies had trekked up and down its magnificent length. Their insatiable need for wood left behind a land barren of forests, wood lots, shaded glens, and fences. Devastation and suffering became the daily lot of the populace, riven as it was by conflicting ideologies and the uneasy co-mingling of warring factions. “A broad spectrum of feelings, loyalties, and beliefs continued to coexist,” historian Margaretta Barton Colt noted in her chronicle of her family’s wartime travails, “from a staunchly Unionist family who abhorred abolition and abolitionists, through slaveowners who welcomed the end of slavery . . . to militant Southerners who refused to walk under the Stars

5 *OR* 43, pt. 1, 815.

6 *Ibid.*, 916–17; Gracey, *Annals*, 286–87; Mark Grimsley, *The Hard Hand of War: Union Military Policy Toward Southern Civilians, 1861–1865* (New York, 1995), 183.



General Jubal A. Early commanded the Confederate forces operating in the Shenandoah Valley. His incursion to Washington spurred the Union response into the valley.  
*Library of Congress*

Colonel John S. Mosby commanded the 43rd Battalion Virginia Cavalry Partisan Rangers. The Rangers operated out of Loudoun and Fauquier counties, an area that came to be known as Mosby's Confederacy. *Library of Congress*



and Stripes at the door of the hospital where their own soldiers awaited their ministrations.” The sights and sounds of war became the backdrop of their daily lives.<sup>7</sup>

“At first the troops of both sides had a degree of idealism,” noted historian Colt. Idealism, however, is always the first casualty of the first bullet that finds its mark on the battlefield. As an army of reporters, photographers, and sketch artists followed in the wake of the armies, the horrors of war were laid naked before the reading publics of both sides. By 1864, as the conflict dragged interminably on, it seemed as if the warring factions had become calloused to the multitude of war’s sinful ways. Death, devastation, and suffering had come to be accepted as the way things were. The overwhelming military and industrial strength of the North wore away at the Confederacy. Though the Southerners fought on valiantly—stubbornly—there was an inevitability to the eventual outcome. There was, for the North, a light at the end of the tunnel.<sup>8</sup>

In the face of dwindling numbers in what had become a war of attrition, the South turned to more nefarious means of attaining, if not victory, at least stalemate. They turned to the “terror” of guerrilla warfare. Chief amongst its proponents was Col. John Singleton Mosby, who, operating out of Virginia’s Loudoun and Fauquier counties, struck fear into the Union armies operating in the Valley. The secessionists had no compunction in giving aid and comfort to Mosby and his men. “This in turn provoked some extreme reactions” opined Colt, “with threats of worse, from the Federals.” Winchester, they warned, would be burned to the

7 Margaretta Barton Colt, *Defend the Valley: A Shenandoah Family in the Civil War* (New York, 1994), 8.

8 *Ibid.*, 17.

ground. Whatever solution the Yankees devised to counter the depredations of Mosby and his rangers would have to be a measured one. Much skepticism existed as to whether the brash Sheridan was the man for the task. Nonetheless, his presence in the Valley was a sure sign that the days when Mosby could operate unhindered in the rear of Union armies were over. The Army of the Shenandoah blocked the easily fordable Potomac River and offered protection for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, which spanned the Shenandoah at its confluence with the Potomac. The railroad was crucial to the supply of the sinews of war in the West.<sup>9</sup>

Neither Custer nor Brig. Gen. Wesley Merritt committed their personal thoughts on the moral and ethical issues raised by Grant's orders to Sheridan to paper. Soldiers that they were, they simply followed the orders they had been given. Custer was assigned the onerous task of carrying out Sheridan's reprisal for Lt. John Meigs's cold-blooded murder, while Merritt would lead an incursion into the heart of "Mosby's Confederacy" in an effort to strike at the Rebel partisan's base of operations.

9 Ibid.

## CHAPTER ONE

### It Was Murderous Work

**D**ANGERS APLENTY LURKED IN the Shenandoah Valley for Phil Sheridan. The combative Jubal Early could readily unite his two commands and attack the thin line of Union cavalry protecting the retrograde movement of Sheridan's spread-out army. Wesley Merritt urged his brigade commanders to keep in touch with his headquarters, as well as with the flanking units to either side of their respective commands. "An intimate connection will be kept up between the columns as they advance," he ordered, "and frequent reports will be made by the commanding officers of the columns on the flanks to these headquarters which will move with the 2nd Brigade."<sup>1</sup>

Brigadier General John McCausland's cavalry and Brig. Gen. Gabriel C. Wharton's infantry quickly marched down the Valley pike, brushed aside some cavalry skirmishers at Kernstown, and halted in front of Bower's Hill, a piece of high ground on the outskirts of Winchester. The tardy Brig. Gen. James Wilson had finally arrived in the Shenandoah, and it was elements of his division, supported by Brig. Gen. William H. Penrose's New Jersey Brigade, who were covering the flank of Sheridan's retreating army. Dusk was starting to creep over the field, but Early cursed one of Wharton's brigades into line, and the Confederates advanced under a heavy fire of musketry and artillery. McCausland swung his cavalry in a wide circle to the right and, charging down the Berryville Road, crashed into the exposed Union flank.

1 *OR* 43, pt. 1, 817.



The numerous rivers and streams of the Shenandoah Valley presented a challenge to the maneuvers of Sheridan's cavalry. *Harper's Weekly*, March 25, 1865

“[It was] a beautiful though unequal skirmish fight,” recalled Col. Edward L. Campbell of the 15th New Jersey. The Rebels advanced across the open fields with their usual verve, their front obscured by the battle smoke of “an uninterrupted, cool, well-directed fire.” From behind the cover of a line of rocks and trees, the Union position erupted in a sheet of flame. “No skirmish line,” Campbell asserted, “however strong, could overcome the resistance of our line, posted as it was.” The Southerners would prove him wrong.<sup>2</sup>

In the end, both Wilson and Penrose were shoved rudely off Bower's Hill. In an inauspicious start, Wilson was driven through Winchester, leaving 50 troopers in Early's hands. The New Jersey Brigade was badly mauled. “The Jerseymen,” recounted one trooper in the 22nd Pennsylvania, “held Early's horsemen in check all afternoon, and only when Wharton's Division of Infantry attacked their right and Maj. Gen. Stephen D. Ramseur's division their front while Gordon advanced against the cavalry, was their line broken.” The Federals lost 97 men killed or wounded and 250 prisoners. “The captures,” explained the Pennsylvanian, “were

<sup>2</sup> Alanson Haines, *History of the Fifteenth Regiment of New Jersey Volunteers* (Gaithersburg, MD, 1987), 244–45.

chiefly due to the pertinacity with which the line had been held until late at night.” Torbert, who had been with Wilson at Winchester, tipped his hat to Merritt. “Breckinridge’s corps made me leave Winchester yesterday, but I had not the First Division by a long shot.” Striking north from Front Royal, Maj. Gen. Joseph Kershaw’s division, with Maj. Gen. Fitzhugh Lee’s horsemen, advanced down the Front Royal pike and took up station on Opequon Creek. Early’s command was finally united with Anderson’s.<sup>3</sup>

Being thrown on the defensive worried Sheridan after the fight at Front Royal. A steady stream of confusing reports gave him a cloudy picture of the extent to which Early had been reinforced. Earlier that week, Grant had telegraphed, “It is now positive that Kershaw’s division has gone, but no other infantry has.” Grant counseled, “This reinforcement to Early will put him nearer on an equality with you in numbers than I want to see, and will make it necessary for you to observe some caution about attacking. I would not, however, change my instructions, further than to enjoin caution.” Sheridan quickly assured Grant, “I have taken the defensive until their strength is more fully developed.” By August 19, he had pulled all his infantry into line a few miles south of Charlestown and picketed the entire front with cavalry. In the north, Brig. Gen. William Averell’s division guarded the Potomac fords from Shepherdstown to Williamsport. James Wilson’s 3rd Division connected on Averell’s left, swung east across the Valley Pike, and connected with Merritt, whose brigades were picketing the Opequon crossings and the gaps through the Blue Ridge Mountains.<sup>4</sup>

Early wasted no time in pressuring the thin blue line. From Winchester, Maj. Gen. Robert Rodes struck down the Berryville Pike, sparring with Col. Charles Russell Lowell’s Reserve Brigade and driving it across the Opequon. Ramseur reconnoitered north on the Martinsburg Road and encountered Averell’s vedettes at Bunker Hill. Anderson moved his command to the Millwood-Front Royal Road, where he swung north to face Berryville. The official view at Sheridan’s headquarters was that “the enemy appears to be uncertain as to what course to pursue.” This was not the case at the unit level, where field officers watched the martial chess match with keen professional interest. It was, complained Col. James H. Kidd, the beginning of a protracted period of “marching and countermarching, picketing, reconnoitering and skirmishing continually.” Throughout this time, the Michiganders were, according to Kidd, “mostly engaged with infantry and did not

3 Samuel Clarke Farrar, *The Twenty-Second Pennsylvania Cavalry and the Ringgold Battalion, 1861–1865* (Pittsburgh, 1911), 338; *OR*, 43, pt. 1, 833.

4 *OR* 43, pt. 1, 791–92, 841.



Major General Fitzhugh Lee commanded Early's cavalry. He had been Custer's tactical officer during his tenure at the Military Academy. *Library of Congress*

once, I believe, come in contact with the confederate [*sic*] cavalry.”<sup>5</sup>

Fluidity remained at the heart of the maneuvering, forcing Early to resort to one of his favorite gambits: a bolt for the Potomac and a crossing into northern territory. It was a move Sheridan was prepared for, reporting to Grant that he was “hoping that my adversary would renew the boldness he had exhibited the early part of the month, and strike for the north side

of the Potomac.” On August 20, Sheridan informed Grant of his intent to lay a trap for the wily Early. “I had purposefully left everything in that direction for the enemy.” From Summit Point, Wilson assured Merritt that “everything [was] quiet in this direction,” but he reported that two squadrons of Averell's command had been driven out of Martinsburg by Fitzhugh Lee's horsemen. Averell's chief of staff, Capt. Marcus Reno, had warned Wilson that he anticipated “a movement of rebels in force thru Snicker's Gap to join Lee's ‘entire army’ for an invasion by Edward's Ferry—Which, I didn't believe it. What's going on?”<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, the heavyweight skirmishing continued. On August 21, Confederate forces crossed the Opequon at several locations and fanned out into the countryside in three rapidly moving columns. Small fights blistered up at Smithfield, Summit Point, and Berryville. A combined force of Rebel infantry and cavalry crashed in Wilson's right at Summit Point, and the Yankees were forced back onto the infantry support of Brig. Gen. George Getty's division of Wright's VI Corps. Getty at once reinforced his line, but Robert Rodes countered by ordering some North Carolina boys into the fracas, which continued until dark. The VI

5 *OR* 43, pt. 1, 841; Kidd, *Recollections*, 377–78.

6 Sheridan, *Memoirs*, 1:492–93; James H. Wilson to Wesley Merritt, August 20, 1864, Wesley Merritt's General's Papers, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. (NARA), hereinafter cited as MGP.

Corps lost approximately 275 killed or wounded, though a last blast of musketry had driven the Rebels from the field.

“As my position at best in front of Charlestown was a bad one,” Sheridan wired Maj. Gen. Henry Halleck, the Union Army’s chief of staff, “and much dependent on this army, I withdrew my command without loss or opposition last night and took up a new line in front of Halltown.” By August 22, the Army of the Shenandoah was once more behind its prepared positions. Sheridan’s withdrawal from Strasburg elicited a howl of derision from the press. Though fully aware of the “mutterings of dissatisfaction,” Sheridan phlegmatically ignored the calls for his removal with a shrug of his shoulders. Confident in his course of action, he “paid small heed to the adverse criticisms pouring down from the North almost every day.” In his memoirs, James Wilson agreed. “Sheridan had evidently not yet found himself,” he opined with the ingrained pomposity that so grated on the nerves of his peers.<sup>7</sup>

Discovering that Sheridan’s forces had retired down the Valley, Early’s men surged forward and drove the covering cavalry through Charlestown before locating the Union positions at Halltown. Sheridan had crafted a defensive line of great natural strength. Wright’s VI Corps occupied the right and Emory’s XIX Corps the center, with Crook’s Army of West Virginia on the left. Merritt’s and Wilson’s cavalry divisions held the right, with Lowell’s Reserve Brigade on the far left, plugging the gap between Crook’s open flank and the Shenandoah River. Averell’s command watched the Potomac crossings from Antietam Ford to Williamsport, while his scouting parties ranged the backcountry from Martinsburg to Shepherdstown in search of the elusive Rebels. Heavy skirmishing over the next few days failed to draw Sheridan out, but under cover of the heavy demonstrations, Early began extending his lines around the Federal right flank.<sup>8</sup>

## End of Unedited Excerpt

7 *OR* 43, pt. 1, 880; Sheridan, *Memoirs*, 1:492; James H. Wilson, *Under the Old Flag: Recollections of Military Operations in the War for the Union, the Spanish War, the Boxer Rebellion, Etc.*, 2 vols. (New York, 1912), 1:539–40.

8 *OR* 43, pt. 1, 880–81.