

Raymond Monahan

History 370

Dr. Dawson

1318 Words

Topic

#25 Did Gen. JEB Stuart fail to support Gen. Robert E. Lee on July 3, 1863 at Gettysburg?

The third day of Gettysburg, July 3rd, has been immortalized by many with the valiant attack known as Pickett's Charge. What many history textbooks and documentaries fail to include is that Pickett's charge was only one of three major engagements on July 3rd. The other two were a renewed attack on Culp's Hill and the cavalry battle of East Cavalry Field. The battle of East Cavalry Field was between Gen. David Gregg's division for the Union and Gen. J.E.B. Stuart's division for the Confederacy. While many historians question Stuart and his regard for the orders provided at the beginning of the campaign, the thesis of this paper is Gen. J.E.B. Stuart followed the orders given to him by Gen. Robert E. Lee on July 3rd detailing his involvement in the 3rd day engagements, successfully providing the support Lee needed for the renewed offenses. Though there is some argument as to what the order was, which will be detailed further in this paper, the order that has the most credibility within the community is that Gen. Stuart was ordered to protect the Confederate left flank, engage Gen. Gregg's large cavalry force threatening the Confederate forces attacking Culp's Hill, and if applicable penetrate into the Union rear to create further chaos following a successful attack on Cemetery Ridge by Gen. Pickett.

To recognize the success of Stuart in following Lee's order on July 3rd, we need to understand what took place. Stuart arrived at Gettysburg on July 2nd and observed the men of the Stonewall Brigade face of against Union cavalry on Brinkerhoff's ridge. The next morning Stuart moved his 4 cavalry brigades to the extreme left of the Confederate line. Gregg had two brigades present on the Union right flank on July 3rd.

At about 11 a.m., Stuart fired four cannon shots. Gregg engaged Stuart in a brief artillery duel. Stuart attempted to flank the defenders, but skirmishers of the 5th Michigan with Spencer repeating rifles successfully resisted the first advances by the confederates. Stuart ordered the 1st Virginia Cavalry to charge and break the skirmishers' line. Gregg ordered Gen. Custer and the 7th Michigan Cavalry to make a counterattack that successfully repelled Confederate advances. Stuart attempted a second attack that was again repelled this time by the 1st Michigan Cavalry. Stuart retreated from the field and held his position on the flank until the Army of Northern Virginia left Gettysburg the next day.¹

Though Stuart failed to drive Gregg from the battlefield, he successfully followed the orders relayed to him by Lee. Stuart was tasked with protecting the Confederate left flank, to engage Union cavalry and preventing them from attacking Confederate infantry forces attacking Culp's Hill, and if applicable harassing the Union rear and retreat upon a successful charge by Pickett on Cemetery Ridge. Stuart deployed on the left flank on July 3rd with the intent of preventing the cavalry of the Union from harassing the Confederate infantry assaulting Culp's Hill as had happened on July 2nd. Stuart's men were exhausted after riding for 8 days around the Army of the Potomac and were in no fighting condition.² Lee was forced to deploy Stuart's men because the last "fresh" cavalry unit under Gen. John Imboden was already deployed to resist Union cavalry attempting to collapse or flank the right end of the Confederate line. Lee's apparent concern for Union cavalry flanking his line, as well as Stuart's observation of Federal cavalry attacking the Stonewall Brigade at the Battle of Brinkerhoff's Ridge on July 2nd,

support the idea that Lee needed Stuart to provide the same shield on the left flank as Imboden provided on the right. Stuart deployed his men in an ambush formation with a goal of drawing in Gregg and engaging him. The four cannon shots were fired for two reasons. The first was to let Gregg know there was a Confederate force in front of him, drawing Gregg's attention from the infantry not far away. The second reason was "reconnaissance by fire," by which Stuart was attempting to spook Gregg's skirmishers to reveal their positions as the cannon shots were fired at them.³ This tactic succeeded as Stuart began to take fire from Pennington's guns. This presented Stuart with his target and charged with his tired cavalry to keep Gregg on the battlefield as long as possible so the infantry not far away could not be harassed. The last part of Stuart's order is what has caused the greatest confusion. Stuart was an intelligent opportunistic battlefield commander and had he driven Gregg from the field and Hancock was driven from Cemetery Ridge, Stuart would have been in the prime position to create even more hysteria amongst the Union retreat.⁴ Because neither of these things happened and his losses on East Cavalry Field were small, Stuart was able to resume his position on the flank and defend it from any assault.

Some historians believe that this last portion of the order detailed was the primary order and Stuart was attempting to flank Culp's Hill or Cemetery Ridge. The arguments that differ the narrative are as follows: the formation of Stuart's men suggested an intent to advance and engage into the Union line, the 4 cannon shots were signal shots to Gen. Lee informing him that "he was in position," and lastly Stuart's force was too large just to be protecting the flank.⁵ Had this been the case then Stuart

would have failed the orders given to him by Lee, but Stuart was not given an order to flank and attack the rear of Culp's Hill or Cemetery Ridge. The key arguments of this alternate order have mistakes in information and logic. First, Stuart formed his men in a skirmisher formation to engage but not overtake Gregg, where he would use an attack formation and would have limited his number of dismounted troops that engaged. Second, it is extremely unlikely Lee would be able to discern the 4 shots fired by Stuart from the cannon barrage on Cemetery Ridge or the intense fighting on Culp's Hill.⁶ Lastly, the argument that Stuart had too many men for an assignment of simple defense is random. Stuart had 5300 men under his command between 4 brigades on July 3rd, and by the end of the fighting only about 3400 had seen any form of combat that day. Gen. Lee had little knowledge of Federal cavalry by mid afternoon July 2nd. Had he had detailed knowledge he would have realized Gen. Imboden's men were not needed on the right flank and could have been able to deploy these fresh soldiers elsewhere.⁷ Lee was taking precautions after the Battle of Brinkerhoff's Ridge by making sure Stuart had as full strength as he could to protect the renewed Confederate offenses. It is important to reiterate that Stuart's men had just finished an eight day ride and were exhausted, along with their horses, and were as fit to fight as the men who attempted to capture Little Round Top on July 2nd.⁸ Finally, in his after action report, Gen. Lee himself commented that Gen. Stuart "effectively protected our left."⁹ Only confirming Stuart was in a position of defense, not offense.

Though Gen. Stuart failed to drive Gen. Gregg from the field, he was successful in following the order given to him by Gen. Lee to protect the Confederate left flank, to

engage Federal cavalry to prevent the infantry units attacking up Culp's Hill from being harassed, and was in position to create chaos within the Union army should they have been routed from their defensive positions on Culp's Hill and Cemetery Ridge. Though Gen. Stuart has been criticized for not being present on the first day of Gettysburg and potentially not following Lee's initial orders when the campaign began, this order was one the Stuart cannot be criticized for not following.¹⁰

Endnotes

Note 1. Eric J. Wittenberg, *Protecting the Flank at Gettysburg: The Battles for Brinkerhoff's Ridge and East Cavalry Field, July 2-3, 1863* (El Dorado Hills, CA: Savas Beatie LLC, 2013), 77-222.

Note 2. 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*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986), 140-148.

Note 3. Wittenberg, *Protecting the Flank at Gettysburg*, 277.

Note 4. Eric J. Wittenberg, "What was Jeb Stuart doing on East Cavalry Field, July 3, 1863?," <http://civilwarcavalry.com/?p=3045>.

Note 5. Tom Carhart, *Lost Triumph: Lee's Real Plan at Gettysburg—And Why It Failed*. (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2005), 159-178.

Note 6. Wittenberg, *Protecting the Flank at Gettysburg*, 271-274.

Note 7. Wittenberg, *Protecting the Flank at Gettysburg*, 255-264.

Note 8. Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg*, 143.

Note 9. Wittenberg, *Protecting the Flank at Gettysburg*, 284.

Note 10. Warren C. Robinson, *Jeb Stuart and the Confederate Defeat at Gettysburg*. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013) 2.

Bibliography

Carhart, Tom. *Lost Triumph: Lee's Real Plan at Gettysburg—And Why It Failed*.

New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 2005.

Longacre, Edward G. *The Cavalry at Gettysburg: A Tactical Study of Mounted Operations during the Civil War's Pivotal Campaign, 9 June-14 July 1863*.

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986.

Robinson, Warren C. *Jeb Stuart and the Confederate Defeat at Gettysburg*.

Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013.

Wittenberg, Eric J. *Protecting the Flank at Gettysburg: The Battles for*

Brinkerhoff's Ridge and East Cavalry Field, July 2-3, 1863. El Dorado Hills,

CA: Savas Beatie LLC, 2013.

Wittenberg, Eric J. "What was Jeb Stuart doing on East Cavalry Field, July 3, 1863?" *Civil War Cavalry* (web log), November 18, 2011. Accessed

October 6, 2017. <http://civilwarcavalry.com/?p=3045>.