

“A hell of a damned fool”
Judson Kilpatrick, Farnsworth’s Charge,
and the
Hard Hand of History

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Brigadier General Judson Kilpatrick’s decision to launch a mounted assault with Elon J. Farnsworth’s cavalry brigade against the right flank of the Army of Northern Virginia during the late afternoon of July 3, 1863 has been characterized by historians as reckless, fruitless, tragic, ill-conceived, and doomed.¹ The results have been called a fiasco, a sacrifice, and a senseless slaughter.² Kilpatrick has been accused of ordering the assault because of his own self-indulgence and his desire to gain eternal glory.³ What has come to be known as “Farnsworth’s Charge” has even been compared to the charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava.⁴ Two well-respected historians simply called the charge a display of bad generalship.⁵ Another historian claimed that Farnsworth’s Charge marked the downturn of Kilpatrick’s career and stood out as the darkest stain on an already blemished record.⁶

Certainly it is easy to find fault with Judson Kilpatrick. He was vain and self-centered. He sought favors from politicians. He boasted and sometimes lied. His modern biographer has concluded that the view held by Kilpatrick’s many detractors was probably close to the truth, in that he was “an egotistical, lying, sadistic, philandering, thieving miscreant whose lofty reputation had been won by words, not deeds.”⁷ After Kilpatrick’s transfer to the Army of the Cumberland, even William Tecumseh Sherman allegedly referred to him as “a hell of a damned fool,” but with the caveat that *that* kind of man was just the sort of cavalry commander he was seeking.⁸

Unfortunately, it is easy to cast aspersions on someone like Kilpatrick based on his character flaws. Likewise, it is tempting to draw simple conclusions about certain events as a result of our own historical hindsight. Because Farnsworth’s Charge was repulsed, because Elon Farnsworth was killed, because some of Kilpatrick’s decisions in later campaigns were faulty, and because Kilpatrick was egotistical and overbearing, one might be apt to make a superficial assessment about the effectiveness or even the necessity of Farnsworth’s Charge. Kilpatrick’s ill-fated decision is thus interpreted as yet another bad call by a general officer who had made many unsound decisions during his military career.

Have historians treated Judson Kilpatrick fairly or unfairly -- at least in respect to his decisions on July 3, 1863? What if Kilpatrick’s decision to order Farnsworth’s Charge is examined and objectively evaluated within the context of his orders, the tactical situation, the cavalry’s organizational structure, the terrain, the enemy, the timing of the attack, and the results? Did Kilpatrick make a sound decision based

on the information he had available to him *at that time*? Could the cavalry assault have succeeded, or was the assault nothing more than a forlorn hope? After close scrutiny, will it be apparent that the aforementioned historians have been correct in their assessment of Kilpatrick's generalship all along?

Hugh Judson Kilpatrick was born in Deckertown, New Jersey on January 14, 1836. He attended two preparatory schools in his youth and was admitted to West Point in 1856. At that time, the U.S. Military Academy curriculum was based on five years of academic study. Kilpatrick graduated seventeenth in a class of forty-five cadets in May 1861. Although he was commissioned in the regular army as a second lieutenant of artillery, Kilpatrick sought service with a volunteer organization and was able to wrangle a captain's commission in the 5th New York Volunteer Infantry, more commonly known as Duryee's Zouaves. One month and four days after graduating from West Point, Captain Kilpatrick was wounded at the Battle of Big Bethel on June 10, 1861 -- the first regular army officer to be wounded in the Civil War.⁹

After his convalescence he was placed on recruiting duty and shortly thereafter gained a commission as lieutenant colonel of the newly recruited 2nd New York Cavalry Regiment. Kilpatrick remained with the 2nd New York through the spring of 1863, participating in several raids and skirmishes during the 1862 Valley Campaign and Second Manassas. During that time neither he nor his command did much to distinguish themselves.¹⁰

Kilpatrick was arrested and incarcerated for three months in the fall of 1862 for allegedly confiscating civilian property and selling it for his own personal gain, but the evidence was inconclusive, and he was released from jail and the charges dropped. Upon his return from prison, Kilpatrick was promoted to full colonel in December 1862 and given command of the 21st New York Cavalry.¹¹ When Joe Hooker took command of the Army of the Potomac in the winter of 1863, the cavalry was reorganized into a corps comprised of three divisions and a reserve brigade, all under the command of Major General George Stoneman.¹² Kilpatrick was again elevated, this time to brigade command in Alfred Pleasonton's division.¹³

Judson Kilpatrick's first tactical mission as a brigade commander came during the Chancellorsville campaign, when he and much of the rest of the Army of the Potomac's cavalry participated in "Stoneman's Raid." During this foray deep into Confederate territory, Kilpatrick and 450 Union troopers rode southward, close to Richmond, and tore up sections of the Richmond, Fredericksburg and Potomac Railroad and the Virginia Central Railroad.¹⁴

In early June 1863, Pleasonton replaced Stoneman as the overall cavalry commander, and Brigadier General David Gregg took command of Pleasonton's old division. Days later, Kilpatrick and his brigade fought in the Battle of Brandy Station, briefly driving Confederates from key terrain known as Fleetwood's Hill before being forced back by a Confederate counterattack. Kilpatrick was promoted to brigadier general shortly after this battle. During the middle of June, in the opening moves of what would come to be called the Gettysburg campaign, Kilpatrick's brigade pushed away a stubborn Confederate force from Aldie, Virginia, but at the cost of approximately 300 casualties compared to only 119 for the Southerners. Kilpatrick's inexperience as a brigade commander was readily noticeable during this battle, as he continually fed his units piecemeal into the fighting.¹⁵ On June 21, during the Battle of Upperville, Kilpatrick's aggressive nature resulted in his own capture. Luckily, Union troopers rescued him in short order.¹⁶ Later during the fighting, Kilpatrick risked his life to rescue the wounded commander of the 5th North Carolina Cavalry. The Confederates withdrew from Upperville that evening, giving the Union cavalry another opportunity to claim victory.¹⁷

Judson Kilpatrick had compensated for his lack of experience with his aggressiveness in combat, something that Alfred Pleasonton had been seeking in his commanders. One week after the Battle of Upperville, Kilpatrick again was elevated, this time to division command. When George Meade replaced Joe Hooker as commander of the Army of the Potomac on June 28, he gave Pleasonton permission to reorganize the cavalry corps, which only a day earlier had gained Brigadier General Julius Stahel's cavalry division from the Department of Washington. With the subsequent reorganization, Judson Kilpatrick took command of Stahel's division, officially designated the 3rd Division, Cavalry Corps,

Army of the Potomac. The 3rd Division was comprised of two brigades, both of which also would receive new commanders -- the 1st Brigade was taken over by Captain Elon J. Farnsworth, and the 2nd Brigade went to Captain George A. Custer. Farnsworth and Kilpatrick had been members of Pleasonton's staff, and both had the military attributes that Pleasonton found appealing. Farnsworth was a good officer, but he also was the nephew of Congressman John F. Farnsworth, Pleasonton's political patron. Custer only recently had been promoted to captain, and now both he and Farnsworth would be jumped four grades to brevet brigadier generals. Wesley Merritt, another young captain and, like Custer and Kilpatrick, a recent graduate of West Point, assumed command of the cavalry corps's reserve brigade. Merritt likewise was promoted to brevet brigadier general.¹⁸



Judson Kilpatrick. CWLM

The young generals would have little time to shake out their new commands. Most of the Army of Northern Virginia already was tramping through Pennsylvania. On June 30, Kilpatrick's division encountered Major General Jeb Stuart's cavalry division at the small town of Hanover, Pennsylvania. Stuart and his troopers had lost contact with the Army of Northern Virginia's infantry columns. They were trying desperately to find them when advance elements of Confederate Colonel John R. Chambliss's brigade engaged a rear guard of Farnsworth's brigade on the outskirts of Hanover sometime after 10 A.M. on June 30. The fighting quickly escalated. The early part of the battle was characterized by mounted charges, sometimes through the streets of town. Stuart himself narrowly escaped capture as the battle intensified. Both sides by this time had brought up horse artillery.

Farnsworth eventually deployed his entire brigade -- consisting of the 18th Pennsylvania, 5th New York, 1st Vermont, and 1st West Virginia -- in the center of Hanover and extending south and east of the town. General Kilpatrick and Custer's brigade, comprised entirely of Michigan regiments, soon galloped into Hanover and extended Farnsworth's line to the northwest. Union troopers barricaded Hanover's streets with boxes, hay bales,

fence rails, and overturned wagons.

Stuart, meanwhile, stabilized his line on the southern edge of Hanover and extended it to the southeast. More Confederate horse artillery was deployed, which immediately opened on Farnsworth's troops in the streets of Hanover and east of town. Custer decided to silence the Confederate guns that had been firing from high ground west of Hanover. The guns were captured and then retaken by a Confederate counterattack, but Custer's Michigan men rallied and tried again. Although unable to seize their objective, Custer's soldiers continued to threaten the Confederate left flank. Concerned with the danger to both flanks and also his rear, which was being threatened by slow-moving Union infantry, Stuart waited until darkness and withdrew from Hanover, moving to the east, farther away from the Army of Northern Virginia. Union casualties at the Battle of Hanover were less than 200; Confederate casualties also were slight, approximately 150.¹⁹

Although the fight at Hanover soon would be eclipsed by the Battle at Gettysburg, the engagement nonetheless had far-reaching ramifications. As a result of the Union cavalry resistance, Stuart was forced to take an even wider detour to link up with his infantry counterparts. If Stuart had not been preoccupied with finding the main body of the Confederate Army, he might have trounced Kilpatrick. As it stood, Judson Kilpatrick could notch his first victory as a division commander, and a very important one at that.

Nevertheless, Kilpatrick squandered his victory by failing to pursue Stuart. Then he reported faulty intelligence -- that the main body of the Army of Northern Virginia was near East Berlin, Pennsylvania.

By pushing his division from Hanover toward East Berlin, Kilpatrick not only completely lost contact with Stuart, he had also put his command far from Gettysburg when John Buford's cavalry division opened the Battle of Gettysburg on July 1. Kilpatrick and his division were approaching Gettysburg on July 2 when they again encountered part of Jeb Stuart's division, this time as the Confederates passed through Hunterstown after their long eastern detour. The subsequent skirmish at Hunterstown was a minor affair, with both sides believing that they had stopped an attack against their main army's flanks and rear.²⁰

At eleven that evening, Kilpatrick received orders to move his division to Two Taverns, about five miles south of Gettysburg on the Baltimore Pike.²¹ By daylight on July 3, Kilpatrick's division had arrived at its destination. At 8 A.M., Kilpatrick received new orders to move to the left flank of the Union line and attack the right and rear of the Army of Northern Virginia.²² Farnsworth's brigade and the division commander already had begun their ride toward Big Round Top when a courier from General Pleasonton found General Custer, who had not yet departed. Pleasonton ordered Custer and his brigade to occupy ground near the intersection of the Hanover and Low Dutch roads, to the east of his current position at Two Taverns. Kilpatrick would not discover Custer's detachment until later.²³ In his official report, Kilpatrick stated, "By some mistake, General Custer's brigade was ordered to report to General Gregg, and he did not join me during the day."²⁴ It was not a mistake, it was faulty communications, or as some would say, the "fog of war." Pleasonton somewhat compensated for the detachment of Custer's brigade by attaching Wesley Merritt's brigade to Kilpatrick. Now the stage was set for one of the most controversial actions of the Battle of Gettysburg.

According to the after-action reports of Pleasonton, Kilpatrick, and Merritt, Kilpatrick's mission was to attack the right and rear of the Army of Northern Virginia.²⁵ Although Kilpatrick did not know it at the time, his adversary on that part of the field would be elements of John B. Hood's division, specifically units from Evander Law's brigade, Jerome Robertson's brigade, and George Anderson's brigade. (Hood had been wounded on July 2, so the division was under the temporary command of Brigadier General Law.) These units were supported by batteries from Major M. W. Henry's artillery battalion, including William Bachman's German artillery (South Carolina), James Reilly's Rowan artillery (North Carolina), and A.C. Latham's Branch artillery (North Carolina).

The ground occupied by the Confederates over which Kilpatrick's brigades would attack was, to say the least, formidable. The Confederates held the lower part of Seminary Ridge where it crossed the Emmitsburg road; the rocky high ground between the Bushman and Snyder farms; the western slope of Big Round Top; and Devil's Den. Any attack against the Confederate right flank most likely would have to pass under the guns of Confederate artillery -- especially Bachman's and Reilly's batteries -- on the extreme southern flank of Seminary Ridge. Boulders, fences, and farm buildings provided the Confederates some protection from enemy fire and also helped to conceal their positions. Trees and other vegetation hid them from the prying eyes of Union cavalrymen. On the other hand, Farnsworth's men enjoyed only briefly the cover and concealment offered by the wooded slopes of Big Round Top and the surrounding knolls and ravines. Once an assault began they would lose this protection. Merritt's soldiers, however, would benefit from the cover of some woods during their advance.

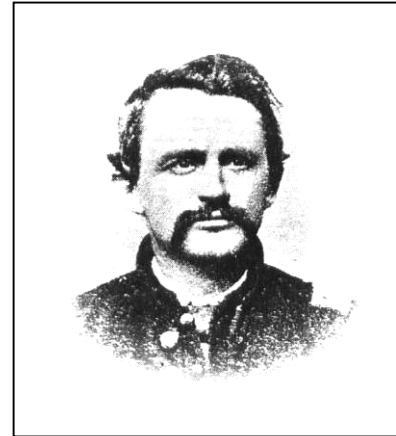
The same terrain features that provided the Confederates with cover and concealment proved to be major impediments to Kilpatrick's force. The Union cavalrymen faced natural and man-made obstacles that included boulders, fences, stands of timber, and steep creek banks, making an assault by mounted cavalry highly hazardous. Kilpatrick's avenues of approach for a mounted attack were limited. On horseback, his men could push north and east along the Emmitsburg road or across the pastures of the Snyder and Bushman farms. Dismounted, he had more options, as his troopers then could take advantage of the terrain and vegetation to mask their movements and protect themselves. However, in a dismounted attack, a quarter of the cavalrymen would be out of action as horse holders, and carbines were no match for the longer-range rifled muskets used by the Confederate infantry.

Although Kilpatrick's orders did not specifically state the exact time of attack, it seems implied that the attack would be made as soon as all his forces had arrived on the scene. Perhaps a better word to use would be *timing*. According to Dennis Hart Mahan's well-known tactical manual, *An Elementary*

Treatise of Advanced, Out-Post, and Detachment Service of Troops, when mounted troops were given a mission to attack infantry, “Cavalry should ... either wait patiently ... until the infantry has become crippled and exhausted by being kept in action for some time; or else, watching its opportunity, make a charge whilst the infantry is in motion, so as to surprise it before it can form to receive the attack.”²⁶ In other words, attack the enemy infantry while it is moving, or soon after it has taken a beating.

Custer’s detachment left Kilpatrick with Farnsworth’s 1,925 men and Merritt’s 1,321 troopers, plus two batteries of horse artillery (one for each brigade).²⁷ In command of these horse soldiers were a brand new division commander and two neophyte brigade commanders who only a few days earlier had been staff officers with the rank of captain.

As Farnsworth’s brigade approached the eastern slope of Big Round Top late in the morning of July 3, Wesley Merritt and his brigade were getting under way from Emmitsburg, Maryland. On the approach to Gettysburg via the Emmitsburg road, Merritt detached one of his regiments, the 6th U.S. Cavalry, to capture a Confederate forage train that was reported to be in the vicinity of Fairfield, Pennsylvania. So, minus the 6th U.S., Merritt’s brigade came in sight of the Confederate right flank about the time that the artillery bombardment that preceded Pickett’s Charge was getting under way. Merritt’s dismounted troops skirmished with soldiers of the 9th Georgia Infantry of Anderson’s brigade while his horse artillery began to shell the Confederate positions. The 5th U.S.



Brig. Gen. Elon Farnsworth
CWLM

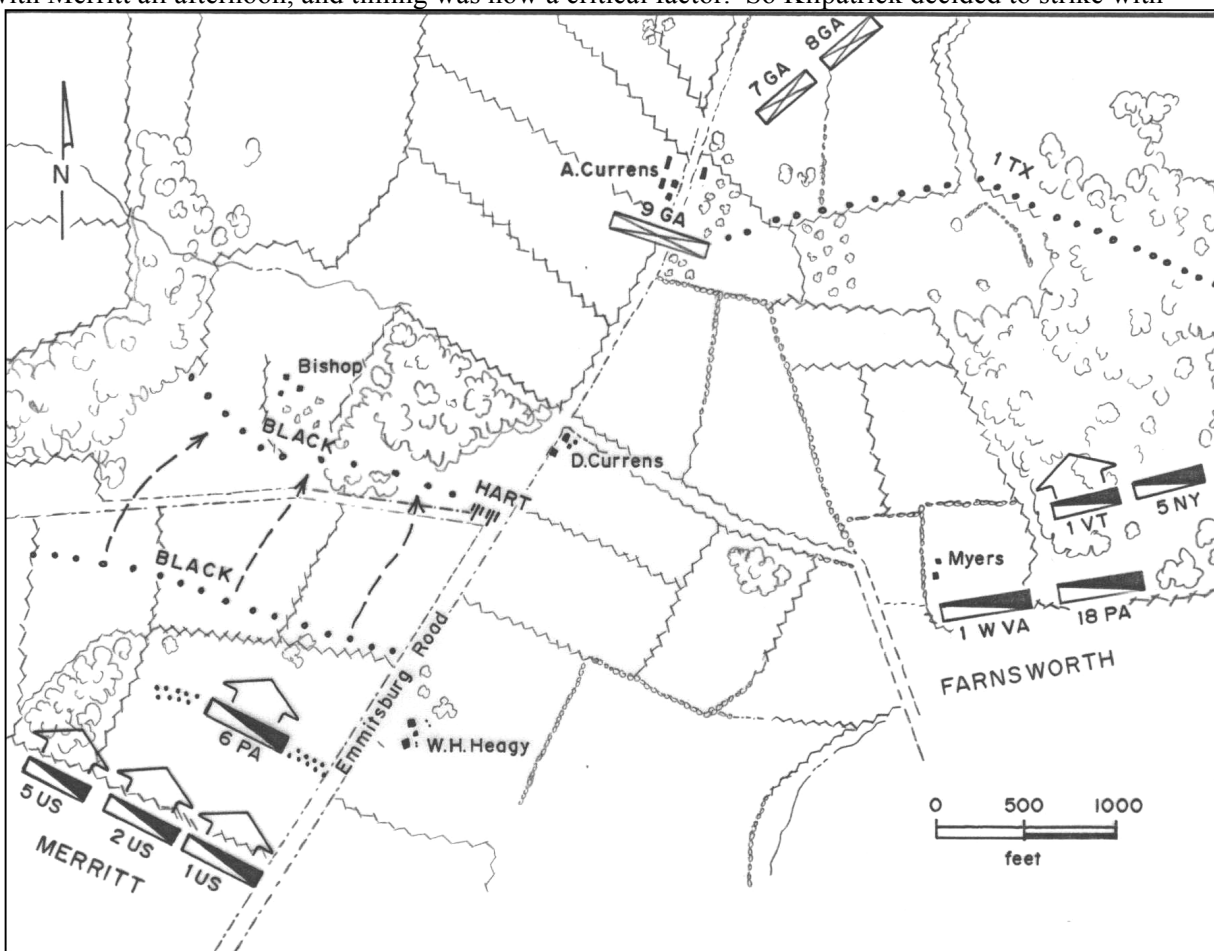
Cavalry made a mounted charge and drove in the Confederate defenders, but reinforcements were brought forward to stop Merritt’s advance. In a mounted assault and thereby take advantage of its speed and shock, Merritt dismounted part of his command and pressed forward. The slow pace of the attack allowed the Confederates to bring up additional reserves. In addition, the guns of Reilly’s and Bachman’s batteries opened on Merritt’s cavalymen. Now, out-gunned and out-manned, Merritt pulled back.²⁸

Meanwhile, Kilpatrick and Farnsworth had been probing the Confederate positions between Big Round Top and the east side of the Emmitsburg road. Dismounting most of his troopers, Farnsworth began to test the Confederate defenses, while placing Lieutenant Samuel S. Elder’s Battery E, 4th U.S. Artillery on a small knoll south of Big Round Top. Kilpatrick next ordered a squadron of the 1st Vermont Cavalry to charge down a lane leading to the Bushman farm. The Vermonters scattered a small rebel outpost and took possession of the farm buildings. Kilpatrick rode forward and told the troopers to hold on for as long as possible. The arrival of the 1st Texas Infantry ended the Vermonters’ stay, however, forcing a retreat back to the main Union cavalry line.²⁹

While Kilpatrick, Merritt, and Farnsworth probed the Confederate positions, James Longstreet’s Grand Assault was occurring on the Union center. Kilpatrick received word around 5 P.M. that the charge had been repulsed. A company commander in the 1st Vermont Cavalry was near Kilpatrick when “an Aide came down and Kilpatrick sprang his saddle and rode towards him.” According to the captain, “The verbal order I heard delivered was: ‘Hood’s division is turning (or pressing) our left; play all of your guns; charge in their rear; create a strong diversion.’”³⁰ (In reality, Hood’s troops were not pressing the Union left; his troops merely were being shifted, but the Union commanders had no way of knowing this at the time.) To Kilpatrick, the question of *timing* now seemed more critical than ever: “*Cavalry should ... either wait patiently ... until the infantry has become crippled and exhausted by being kept in action for some time; or else, watching its opportunity, make a charge whilst the infantry is in motion, so as to surprise it before it can form to receive the attack.*” So far, Kilpatrick’s thrusts were uncoordinated and mostly dismounted, and the Confederates had been able to react easily. It was time to use the shocking power of a cavalry charge. His orders were clear, and Kilpatrick sprang to action. Now things really began to go wrong.

If a mounted assault was going to be made anywhere, the most likely place was in General Merritt’s

sector, where the terrain was a bit more favorable. But Kilpatrick had been having difficulty coordinating with Merritt all afternoon, and timing was now a critical factor. So Kilpatrick decided to strike with



Merritt and Farnsworth threaten the Confederate right flank.

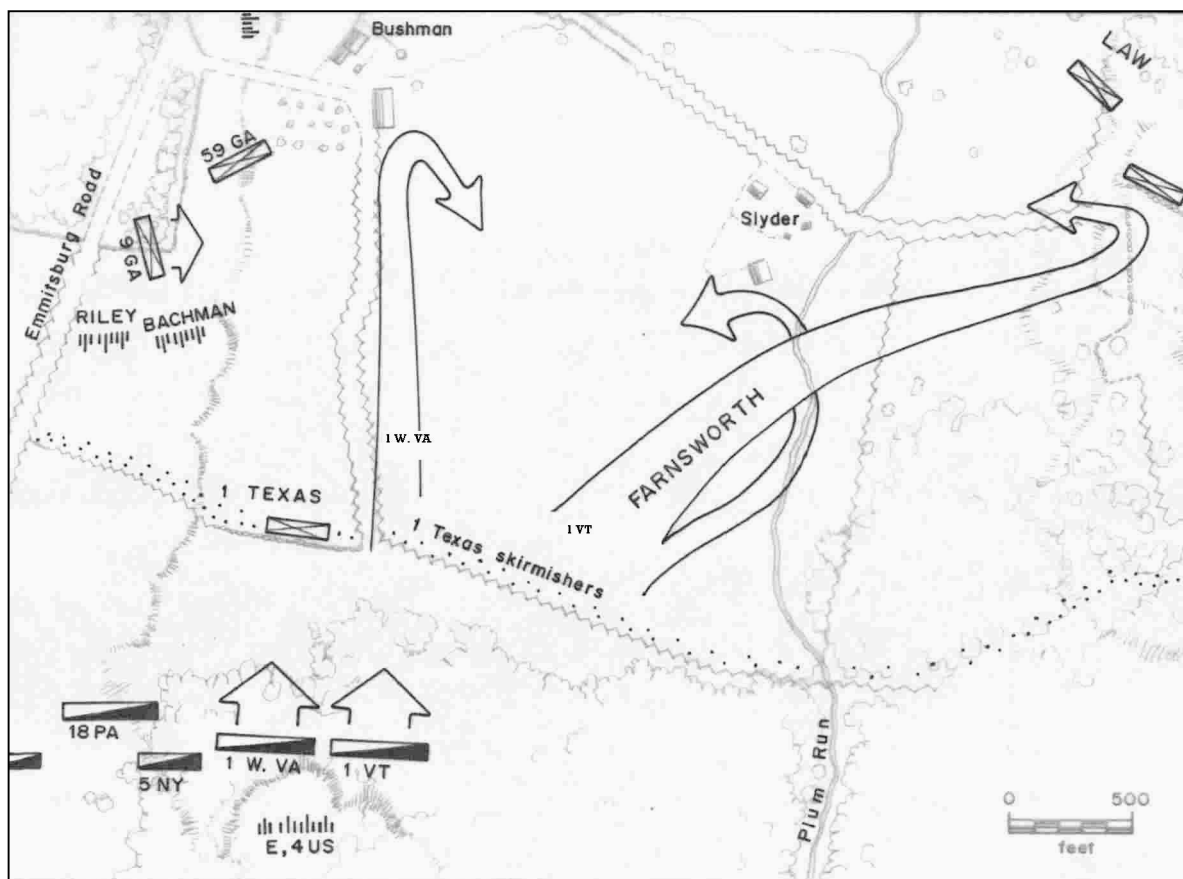
Farnsworth's brigade, a command that actually was *assigned* to his own division rather than just attached, like Merritt. Could Kilpatrick actually have believed that a mounted charge would garner success? The squadron from the 1st Vermont Cavalry had made some headway earlier in the afternoon, and Merritt's advance initially had been successful. Perhaps Kilpatrick believed that a mounted assault with a larger force would roll up the enemy flank, so he ordered the 1st West Virginia Cavalry to charge toward the Bushman farm. The assault, however, would have to be made over terribly rough ground, and the charge would carry the West Virginians directly into the fields of fire of Reilly's and Bachman's batteries. Nevertheless, the orders were given, and the charge was made.

The 18th Pennsylvania Cavalry was on the extreme left of Farnsworth's line; the 1st West Virginia was to its right, followed by the 1st Vermont. The 5th New York was in the rear, in support of Elder's battery. Earlier reconnaissance by Farnsworth and some of his commanders convinced them that the terrain was less than desirable for a cavalry charge.³¹ Kilpatrick sent the regiment forward anyway. The West Virginians struggled through the woods and over the rocky ground. They had to jump their horses over several fence lines, and when they finally broke into the open they were greeted by soldiers of the 1st Texas Infantry, who had taken cover behind a stone wall. They took fire from Reilly's and Bachman's batteries. One West Virginia cavalryman wrote, "The booming of cannon, the rattle of musketry, the clank of sabers parrying the bayonet, together with the cheering of the men, made it seem as though all the powers of hell were waked to madness ..." After riding completely through the Texans, the West

Virginians found themselves surrounded, and their commander ordered a withdrawal. Now they had to fight their way back the same way they came.³²

While this episode was taking place, Kilpatrick ordered Farnsworth to attack with the 1st Vermont Cavalry. Farnsworth protested to his division commander but to no avail. Captain Henry Clay Potter of the 18th Pennsylvania Cavalry recalled that Farnsworth and Kilpatrick had been discussing their options for quite a while, but finally

Kilpatrick jumped up and impatiently but in a low voice said, "Farnsworth, if you don't charge that battery, I will." No one except myself and the bugler could possibly have heard the conversation between Kilpatrick and Farnsworth, and all stories about other people having heard it are pure imagination and not true. [Potter was reacting to stories that the two generals were engaged in an argument over the proper course of action, and that Kilpatrick allegedly said that he would lead the charge himself if Farnsworth was afraid. This supposedly led to another heated exchange between the generals.] There was no order given to charge; but as soon as Kilpatrick made the remark, Farnsworth got up, passed me, and beckoned to his orderly to bring up his horse, met it half way, mounted and ordered the troops to file out.³³



Attack of Farnsworth and the 1st Vermont Cavalry

Farnsworth personally led a battalion of the 1st Vermont in columns of fours, while another battalion from the same regiment charged to his right. Then Kilpatrick sent the 18th Pennsylvania into the fray, but this regiment was quickly repulsed.³⁴ The 1st Vermont suffered the same fate as the West Virginians. During the charge, Farnsworth rode a circuit around the Bushman and Slyder farms. On the way back,

the battalion of Vermonters that he led was caught between two lines of Confederate infantry from Law's brigade. The enfilading fire broke Farnsworth's battalion into three groups. Two groups rode through the 1st Texas and picked up a bag full of prisoners; Farnsworth's group of about fifty men made a desperate charge to break through the 15th Alabama's position, but Farnsworth was killed in the attempt.³⁵ Contrary to legend, Farnsworth was killed by Confederate infantry, not by turning his revolver on himself.³⁶

And so ended a sad chapter in the history of the Battle of Gettysburg. For this short but violent episode, historians would brand Kilpatrick as a blunder-head, a glory seeker, and a fool. For example, in 1910, A. T. Cowell, author of *Tactics at Gettysburg*, wrote, "an attack was made on the right of the Confederate line by Farnsworth's and Merritt's brigades of cavalry. The ground was wholly unsuited for cavalry and the attack was a sacrifice. Farnsworth was killed." In 1956 Edward Stackpole published *They Met at Gettysburg*. Concerning Farnsworth's Charge he opined that

Kilpatrick, who was under the impression or at least chose to believe that Meade was about to make a major counterattack, ordered Farnsworth to send the First West Virginia Regiment of his brigade to attack a Texas regiment in his front. ... Dissatisfied with the meager results, Kilpatrick directed General Farnsworth personally to lead a final charge ... Farnsworth's charge was equally fruitless. It was a brief and thrilling performance, but in reality proved nothing.³⁷

Edwin B. Coddington, one of the most respected historians of the battle, was a bit more judicious than Stackpole, but he nevertheless concluded that Kilpatrick had made a fatal error:

As for Kilpatrick ... his own men fought over ground too broken and rocky for operations by large bodies of cavalry. ... When about 5:30 P.M. Kilpatrick received word of Union success in the center, he ordered an all-out effort by both brigades. ... Although Farnsworth protested it was suicide, Kilpatrick insisted that he should charge with half his brigade against the center of Law's slender line ... but the attack ended in a fiasco, including the death of Farnsworth. ... Both Kilpatrick and Pleasanton in their reports exaggerated the impact of this attack on the enemy Kilpatrick had a point, however, when he observed that some Union infantry should have advanced on his right at the time he made his charge. ... Nevertheless, Kilpatrick's complaint . . . does not excuse him from the charge of bad generalship.³⁸

Then, in 1986, Edward G. Longacre published *The Cavalry at Gettysburg*. His criticism of Kilpatrick is scathing:

Had Kilpatrick seriously threatened the other end of Law's refused right while Merritt made his push, he might have placed his foe in trouble. As it was, he wasted Merritt's diversion, making an ill-conceived assault against the Rebel center and then, when too late and with tragic results, committing a larger force against impregnable positions on Law's left. . . . Farnsworth's death capped a charge that had taken sixty-seven lives and a heavy toll in wounded and captured. It also marked the downturn of the career of the man who had ordered the attack. For utter recklessness, for self-indulgent folly, the doomed and senseless assault outshone the many other stains on Judson Kilpatrick's record.³⁹

The criticism grew harsher as the years passed. Kilpatrick's biographer, Samuel J. Martin, has been the most severe of all. According to Martin,

If Kilpatrick smashed into the flank of the panicked Confederates, he could win the battle for Meade and gain eternal glory for himself. Custer was still not there; Farnsworth would have to make the assault on his own. . . . The charge had been a fiasco. Kilpatrick had hoped to win glory (at Farnsworth's expense), but instead he gave the enemy "one little spot of silver lining" in the

cloud that hung so darkly over the field of Gettysburg.⁴⁰

Eric J. Wittenberg, a practicing attorney who nevertheless seems to have the best grasp of what actually occurred on the southern portion of the Gettysburg battlefield on the afternoon of July 3, wrote, “Like the fabled charge of the Light Brigade, Farnsworth’s Charge was brave, memorable and fruitless ... their attack was misdirected, unsupported, and led to no tangible gains. The primary result, it seems, was the death of Elon Farnsworth. A great opportunity was squandered that day, along with Farnsworth’s life.”⁴¹ Finally, in *Gettysburg: Day Three*, Jeffery Wert wrote, “it was a senseless slaughter of good men,” and concluded simply, “Kilpatrick’s aggressiveness and misjudgment had led the Vermonters into a bloody trap.”⁴²

Are the judgments of these historians fair? An objective reassessment proves otherwise. First, there are Kilpatrick’s orders to take into account: *Attack the right and rear of the enemy*. This he accomplished beyond a shadow of a doubt. In a message to General-in-Chief Henry Halleck, sent at 8:35 P.M. on July 3, General Meade substantiated that Kilpatrick had followed orders. “After the repelling of the assault [i.e., Pickett’s Charge],” Meade wrote, “indications leading to the belief that the enemy might be withdrawing, an armed reconnaissance was pushed forward from the left, and the enemy found to be in force.”⁴³ Whether Kilpatrick actually accomplished anything is beside the point -- he carried out the orders that were given to him. As far as the timing of the charge, it was launched at precisely the moment when the era’s cavalry doctrine dictated it should have been made.

Second, just how badly did Farnsworth’s brigade suffer? It is difficult to justify the loss of a rising star like Elon Farnsworth, but what about the rest of his command? The number of cavalymen who actually participated in the charge is difficult to pinpoint. The 5th New York Cavalry did not play a role, as it was kept in support of Elder’s battery. Assuming that the attacking regiments made the assault with most or all of their men, then the 1st West Virginia made the charge with about 395 men, the 18th Pennsylvania attacked with approximately 509 soldiers, and the 1st Vermont rode off with about 600 troopers, for a total of 1,504.⁴⁴ These units suffered a total of 101 casualties during the assault, for a casualty rate of 6.7 percent.⁴⁵ One survivor from the 1st Vermont later claimed that only 312 men from his regiment participated in the charge.⁴⁶ If that number is substituted, the total number of cavalymen making the charge would have been 1,216, and the casualty rate 8.3 percent. And if the total number of each regiment that made the charge is reduced by half -- which is highly unlikely -- for an approximate total of 750 participants, the casualty rate would still be a relatively low 13.4 percent.

How does the casualty rate for Farnsworth’s Charge compare to similar cavalry assaults in other battles? At the Battle of Gaines’s Mill on June 27, 1862, the 5th U.S. Cavalry charged headlong into Confederate infantry. The unit suffered a 22 percent casualty rate. During the Battle of Chancellorsville, the 8th Pennsylvania Cavalry also made a charge into a rebel infantry formation. Its casualty rate was 31 percent.⁴⁷ If we compare these rates to the casualty rate of Farnsworth’s brigade, we see that the latter organization really did not take such a harsh beating after all.⁴⁸

What did some of the men who served under Kilpatrick and participated in the assault think of their

Cavalry Charges Against Infantry

<i>Unit and Battle</i>	<i>Engaged</i>	<i>Casualties</i>	<i>Percent Casualties</i>
Farnsworth’s Bde. at Gettysburg	1,504	101	6.7%
8 th Pennsylvania at Chancellorsville	350	109	31%
5 th U.S. at Gaines’s Mill	250	55	22%

commander's generalship on that sultry July afternoon? There is no indication that General Pleasonton was unhappy with Kilpatrick's decisions. "General Kilpatrick did valuable service with the First Brigade, under General Farnsworth, in charging the enemy's infantry," he wrote in his official report of the Gettysburg campaign, "and with the assistance of Merritt's brigade and the good execution of their united batteries, caused him to detach largely from his main attack on the left of our line."⁴⁹ (Historian Edwin Coddington has suggested that Pleasonton overstated the case, since the Confederates had not planned to attack the Union left flank on July 3.⁵⁰ At the time, however, no one in the Union army knew exactly what the Confederates had planned.) General Meade, in his 8:30 P.M. dispatch to General Halleck, likewise seemed pleased: "My cavalry have been engaged all day on both flanks of the enemy harassing and vigorously attacking him with great success, notwithstanding they encountered superior numbers, both of cavalry and infantry."⁵¹ One of Kilpatrick's subordinates, Colonel Nathaniel Richmond of the 1st West Virginia, in temporary command of the brigade after Farnsworth was killed, wrote: "General Farnsworth was ordered to charge the enemy's right, which he at once did, making one of the most desperate, and at the same time one of the most successful charges it has ever been my lot to witness ..."⁵² On the occasion of the dedication of the 18th Pennsylvania's memorial at Gettysburg twenty-six years after the battle, Captain John W. Philips of that regiment's Company B said, "The whole object of the maneuver of General Kilpatrick on that day against the extreme right of the enemy's line was to divert his attention as to prevent a massing of his forces on General Meade's center. That it had its desired effect and that the 18th Pennsylvania Cavalry bore its full part in this strategic movement is well known to those who have studied the history of this battle."⁵³ Louis Boudrye, a veteran of the 5th New York Cavalry wrote in 1865, "Though this charge was not a success, its well directed blow prevented the flank movement, and thus the cavalry earned another dearly earned chaplet of honor, *dearly earned* because many of their bravest champions fell on that bloody field."⁵⁴ Captain Parsons, who led one of the 1st Vermont's charging columns, later wrote:

It is remarkable that the most deliberate and desperate cavalry charge made during the Civil War passed so nearly unnoticed that the attention of the country was first drawn to it by the reports of the enemy. The charge was directly ordered by General Meade and immediately after it was made he sent a congratulatory dispatch; and yet when the report went up that Farnsworth was killed and the regiment he led all but annihilated, the order was withheld from the Official Report. The friends of Farnsworth attacked Kilpatrick for having ordered a wanton waste of life and he remained silent. Farnsworth, who led the charge, was dead; other officers, who might have given the story, were killed in a subsequent battle, and the men who survived, oppressed with grief over their losses, and resentment over their neglect, refused to come forward to claim credit for an action that they believed was well tuned, well directed and effective.⁵⁵

The only critic of the charge who actually expressed his anger in writing at the time was Major Charles Capehart of the 1st West Virginia. Composing the regiment's official report in the absence of Colonel Richmond, Capehart stated:

I cannot fail to refer you to the defensive position the enemy had availed themselves of, which is one that above all others is the worst for a cavalry charge -- that is, behind stone fences so high as to preclude the possibility of gaining the opposite side without dismounting and throwing them down. The whole ground over which we charged was very adverse in every particular, being broken and uneven and covered with rock. Neither can I fail to bring to your notice that this regiment here charged upon infantry Any one not cognizant of the minutia of this charge upon infantry, under cover of heavy timber and stone fences, will fail to form a just conception of its magnitude.⁵⁶

As critical as he was of the decision to make a mounted charge over such rough terrain, Capehart nevertheless admitted, "Apparently our mission there had been filled, for we withdrew some 3 miles from

where the engagement had taken place, and bivouacked in the open field.”⁵⁷

Could Judson Kilpatrick have practiced better generalship? Absolutely! He ordered his units into battle in a piecemeal fashion, and he failed to coordinate the movements of Merritt and Farnsworth. He also ordered a cavalry charge across rugged terrain that was covered with rocks, fences, a stream bed, and patches of woods, to attack infantry well protected behind a stone wall. We will never know whether Custer’s presence would have made a difference. What we do know is that a brand-new division commander was given a difficult mission, and to accomplish this mission he had to rely on two equally new brigade commanders, one of which was not even assigned to his own division. Perhaps if Custer had been in Merritt’s place, Kilpatrick might have ordered that brigade to make the charge instead of Farnsworth, and the results might have been much different -- or Custer may have been the victim of Confederate bullets instead of Sioux bullets. Kilpatrick also failed to coordinate with the infantry of the 5th Corps on his right. Had the infantry supported him in his attack, as he claimed in his after-action report that they should have done, he just might have succeeded in rolling up the Confederate right flank.⁵⁸

After the Battle of Gettysburg, Kilpatrick’s division participated in the pursuit of the retreating Army of Northern Virginia. His command performed well at Monterey Pass on the rainy night of July 4, but he blundered at Smithsburg on July 5 by allowing an outnumbered Confederate cavalry force to escape. His generalship at Hagerstown on July 6 has been questioned, since he failed to hold the town, instead sending one of his brigades to support John Buford. On July 12 Kilpatrick and the infantry of the 6th and 11th corps seized Hagerstown, and on July 13 Kilpatrick ordered another mounted assault -- again against infantry -- with two companies of the 1st Vermont Cavalry, which suffered fourteen casualties. This time, General Meade gave Kilpatrick a written reprimand for the unnecessary loss of life.⁵⁹

Kilpatrick had one last shot at the Confederates before they escaped back into Virginia. On July 14, he noticed the empty line of enemy rifle pits along the Potomac River below Hagerstown. Hoping to cut off Lee’s rear guard, both Buford and Kilpatrick tried to swoop in and bag the divisions of Henry Heth and Johnston Pettigrew at Falling Waters before they too made it across the river. Again Kilpatrick ordered a charge with one of his units, this time Custer’s 6th Michigan. Although General Pettigrew was mortally wounded, many Michigan troopers were cut from their saddles. For all intents and purposes, the Gettysburg campaign was over.⁶⁰

Judson Kilpatrick’s record during the Gettysburg campaign was uneven. Although new to division command, he seemed to make the same mistakes over and over. No one could ever accuse him of being timid, but he could be faulted for the way he recklessly sent men to their deaths. Cavalry leaders must be bold and daring, but they also must use good judgment. Perhaps this is why his subordinates gave him the unflattering nickname, “Kill-Cavalry.”

Stung by the criticism heaped on him as a result of Farnsworth’s Charge, Kilpatrick attempted in early 1864 to redeem his reputation with a plan to free the thousands of Union prisoners held in Richmond. Known as the Kilpatrick-Dahlgren Raid, the attempt failed, resulting in the death of Colonel Ulric Dahlgren and another blow to Kilpatrick’s already tarnished image. Kilpatrick was transferred to William T. Sherman’s army after the raid, where he commanded a cavalry division in the drive on Atlanta. Although he was wounded at Dalton, Georgia, he recuperated in time to participate in the March to the Sea and the drive through the Carolinas. When the war ended, Kilpatrick resigned his commission and accepted an appointment as minister to the Republic of Chile. In 1880 he ran for Congress but lost, and returned to his diplomatic post in Chile, where he died on December 4, 1881. He was a month shy of his forty-sixth birthday.⁶¹

Hugh Judson Kilpatrick will always be remembered as a vain, self-serving, and reckless officer. He made more than a few tactical blunders, and on several occasions he threw away the lives of men who served under him. When placed in the context of his entire military career, Farnsworth’s Charge seems to be yet another example of Kill-Cavalry’s quest for glory at the expense of his men. At Gettysburg, Kilpatrick was as inexperienced to division command as his subordinates were to brigade command, and his new command had only recently been organized. Then, Kilpatrick was given a difficult mission and was forced to accomplish it without one of his assigned brigades. He applied sound military doctrine, but he launched his mounted assault with the wrong part of his line. The casualties sustained during this

charge, though high for a cavalry brigade, were lower than the casualty rates suffered in similar attacks. The major difference this time was that a promising young general officer was killed, one who also happened to be the nephew of a prominent congressman.

The purpose of this essay is not to vindicate Kilpatrick, but to take an objective look at a controversial episode of the Battle of Gettysburg and in Kilpatrick's career. Most students of the Civil War still will find very little to like about Judson Kilpatrick. But at a time when the Union army was searching for offensively minded cavalry generals who were not afraid to tangle with their Confederate adversaries, Judson Kilpatrick rose to the occasion. If Kilpatrick had been killed leading Farnsworth's brigade on July 3, 1863, the hard hand of history might not have struck him such a harsh blow, and he might have been remembered with the likes of John Reynolds or James Birdseye McPherson: Union generals slain while bravely leading their men into the fray.

Notes

¹See for example Edward Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg: A Tactical Study of Mounted Operations during the Civil War's Pivotal Campaign 9 June-14 July 1863* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1986), 244; Edward Stackpole, *They Met at Gettysburg* (Harrisburg: The Stackpole Co., 1956), 275; Samuel Martin, *Kill-Cavalry: The Life of Union General Hugh Judson Kilpatrick* (Mechanicsburg: Stackpole Books, 2000), 117.

²Edwin Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign: A Study in Command* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1968), 525.

³Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg*, 244; Martin, *Kill-Cavalry*, 116.

⁴In *They Met at Gettysburg*, Edward Stackpole described the assault as "a hell-for-leather mounted attack which reminds one of the Charge of the Light Brigade at Balaclava in the Crimean War," 274-75.

⁵Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign*, 525; Jeffery Wert, *Gettysburg: Day Three* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 280.

⁶Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg*, 244

⁷Martin, *Kill-Cavalry*, 2.

⁸James H. Wilson, *Under the Old Flag* (New York: D. Appleton & Co., 1912), 2:13.

⁹Ezra Warner, *Generals in Blue* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1964), 266.

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹Martin, *Kill-Cavalry*, 57.

¹²U.S. War Department, *The War of the Rebellion: A Compilation of the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1889) [hereafter cited as *OR*], Series 1, 25(2):71-72.

¹³Martin, *Kill-Cavalry*, 66.

¹⁴Stephen Sears, *Chancellorsville* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1996), 368.

¹⁵Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg*, 80, 109; James Moore, *Kilpatrick and Our Cavalry* (New York: W.J. Widdleton, 1865), 63.

¹⁶Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg*, 128.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 129.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, 166-67.

¹⁹Mark A. Snell, "The Battle of Hanover," in David and Jeanne Heidler, eds., *Encyclopedia of the American Civil War: A Political, Social, and Military History* (Santa Barbara: ABC Clio, 2000), 2:924-25.

²⁰Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg*, 200-201.

²¹Kilpatrick's report, *OR* 27(1):992.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg*, 223.

²⁴Kilpatrick's report, *OR* 27(1):992-93.

²⁵*Ibid.*; Pleasonton's and Merritt's reports also can be found in *OR* 27(1):914 and 943, respectively.

²⁶Mahan, *An Elementary Treatise of Advanced, Out-Post, and Detachment Service of Troops* (New York: John Wiley, 1861), 58.

²⁷Brigade personnel strengths are from John W. Busey and David G. Martin, *Regimental Strengths at Gettysburg* (Baltimore: Gateway Press, 1982), 103, 107. The strength of Merritt's brigade does not include the 6th U.S. Cavalry.

²⁸Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg*, 241.

²⁹H. C. Parsons (Co. L, 1st Vermont Cavalry), typescript recollections of “Farnsworth’s Charge and Death,” p. 3. 1st Vermont Cavalry File, Gettysburg National Military Park Library (GNMPL). A version of this was published in the “Battles and Leaders” series in *The Century Magazine*. See Parsons, “Farnsworth’s Charge and Death,” in Robert Johnson and Clarence Buel, eds., *Battles and Leaders of the Civil War* (Edison, NJ: Castle Books, 1995 [reprint]), 3:393-96.

³⁰Parson’s recollections, 4.

³¹Recollections of Captain Henry Clay Potter, 18th Pennsylvania Cavalry. 18th Penn. Cavalry File, GNMPL.

³²Steven A. Cunningham and Beth A. White, “‘The Ground Trembled As They Came’: The First West Virginia Cavalry in the Gettysburg Campaign” in *Civil War Regiments: A Journal of the American Civil War*, 6(3):71-72. The quote is from Private James Dean, who wrote a description of the charge for his hometown newspaper, the *Wheeling Intelligencer* (quoted in Cunningham and White).

³³Recollections of H. C. Potter, GNMPL. In his *Century Magazine* article, Captain Henry Parsons stated that Farnsworth protested the order to charge, Kilpatrick offered to lead it if Farnsworth was afraid, and Farnsworth yelled at Kilpatrick to “take that back.” According to Parsons, Kilpatrick said he did not mean it, and then Farnsworth led the charge after Kilpatrick took full responsibility for ordering it.

³⁴*Ibid.* Potter mistakenly remembered the 5th New York also participating in the charge, but that regiment remained as supports for Elder’s battery.

³⁵Parsons recollections, 6-7.

³⁶Letters from Thomas Cheney and Dr. P. O. Edson, former members of the 1st Vermont Cavalry, to the editor of the *Gettysburg Compiler*, November 7, 1899. Farnsworth’s body was found with five gunshot wounds – four in the chest and abdomen and one on the upper thigh. Apparently, another 1st Vermont officer, Captain Cushman of Company E, suffered a terrible gunshot wound to the face (although it was not mortal). He was left on the field for dead and some of the Confederates who saw the body assumed it was Farnsworth and that he had shot himself in the head. (Letters to the editor transcribed by John Heiser. Elon J. Farnsworth file, GNMPL.)

³⁷Stackpole, *They Met at Gettysburg*, 274-275.

³⁸Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign*, 524-525.

³⁹Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg*, 242, 244.

⁴⁰Martin, *Kill-Cavalry*, 113-117.

⁴¹Eric. J. Wittenberg, *Gettysburg’s Forgotten Cavalry Actions* (Gettysburg: Thomas Publications, 1998), 44.

⁴²Wert, *Gettysburg: Day Three*, 280.

⁴³Meade to Halleck, July 3, 1863. *OR* 27(1):75 .

⁴⁴Busey and Martin, *Regimental Strengths at Gettysburg*, 107.

⁴⁵“Report of Casualties in the First Brigade, Third Division, Cavalry Corps, from June 29 to July 9, 1863.” *OR* 27(1):1008. The casualties are broken down by type and by engagement. There were fourteen casualties in the 18th Pennsylvania (one killed, five wounded, eight missing); eighteen casualties in the 1st West Virginia (four killed, eight wounded, six missing); sixty-eight casualties in the 1st Vermont (thirteen killed, nineteen wounded, thirty-six missing); and General Farnsworth, killed in action. The total killed was nineteen, including the general.

⁴⁶Joe Allen, *The Anthology of Another Town* (Photocopy excerpt in the 1st Vermont Cavalry File, GNMPL), 174.

⁴⁷The 5th U.S. Cavalry sustained 55 casualties out of 250 men (22 percent). See Stephen Sears, *To the Gates of Richmond: The Peninsula Campaign* (New York: Ticknor & Fields, 1992), 245-46. The 8th Pennsylvania Cavalry lost 109 men of its approximately 350 troopers (31 percent). See Sears, *Chancellorsville*, 288; John Bigelow, *Chancellorsville* (New York: Smithmark Publishers, 1995), 194.

⁴⁸Even if we use only the 1st Vermont’s casualty rate, and even by using Joe Allen’s figure of 312 men who made the charge, the casualty rate still remains lower (21.8 percent) than that of the 5th U.S. at Gaines’s Mill and the 8th Pennsylvania at Chancellorsville.

⁴⁹“Reports of Maj. Gen. Alfred Pleasonton, U.S. Army, commanding Cavalry Corps,” *OR* 27(1):916.

⁵⁰Coddington, *The Gettysburg Campaign*, 524-25.

⁵¹Meade to Halleck, July 3, 1863. *OR* 27(1):75.

⁵²“Report of Col. Nathaniel P. Richmond, First West Virginia Cavalry, commanding First Brigade, 3rd Division.” *OR* 27(1):1005.

⁵³Address of Captain John W. Philips at the dedication of the 18th Pennsylvania Cavalry monument. Typescript in the 18th Pennsylvania Cavalry File, GNMPL.

⁵⁴From “Historic Records of 5NYCav.” (1865). Typescript copy in 5th New York Cavalry File, GNMPL.

⁵⁵Parson’s recollections, 1.

⁵⁶“Report of Maj. Charles. E. Capehart, First West Virginia Cavalry. *OR* 27(1):1018-19.

⁵⁷*Ibid.*

⁵⁸Kilpatrick’s report, *OR* 27(1):993.

⁵⁹Longacre, *The Cavalry at Gettysburg*, 248-250, 253-54, 256-58, 260-62, 265-67.

⁶⁰*Ibid.*, 268-69.

⁶¹Warner, *Generals in Blue*, 266.