Sheridan's Ride



Image Credit: Western Reserve Historical Society

"Jumping my horse over the rails, I rode to the crest of the elevation, and there taking off my hat, the men rose from behind the barricades with cheers of recognition."
Gen. Philip H. Sheridan

The Poem

"Hurrah! hurrah for Sheridan,
Hurrah! hurrah for horse and man!
And when their statues are placed on high,
Under the dome of the Union sky,
The American soldier's Temple of fame,
There. with the glorious general's name,
Be it said, in letters both bold and bright;
"Here is the steed that saved the day
By carrying Sheridan into the fight,
From Winchester - twenty miles away!'"

Although Thomas Buchanan Read's poem, "Sheridan's Ride," takes some liberties with the facts - Sheridan only rode some twelve miles to reach his army, not twenty - in other ways the poem is justified in honoring the Union general who turned the tables on his Confederate counterpart. Leaders like that are rare.

The Ride

Having returned to Winchester from his strategy conference in Washington, D.C., the evening of October 18, Sheridan retired to bed, no doubt believing that all was well with his army camped along Cedar Creek to the south. He anticipated sleeping late the morning of October 19, 1864, but around 7:00 a.m., Sheridan was awakened by an officer who had been on picket duty and heard artillery fire to the south. Initially Sheridan waved him off - a reconnaissance-in-force had been ordered that morning, so the fire the officer heard was because of that. Sheridan tried to get back to sleep, but apparently was concerned, and soon got up, and - with artillery fire still heard - determined to return to the army.

Around 9:00 a.m., Sheridan, riding his horse, Rienzi, followed by his aides Major George A. "Sandy" Forsyth and Captain Joseph O'Keefe, and an escort of some twenty troopers, started off south.



Gen. Philip H. Sheridan making his famous ride from Winchester.
Sheridan's Ride by Thure de Thulstrup
Image Courtesy: Library of Congress

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The Ride

Even after three years of war, with armies from both sides tramping up and down the Shenandoah Valley, the Valley Pike provided a good macadamized surface. Ruts created by the passing of artillery and wagons were avoided, and Sheridan's small entourage made good time.

"It was a golden, sunny day that had succeeded a densely foggy morning," Sandy Forsyth wrote later, but it wasn't long before they came on supply wagons heading north. Ordered to halt and await further instructions, Sheridan and his staff members rode on. But now it was apparent that something had gone wrong. Soon they came on more evidence of a Federal retreat, "*now and then a group of soldiers...the first driftwood of a flood just beyond and soon to come sweeping down the road,"* Forsyth recalled.

By then Sheridan's face had taken on a determined look; he was aware that a disaster of some proportion had befallen his army. When the general saw groups of soldiers, *"sitting or lying down to rest by the side of the road, while others were making coffee,"* Sheridan vigorously waved his hat to the front, calling for them to *"Turn back, men! Turn back! Face the other way!"* Most of the soldiers did just that, and all broke into cheers *"Sheridan! Sheridan!"* at the sight of their leader.

"...the appalling spectacle of panic..."

A few miles more, they reached Newtown (Stephen's City today), where they found a field hospital, ambulances in abundance, and wounded men all around. Here Sheridan, Forsyth and O'Keefe – their cavalry escort had been left behind - left the pike briefly, rode through a small wooded area, and up a slight hill. Reaching the top of that rise, Sheridan later described the scene: "*there burst upon our view the appalling spectacle of panic...hundreds of slightly wounded men, throngs of others unhurt but utterly demoralized, and baggage wagons by the score, all pressing to the rear in hopeless confusion, telling all plainly that a disaster had occurred at the front."*

About 10:30 a.m., they reached the army, then positioned 1.5 miles north of Middletown. One of the first officers they met, Colonel Amasa Tracey, commanding the Vermont Brigade, saluted Sheridan: "*General, we're glad to see you,"* Tracey said. *"Well, by God, I'm glad to be here. What troops are these?" "Sixth Corps! Vermont Brigade!"* the soldiers nearby yelled, delighted to see their commanding general among them again. *"All right, we're all right!"* Sheridan's reported to have said. *"We'll have our camps by night!"*

Worth 10,000 Reinforcements



Gen. Philip H. Sheridan
Image Courtesy: National Archives

Sheridan's return marked a turn-around in the battle. One Union officer would later state that his arrival was worth more than 10,000 reinforcements, and indeed, it seemed so. After reorganizing his lines, Sheridan rode the length of them, and *"his appearance was greeted by tremendous cheers from one end of the line to the other, many officers pressing forward to shake his hand."* He then planned for a counter-attack. Launched at 4:00 p.m., the assault was initially met with stiff resistance, but by the end of the day the Federals had driven the Confederate army from the field. Sheridan's timely arrival and inspirational leadership had turned a certain defeat into a momentous Union victory.

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