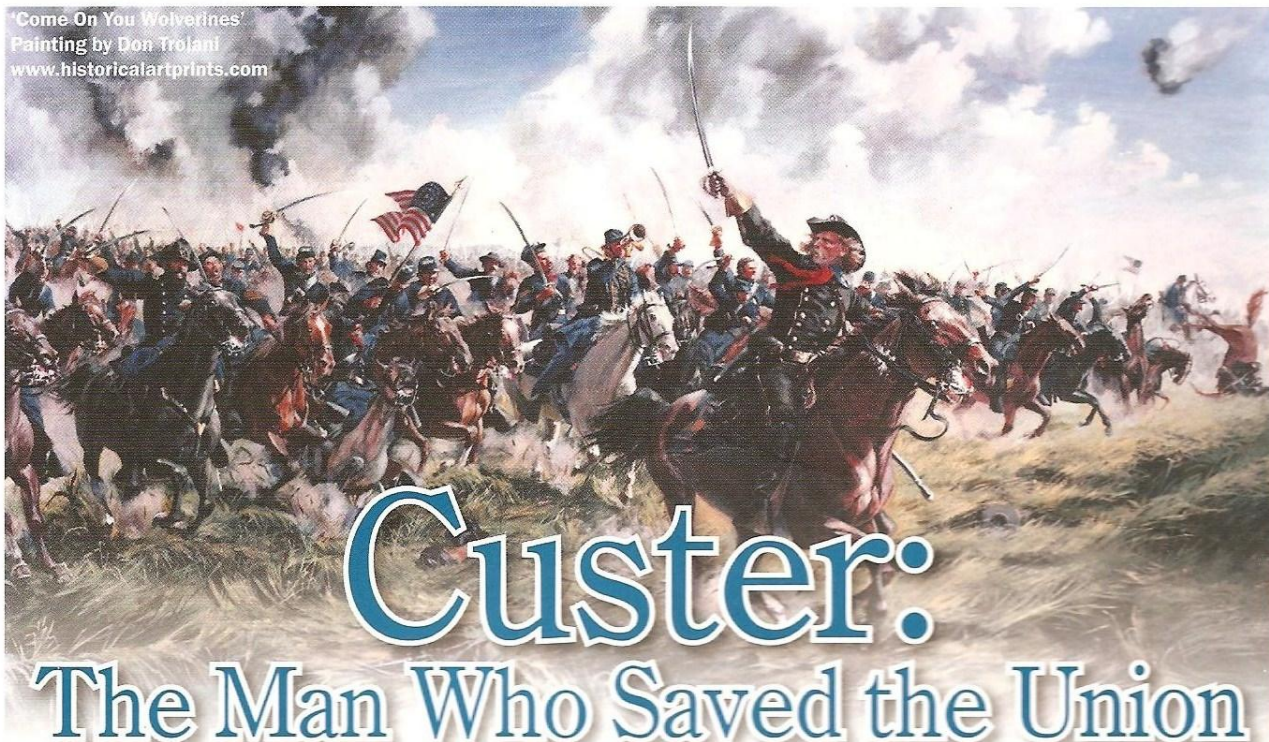


'Come On You Wolverines'
Painting by Don Troiani
www.historicalartprints.com



By James H. Hillestad, Member No. 6

Mention the name of Custer and the Little Big Horn comes immediately to mind. However, it was at Gettysburg that Custer carved for himself a place in history that would forever distinguish him as one of the finest cavalry commanders of the United States. His raw personal courage prevented a Confederate victory, and in doing so saved the Union.

Few books on the Civil War mention the battle at East Cavalry Field, three miles east of Cemetery Ridge. The American Heritage History of the Civil War makes no mention at all. The 800-page Oxford History 'Battle Cry of Freedom' gives it one sentence. And the West Point Atlas for the American Civil War has only a notation on the edge of its Gettysburg battle map with an arrow pointing off the edge: "cavalry action →".

To put this pivotal battle into context, one needs to appreciate the mind of Robert E. Lee. Lee was a brilliant strategist – and a student of history. In particular, he had studied the battles of Cannae, Leuthen and Austerlitz, which provided lessons in defeating a superior force, especially one that preferred a

defensive versus offensive posture. A key element was envelopment, and this formed the basis for the third day of battle at Gettysburg.

Lee's plan called for Pickett, who reported to Longstreet, to advance with 13,000 fresh infantry to attack the center of the Union lines on Cemetery Ridge. At the same time, Ewell, commanding Third Corps, was to attack Culp's Hill, rolling up the right wing of the Union defenses. The third and key component was Jeb Stuart, who with three brigades of cavalry – 4,000 men – would swing behind the Union right wing and attack from the rear; the Union infantry on Cemetery Ridge and Culp's Hill. In the process, they would capture the Union artillery and, lowering their muzzles, fire canister into the backs of the waiting Union infantry. The Union army, attacked front and rear, would be forced to surrender.

Such was the plan. To be successful, it relied on coordination and perfect timing.

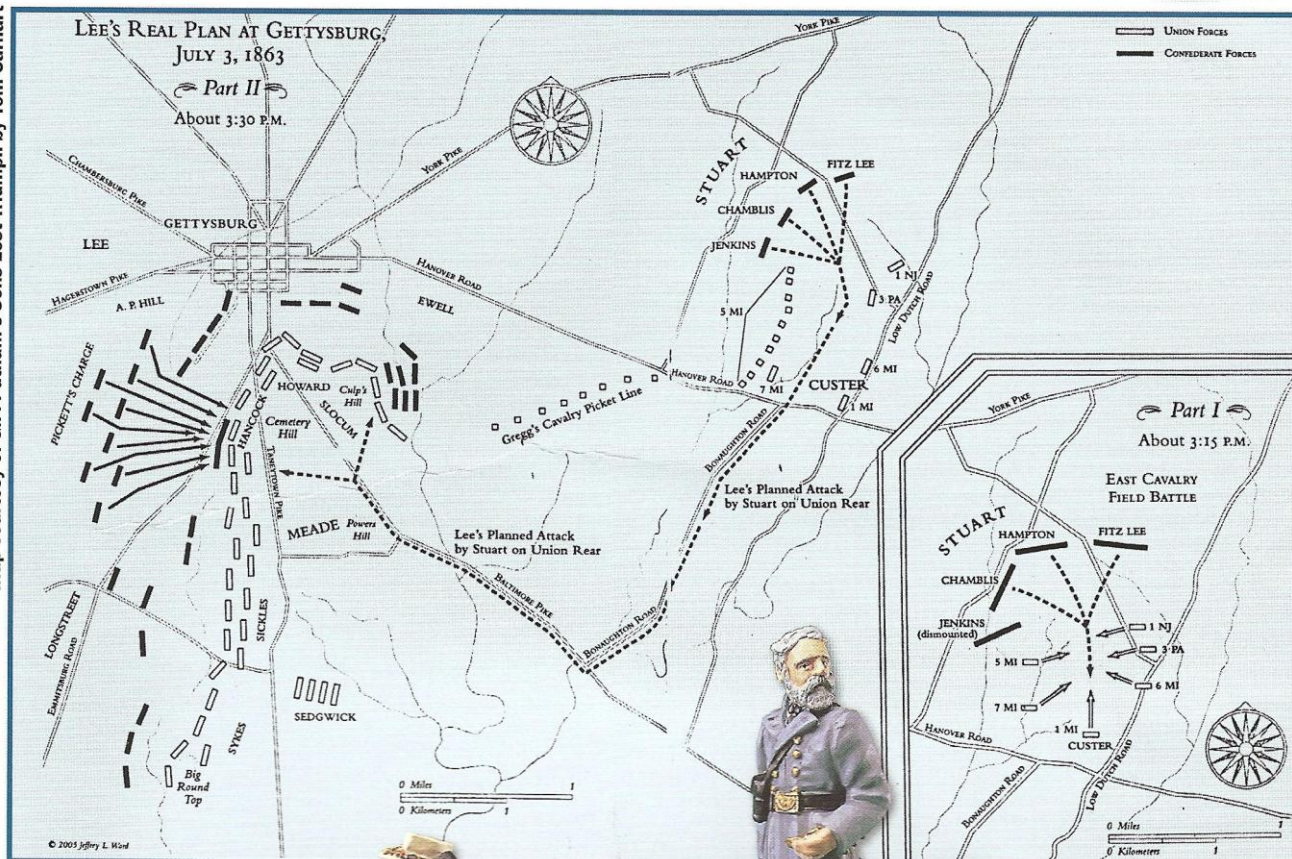
At dawn on July 3 1863, Ewell's forces attacked Culp's Hill on schedule – but were thrown back. Lee hearing nothing from Longstreet's First Corps on the right, he sought him out to find that he had willfully disobeyed orders by planning his own attack on the Union left wing.

It was not until 1 p.m., three hours after Ewell was told to call off his attack on Culp's Hill, that Longstreet began his assault. Preceded by a tremendous artillery barrage, he advanced with eleven brigades in a wedge formation with Pickett being the spearhead. They

(17011) George A. Custer (right) and the newly repainted Deetail version



Map courtesy of G.P. Putnam's Sons Lost Triumph by Tom Carhart



focused on the "clump of trees" on Cemetery Ridge.

Jeb Stuart, who was waiting three miles to the northeast, ordered his cavalry of over 4,000 men forward with Wade Hapton's brigade in the van. He chose a column formation – with all its built-in risks of severely restricting firepower to the front. Stuart, however, was concerned with meeting the timetable, knowing that to support Pickett's charge, he would have to travel narrow roads which allowed quick passage through the fence-lined fields. He was also confident (some say cocky) that the size and reputation of his "Invincibles" would intimidate the Union commanders and that they would let him pass. He would then race in from the rear to support the Confederate infantry attack and split the Union army in half ... and destroy it.

This was not to be. Brigadier George Armstrong Custer, age 23 (the youngest general in the Union army), was prepared to stop him. Leading

(17006) Robert E. Lee (right) and (17008) Jeb Stuart

400 troopers of the First Michigan, Custer drew his saber, threw off his hat, and shouted, "Come on, you Wolverines!" Outnumbered ten to one, Custer ordered his men as they were galloping forward to change from column of squadrons to line of squadrons. This increased the front ranks from 15 men to between 40 and 50 men. This maneuver disoriented the Confederates to the extent that they lost momentum and became a confused mass vulnerable to the smashing charge of the First Michigan. Effectively punched in the nose, the Confederate cavalry simply stopped. It was then that Union cavalry positioned on the flanks plunged into the melee, causing Stuart's cavalry to withdraw.

But for Custer's seemingly suicidal frontal attack, Stuart might well have made it to the Union rear and caused untold havoc.

Custer had five horses shot from under him that July day. He went on to participate in more than one hundred cavalry actions during the war. He captured more Confederate battle flags than any other Union general ... a remarkable man, and worthy of more than a footnote to history. ■

SUGGESTED READING

Clashes of Cavalry by Thom Hatch
Lost Triumph by Tom Carhart
The Battles for Brinkerhoff's Ridge and East Cavalry Field by Eric Wittenberg
The Cavalry Battle that Saved the Union by Paul Walker

Jim Hillestad operates under the name "The Toy Soldier." His museum, containing more than 35,000 figures and a large collection of militaria, is located in the Pocono Mountains of Northeastern Pennsylvania. For directions and hours, call him on 570 629-7227 or visit his website at www.the-toy-soldier.com.