

Hartwood Church Cavalry Raid, February 25-26 1863.

The most significant ground combat action which took place entirely within Stafford County's boundaries was a brigade-sized Confederate cavalry raid which took place February 25-26, 1863 at Hartwood Church. It would establish an important benchmark for both the Confederate and Union cavalry operations for the rest of the war.

Situation

In the winter of 1862-1863, the Union Army of the Potomac and the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia shared equal privation and discomfort facing one another across the desolate landscape of the Rappahannock River valley. Based in Stafford County, the Army of the Potomac had been badly defeated at Fredericksburg (December 11-15, 1862) and humiliated in the abortive "Mud March Campaign" (January 20-24, 1863). Lee's Confederates were based in and around Fredericksburg, and in Spotsylvania, Caroline and Culpeper Counties. The Federals manned a perimeter defense of 150 square miles encompassing seven army corps, with over 135,000 men; 60,000 horses and mules; 400 artillery pieces; numerous fortifications and entrenchments; and 30,000 temporary shelters. February 1863 saw them reorganizing, resupplying, refitting, and replenishing manpower with replacement and returned deserters, stragglers and wounded. Operationally they were picketing all along their perimeter and especially watchful to the west and southwest along the Rappahannock's fords and to the south toward the Northern Neck.

Cavalry raids by Major General Jeb Stuart's forces had taken an endless toll on Union commanders' patience, and especially on Major General Joseph Hooker, who had commanded the Army of the Potomac since January 26th. Raids at Dumfries and Fairfax Station in December 1862 and a small skirmish at Wigginton's Mill on February 6th had emphasized the imbalance in the armies' cavalry capabilities. Confederate cavalry patrols roamed freely to the west from the Rappahannock to Brentsville (Prince William County). As they probed and tested the outer defenses and early warning networks of the Army of the Potomac, the only limitations on the Confederates were severe shortfalls in fodder and horses. Despite superior arms and equipment, the Rebel cavalry seemed to generally best their Federal counterparts. They were strongly aided by what one historian termed an "extensive spy network" in Stafford. Captain Frank W. Hess of the 3rd Pennsylvania Cavalry related, "Every inhabitant in this county was in full sympathy with the enemy." The Confederates, according to a Union general, also had "many young rebels, who assemble, mount, and form scouting parties at the shortest notice." Once approached by "any superior force they are suddenly transformed into idle, loitering citizens, without arms, and professing great ignorance of the country." Union cavalryman complained that even women and children participated energetically in scouting the Federals.

To combat these deficiencies and to create an independent cavalry force which could match Stuart's, General Hooker created a cavalry corps in his army in early February 1863. This force of two divisions, a reserve brigade and a horse artillery brigade was the Union's first concrete step toward achieving parity in cavalry actions. However, this fledgling force was still in its first month of existence and was generally untested. Guarding the approaches from Culpeper, Fauquier and western Stafford Counties, the Union cavalry established an outpost line under Brigadier General William Woods Averell, one of two cavalry division commanders. Operations were centered around Hartwood Church near the Warrenton Road. Further west, they established *videttes* (also *vedettes* – manned by mounted sentries, each guarding a smaller approach route). Together with the cavalry, Federal infantry picket lines at Berea Church covered the main

approaches to Falmouth. Little Hartwood Church became a shelter for men, horses, grain and rations, as well as a source for firewood.

Fitzhugh Lee's Raid

While Hooker and his cavalry corps commander, Major General George Stoneman, struggled to rapidly organize, train and deploy the new cavalry corps, Confederate Brigadier General Fitzhugh "Fitz" Lee was already headed in their direction. He had been ordered by a telegraph message on February 23rd to cross the river into Federal territory and test the Union forces with his brigade. He took a combined force of about 400 troopers of the 1st, 2nd and 3rd Virginia Cavalry Regiments (probably limited in numbers by a lack of available horses). As exemplified by Colonel Thomas Taylor Munford's 2nd Virginia Cavalry Regiment, the brigade had been active ever since the Fredericksburg battle. They had participated in the Christmas raid on Dumfries and Fairfax Station and conducted picket duty along the Rappahannock in January. They had also endured the same dull routines of winter camp as their Union counterparts. Hard times followed them even in camp. Summoned to a review parade -- normally a happy break from cavalry operations and a chance for the troopers to "show-off" -- they had been compelled to ride some 30 wet and cold miles to perform in the review, during which rain reduced visibility to 50 yards. Earlier in February, the regiment again braved snow and cold on the Rappahannock picket line

On February 24th, a day after receiving his orders, Fitz Lee took his command from Stevensburg (Culpeper County) across the Rappahannock at Kelly's Ford. They moved along the Warrenton Road from Morrisville (18 miles from Falmouth) toward Hartwood through a daunting 15 inch snowfall. On the 25th around 9:30 A. M., Fitz Lee divided his force and ordered an approach march to Hartwood Church.

Averell's Union cavalry were caught while changing the guard at Hartwood Church at noon. Mistaking Lee's stolen blue overcoat-clad troopers for fellow Federals, the videttes had allowed the Confederates to approach too close, and were suddenly surprised and overrun. Responding Federal units (16th Pennsylvania and 4th New York Cavalry Regiments), were soon trapped in file formations, unable to maneuver in the mud and snow, and routed as well. The whole Union cavalry force was driven back toward Berea Church.

Fitz Lee's troopers rounded up prisoners and horses and moved forward. The 3rd Virginia Cavalry foiled at least one Federal cavalry counterattack by charging on Fitz Lee's order. A Northerner wryly observed, "Considering the [poor] conditions of the roads, [the Federals] made very good time to the rear." By 7 P. M. on the 25th, Fitz Lee's cavalry finally encountered Union infantry defenses near Berea Baptist Church, and withdrew in good order toward Morrisville. The successful raid cost the Rebels 14 casualties, while capturing 125-150 Yankee cavalrymen (including 5 officers), their horses, and much-needed equipment. Fitz Lee's February 27th report provided additional perspectives:

On the 25th, I drove the enemy's pickets near Hartwood Church, and attacked his reserve and main body. Routed them, and pursued them within five miles of Falmouth, to their infantry lines. Killed and wounded many of them. Captured 150 prisoners, including 5 commissioned officers, with all of their horses, arms, and equipments. I then withdrew my command slowly, retiring by detachments. Encamped at Morrisville that night [25th/26th], and on the 26th recrossed the river, and returned to camp with my prisoners. The successive charges were splendidly executed. My loss in killed, wounded and missing was 14.

The reactions by the Army of the Potomac and its new cavalry corps to the Hartwood Raid were adequate, but slow. At 6:30 P. M., Hooker coordinated with Major General Heintzelman in the Washington Defenses to send additional cavalry out to the west at Catlett's and Rappahannock Stations. Heintzelman sent 2,000 cavalry in that direction the following morning. At 7:30 Hooker had alerted Major General Darius Couch's II Army Corps to "send a good brigade of infantry up to Berea Church" to further block the enemy cavalry. Hooker related that Stoneman and Averell were responding and cautioned Couch not to "get in collision" with them. Averell, then at Potomac Creek, headed for Hartwood, and was ordered to follow the Rebel force in cooperation with Stoneman. Other Federal cavalry units were alerted to block a possible breakthrough toward Stafford Court House. (Hooker had previously realigned the XII and XI Corps for such a possibility.) The XII Army Corps in that sector was also alerted to defend. Hooker assessed that, given the undoubted weariness of the Confederate horses, "We ought to capture every one of them." The alarm, seemingly over, Hooker's chief of staff, Major General Dan Butterfield dispatched a message to Averell providing intelligence and stating "General Hooker says that a major-general's commission is staring somebody in the face in this affair, and that the enemy should never be allowed to get away from us."

Hooker sent a similar message to Brigadier General Alfred Pleasonton, the other cavalry division commander whom Stoneman had sent forward. In the weakest part of the Union response, Pleasonton's orders became garbled and confused. His men began moving at 2:30 A. M. on the 26th; however, he made the mistake of stating that he didn't plan to move his headquarters beyond Aquia Church where he would be at 8 A. M. This severely rankled Butterfield, who blasted General Stoneman with:

The accompanying dispatch just received from Pleasonton. His brilliant dash and rapid movements will undoubtedly immortalize him!

8 A. M. – In position at Aquia Church.

It is fair to presume that he failed to receive your orders to push on, otherwise I cannot account for his movements at all.

Butterfield simultaneously (February 26th at 10:15 A. M.) sent Pleasonton a similar message, beginning with, "I don't know what you are doing there. Orders were sent you at 11 p. m. last night, by telegraph and orderlies, to push for the enemy without delay, and to communicate with General Stoneman at Hartwood. The enemy have recrossed the river, at Kelly's Ford probably, and Averell is pursuing them. Get your orders from Stoneman."

Hooker, badly overestimating the Confederate force, reported to Washington on the Hartwood Raid:

About 2,000 of the enemy's cavalry felt my pickets yesterday after-noon; were repulsed. And Stoneman is now after them at full chase, with instructions to follow them to their camps, should it be necessary, to destroy them. These are on the south side of the Rappahannock, and near Culpeper. The rebels crossed the river at Kelly's Ford.

Hooker's report may have had the last word at the time. However, historical records ultimately have the final word. In this instance, they included reports of Brigadier General Dan Sickles (III Army Corps); Colonel Benjamin Bailey, 86th New York Infantry; General Stoneman (Cavalry Corps); and General Averell (2nd Division, Cavalry Corps). Sickles summarized: "About

2 o'clock the enemy's cavalry in force drove in our vedettes, and approached within 20 yards of my infantry sentinels. Lieutenant-Colonel Cummins [124th, New York], opened fire on the assailants, and drove them back with loss. The attack was not renewed. Considerable firing was heard on the right of Colonel Bailey [outpost commander, 1st Brigade, 3rd Division, III Army Corps]. It was reported that a detachment of our cavalry, estimated from 60 to 100, was cut off by the enemy and made prisoners." Bailey estimated the Confederate strength at "500-1,000 strong" and added that the Federal cavalry had passed through the infantry lines and engaged Fitz Lee's men with pistols at 20 yards.

Stoneman reported on March 4th providing the greatest detail. He said Averell had alerted him on the afternoon of February 25th that the "line of cavalry vedettes" at Hartwood Church had been attacked. Stoneman went to army headquarters and learned that Averell had already telegraphed his report. On Hooker's orders, Stoneman had alerted his 1st Division (Pleasanton by telegraph) and Reserve Brigade (Captain George C. Cram personally) to be ready to move by daylight. Hooker then ordered him to move his whole force at 1 A. M. and then "at once." Pleasanton was ordered "to move upon the Stafford Court House and Dumfries road, at a point near Aquia Church." Cram was ordered to take his brigade directly to Hartwood Church. Sensing a Rebel move on Stafford Court House and Dumfries, Stoneman had planned to move his units by echelon to secure Hartwood (Averell and Cram) and Morrisville via Aquia Creek (Pleasanton). Stoneman received orders from Hooker at 6:30 A. M. that, "in the event of your inability to cut off the enemy's cavalry, you will follow them to their camp, and destroy them." Averell's report adds further details. Averell's 1st Brigade (Colonel Alfred N. Duffie, 1st Rhode Island Cavalry) had been only organized on the 25th. Averell reported that the 1st Rhode Island and 1st Massachusetts Cavalry Regiments had supported the pickets "in a skirmish on February 26 and 27, [losing] 36 killed, wounded, and missing." All regiments had returned to their Stafford camps by February 28th.

An interesting and revealing sidelight of the Hartwood raid was that Fitz Lee and William Averell had been fast friends in prewar days. Lee taunted his old comrade with a note after the raid. That, and Hooker's severe prodding, brought on retaliatory raiding by the Yankees.

The Hartwood cavalry raid was an undoubted Confederate tactical success. It also had distinct significance to the cavalry establishments on both sides. Modern historians rank it as the beginning of Fitz Lee's final rise to prominence as a major cavalry commander and, ironically, the event which spurred the Federal cavalry afterward to higher levels of raiding and general performance.

Epilogue

The Federal cavalry corps would go on to steadily better performance. In retaliation for the Hartwood Church raid, Averell attacked the Confederates on a similar raid at Kelly's Ford on March 17, 1863. This time it was Averell who left a sarcastic and taunting note. Finally, substantial progress for the Union cavalry would be achieved at Brandy Station in June 1863, where the Federals surprised and fought evenly with Jeb Stuart's cavaliers in a major engagement. In the ensuing Civil War battles, the Federal cavalry would grow stronger and more capable and the Southerners would grow steadily weaker and less able to challenge their adversaries. In 1865, after the Appomattox surrender, Fitz Lee and the other sons of Naval Captain Sydney Smith Lee would settle in Stafford County at "Richland." There they would begin life anew in a restored, if not yet contented Union. Lee would remain a Stafford citizen until he became governor of Virginia and would live long enough to serve the United States again as a major general in the Spanish-American War. It would not be a completely comfortable fit –

he had expressed confusion when presented with his blue uniform as to whether he should salute it or shoot it! That war brought the first serious postwar reconciliation of North and South.

Further Reading:

- Homer D. Musselman, *Stafford County in the Civil War*, (Lynchburg, VA: H. H. Howard, 1995).
- *Official Records*, Series I, Volume XXV, Part II, pp 97-108,
- *Official Records*, Series I, Volume XXV, Part I, pp 21-26.
- Eric J. Wittenberg, *The Union Cavalry Comes of Age: Hartwood Church to Brandy Station, 1863*, (Washington D.C.: Potomac Books, Inc., 2003), Chapter 2.
- Robert J. Driver Jr. and H. E. Howard, *2nd Virginia Cavalry*, (Lynchburg, VA: H. E. Howard, 1995.)