The Battle of Gettysburg was one of the most decisive of the War Between the States. It was filled with gallant soldiers and deeds, but also with controversies. There was perhaps no greater hero nor debate present than that surrounding James Ewell Brown Stuart, Major General of Cavalry, Confederate States of America.

Could it be true that this devout cavalryman had abandoned his duties and obligations to his beloved army; the army to which he had gladly offered his life, and for which he had forsaken his cherished Federal Army career? Or was he as tired and even ill-fated as many another Southern soldier too long at war with self and sovereign? Many mishaps plagued the mighty Rebel Army in their Northern crusade, and mistakes-gone-disputes assailed many a fine leader that summer, perhaps the gravest of which belonged to their venerable commanding officer. However, Gen. Robert E. Lee was untaintable in the hearts and minds of the South and those burdens fell on the heads of his devoted subordinates.

The ruinous Gettysburg campaign signified a great turning point in the American Civil War. Until that point most engagements twixt the two factions had resulted in a series of Union humiliations, especially where the cavalries were concerned. Gen. Lee was directing a major offensive intended to reach Harrisburg, Pennsylvania’s Capitol city. It was Lee’s habit to leave as much discretion as he deemed possible to his trusted commanders, and the mission on which he sent Gen. Stuart was no exception. He was to screen their movements from the enemy, report immediately any move made by Federal forces, and rendezvous with Ewell near Harrisburg. There was some discussion concerning the harassment of Federal support lines along the way; an idea approved of by the commanding officers, but left up to Stuart; this would become the source of the Stuart dispute. An unanticipated early start by the Army of the Potomac was, somewhat belatedly, reported to Stuart by his principle reconnaissance man, Capt. Mosby, but the dispatch warning Lee never reached its destination. As if that wasn’t enough, the brigades of Generals Robertson and “Grumble” Jones, who had been ordered left behind in the event of another circling of the Union Army, failed their assignments to
closely shadow the infantry and guard the mountain passes on the north-
ward march (Davis 323, 342). This resulted in a separation of Stuart’s entire
cavalry from the main body of the Army, thereby leaving Lee blind to the
enemy’s dimensions and locations, as well as ignorant of the terrain. If not
for the efforts of Harrison, a civilian scout, they may have been taken com-
pletely unaware.

As it was, they were able to turn and meet the Federals around the small
town of Gettysburg, and on the first day of that battle, July 1, 1863, Heth’s
Division under Gen. Hill clashed with Gen. Buford’s Union Cavalry Corps
on ground of Buford’s choosing at Seminary Ridge. There he had set up to
keep the Confederates from attaining the high ground South of the town
which began at Culp’s Hill and extended in a fishhook pattern up around
Cemetery Hill and down Cemetery Ridge to the best vantages on the field,
the Little and Big Round Tops. This good ground Buford was able to hold,
albeit barely, until Gen. Reynolds arrived with his infantry to reinforce him.
Just as Buford had hoped, they were able to fall back to the heights and gain
the advantage, leaving the Confederates to the lesser rise of Seminary Ridge.
When Ewell arrived from the North, Lee had ordered him to, at his discre-
tion, follow the retreating Union troops up their hill and force them off; this
he failed to do, a source of some controversy. Ewell’s timidity along with
Buford’s stubborn resistance and the arrival of the infantry saved the day for
the Union, although the Confederates considered it their victory.

While the Confederate main body approached that encounter, Stuart’s
cavalry continued its Northward trek around the Union Army, seeking to do
as much harm to the Federals as possible in passing. Mosby’s persuasive
comment to Stuart that “The best way to protect Lee’s communications is to
assail Hooker’s,” struck close to his own heart (Davis 322). It also showed
that they remained ignorant of the Union change of command into the hands
of Major General George Meade. After some traveling difficulties, like a
rough crossing at the Potomac River and a detour to avoid Union troops,
they were able to sever Federal telegraph lines in several places affecting their
communications. They also took possession of 125 Union supply wagons.
These actions, though seemingly in accordance with the original plan, served
to further delay Stuart’s reunion with the main force, an issue of growing
concern and criticism among those who anxiously awaited the arrival of the
“eyes and ears” of the Confederate Army (Davis 325-330).

That July 1, as the Rebel Army faced the Federals for the first time at
Gettysburg, the cavalry found itself engaged in a skirmish of its own at
Stuart had been vainly seeking the position of the main body, having had no
knowledge of the turn at Gettysburg, when he stumbled upon the occupied
town, and was in the process of bombarding the stubborn Union General into submission when Venable and Henry Lee, of Gen. Lee’s staff, arrived with new orders to make all haste to Gettysburg. Stuart finally left the cumbersome wagon train trailing with orders of pursuit while he rushed ahead to join the fray (Davis 332).

The second and third days essentially consisted of Union troops waiting on their heights, dug in to repel a series of Rebel attacks. Lee’s plan for July 2 was for one half of his force, under Gen. Longstreet, to attack the Southern end of the Union line while simultaneously striking the Northern end with Gen. Hill and the other half in a flanking maneuver of Ewell’s Division around Culp’s Hill. A couple of factors complicated Lee’s echelon strategy. Lee had opposed Longstreet’s request to concentrate on the Union’s right flank, but that was before it was known that Sickles had moved his force of Federals forward off of the high ground, exposing that flank. Longstreet’s refusal to deviate from the original plan was the source of another dispute. The other hitch in the plan was Longstreet’s tardiness, which caused the hopes of a synchronized strike to be discarded. It was around that time that Stuart finally made his appearance at the headquarters of Gen. Lee. Despite the exuberance with which the troops greeted him, his peers afforded a much chillier reception. When meeting with Lee, Stuart faced a stern reproach from his beloved general which nearly crushed even his indomitable spirit. While they spoke, some of the other officers were busy discussing the drawing of papers for Stuart’s court martial. This latter issue would never come to fruition, but did remain one of the biggest debates of the battle, and of Stuart’s illustrious career (Davis 334). That day ended with the massacre of Devil’s Den and the victorious famed stand of Col. Chamberlain and the 20th Maine, and the Army of the Potomac was again left holding the heights. The failure of July 2 went unrecognized as such by the majority of the Rebel troops who celebrated with their usual vigor; their fearless leader shared their delusions, but the truth was not lost on many of the other officers, most of whom had suffered heavy casualties and none of whom had reached their objective; the coveted heights, which steadfastly remained Union possessions on the right and left flanks.

July 3, the final day of the confrontation, Lee planned to use Longstreet’s forces, who were the freshest, including Pickett’s Division which had seen no action thus far as they brought up the rear. They were to strike this time in the center of the Union line at Cemetery Ridge, thereby cutting Meade’s force in twain, while the rest of the army lent support. To do this it was necessary to lead the main body across a large open space ending in a long-sloping hill approaching the objective rise, during which time the slow infantry would be under merciless barrage by the Union batteries above. Longstreet vehemently objected to that course of action, insisting again that
the Union’s left flank remained vulnerable. But his protests fell on deaf ears and Lee persisted, driving a fatal wedge twixt those two old friends that would never be amended. During that attack, Stuart was to lead his cavalry troops around the Northern flank of the Union and cause disruption from behind amidst their supply trains.

As Pickett rode his famous charge into the jaws of destruction, Stuart was closing with Federal cavalry under Gen. David Gregg a short distance to the East of the main fray. It is hard to say whether because of the absence of many of Stuart’s seasoned troops and his use of some green units, Jeb’s own folly, or the tenacity of Gregg and his Michigan Wolverines, but the Union general was able to hold Stuart on the right flank. This left free the resources of the other Union cavalry corps, and though Buford was finished for a time, a Union cavalry regiment, the 1st Vermont, led by Gen. Farnsworth under Gen. Kilpatrick, attacked Hood’s Division on the Confederate right flank. There they made a costly charge that pierced the Rebel flank, weakening it for possible infantry intrusion, and drew enemy fire, something not exactly in abundance among Southern batteries (Davis 342).

As Pickett’s hopeless charge met its fated but valiant end, so did the hopes of the Confederacy of a victorious Northern invasion. While Lee hung his head in guilt and despair, and his men staunchly maintained the contrary, he gave his orders to rest one day and withdraw. Stuart’s Cavalry was once again given the duty of protecting the Rebel flank as it retreated from the pursuit of Union forces. The retreat made its way in the pouring rain, and though they were beset by many federal harassments, Stuart’s Horsemen kept the main encampments secure from the hands of Union cavalry. It was an arduous and costly operation, with casualty counts of more than 20,000 Confederate and 23,000 Federal, but by July 13, the Rebel Army had recrossed the Potomac to the temporary safety of Virginia (Davis 343-349).

If Stuart was aware of the harsh criticisms of his performance coursed through the halls of the most high back home, he gave no indications. He continued to be the model officer in military affairs, while remaining “Stuart the beau” when amongst the ladies (Davis 355). That is, with the exception of a heated conversation he had with Col. Marshall, of Lee’s staff, in which he discussed his reasons for actions in the North as reported in his Gettysburg report (Davis 353). Marshall was one of his main critics and is depicted as the one who drew up a petition for court martial on the field in Shaara’s novel (247). Jeb stated in his report that he had felt that he could not join the infantry without bringing the danger of Union cavalry to them, as his was the screening force. By staying clear until further North, he kept Lee’s wagon trains safe. Marshall pointed out that the wagons had been of only marginal importance at that point, and that paramount was their need
for information. But Stuart had been unaware of the critical turn things had taken at that time. Further complications existed in the fact that Stuart had counted on the brigades of Robertson and "Grumble" Jones to support the infantry. Finally, there was the failure of Jeb’s dispatch warning Lee of the original move (Davis 354). These last were forces beyond Stuart’s control. His was certainly a bold interpretation of the vague order, but courts martial? One must only look at the life of the man to dispel any further doubts of Jeb Stuart’s loyalty or courage.

Esten Cooke, a cousin of Stuart’s wife and cavalryman under him, rode with Jeb throughout the war. Cooke wrote often of their exploits and later became a famed author. He once penned of Jeb:

“His instinct was unfailing, his glance that of the master . . . it looked like instinct rather than calculation—that rapid and unerring glance which took in at once every trait of the ground . . . and anticipated every movement of his adversary.” (Davis 155)

Stuart was certainly no fool, or else he was the luckiest damned fool that ever was, because the precision and audacity with which he pulled off many a mission was either genius or madness, the difference twixt I will leave up to you. His instinct was not with him in Gettysburg, though there was certainly no shortage of testaments throughout his career. Jeb attempted to join the West Point Military Academy at the age of 17. Having had home tutors “of some ability” and some schooling at Emory and Henry College, Jeb needed only an appointment to begin, which he received from newly elected Congressman, H. T. Averett, who, incidentally, had recently unseated Jeb’s father, Archibald Stuart. At West Point Stuart met and impressed some of his close comrades-in-arms to be, like the superintendent at the time, Robert E. Lee, and his nephew, Fitzhugh Lee, who came to be one of Jeb’s most trusted officers. Stuart’s grades at The Point were exemplary, usually near the top his class, until his final year there, during which his demerits rose also (Davis 18-21). There was a belief maintained in his family that Jeb allowed his grades to drop so he didn’t get forced into the corps of engineers, which took all the highest scoring cadets (De Grummond 13). However, Stuart’s intelligence encompassed more than books, as former Confederate CO, Gen. Johnston, reported to Confederate President Davis, “I know no one more competent than he [Jeb] to estimate the occurrences before him at their true value” (Davis 73). During his frontier days as Quartermaster of the Union 1st Cavalry, Jeb gained an intimate understanding of the importance of the supply line (De Grummond 19). Given this and his ignorance of Lee’s predicament, it is easy to see how he may have overestimated the value of the supply line in Pennsylvania. In view of these and other tributes to Stuart’s judgement, it is not
hard to understand the surprise and disappointment of the other officers at the Battle of Gettysburg. We never feel so let down as when we are deprived of a sure victory, and it is easy in the face of such, to look with scorn on those who we take for granted.

Another facet of Stuart’s genius was his knowledge of people, both militarily and personally. On many occasions Stuart knew a gem of a human being when he saw one, as can be seen in many of the fine men he acquired for his cavalry; of all varieties. One of these men was the young master-gunner John Pelham, whose loss was most acutely felt during the days of the Northern campaign. Another jewel was an accomplished young banjo player named Sam Sweeney who Jeb accosted from another regiment to play along with his own minstrel-servant, Mulatto Bob; for Stuart, a singer of some note, loved his music and his coveted musicians (Davis 69). Jeb was a hit with the civilians, even having many, though mostly female, fans behind Union lines. He was always courteous to the denizens of the countryside through which he passed, assuming they didn’t wear Union Blue. For the latter he thoroughly enjoyed outsmarting and having fun at the expense of; as in an account of one occasion:

...Stuart captured a Union officer’s trunk and found touching letters from a wife, and obscene ones from a mistress, reveling in the wife’s ignorance of the affair. Stuart sent all to the officer’s wife. (Davis 70)

Another such display on a more serious note is Stuart’s daring ring around McClellan’s Army, in which he masterfully surprised and outwitted his opponents in their own territory, and even got the chance to embarrass his own father-in-law, Gen. Philip St. George Cooke, the celebrated cavalry leader of the Union Army that was always several steps too late the entire chase. Stuart never forgave him for remaining with the Federals and took great pleasure in his humiliation (Davis 117-119). Stuart always believed that “a good man and a good horse can never be caught” (De Grummond 31).

One of the most notable traits of that young cavalry commander was his tenacity. Jeb Stuart was a Pit Bull among men, with never a thought of surrender. His temerity was well-noted from his earliest days as in one of his elder brother, Wm. Alexander’s memories from their childhood. It was that of a single minded attack Jeb made on a hornet’s nest with nary a care for their sting (De Grummond 12). His diligence was also manifest in an event from his days on the Western frontier, that time involving an artillery piece. Stuart was leading a small detachment of riders and towing one gun when their course placed them at the top of a huge cliff with only a narrow-winding path to the bottom. Having no orders to leave the gun, Stuart decided to
"show the Major [John Simonson of the Mounted Rifles] what a little determination could do" (Davis 33). So, using ropes and sweat on the partially dismantled cannon, he and his men laboriously attained the bottom, much to the astonishment of his superiors (Davis 33-34 & De Grummond 16-17). Jeb came from a long line of courage, as well as public and military service. I’ll spare you the stale apple and tree metaphor and say that it is clear that he was raised with the belief in self-sacrifice for a higher purpose and a strong sense of patriotism for his homeland, Virginia. Jeb’s father, Archibald Stuart, was a veteran of the War of 1812; prior, longstanding representative of the Virginia Assembly; and former Congressman. Alexander Stuart, Jeb’s grandfather, was a member of the Virginia Executive Counsel; a Federal judge in Missouri; and a Speaker of the Missouri House of Representatives. A similar pattern can be seen from his mother’s side of the family, who professed ties to Civil War Governor of Virginia, John Letcher and the noted Governor Sam Houston of Texas.

In the tradition of his forebears, Jeb committed his undying devotion to his patriotic duties as a Son of Virginia. There are many tales of the divisions in men’s hearts over joining their home states in secession, as with Generals Lee, Longstreet, and Armistead to name but a few (K.A. 191 & 257). With Stuart, however, there was never a question, nor a moment’s hesitation. He had eagerly waited and prepared for word from his family on the state of affairs, either way. When he was forewarned of Virginia’s decision to adopt The Order by Esten Cooke, he promptly mailed both his letter of resignation and his letter of application to the Union and Confederate commands, respectively, and set out for Virginia (Davis 47-48). When Stuart’s father-in-law, his son’s namesake, remained with the Federals, Jeb legally changed the boy’s name to James Ewell Brown Stuart Jr. (Davis 43 & 77). Jeb served his command with his whole heart, and his heart belonged to Virginia.

Stuart was not a disloyal or disobedient soldier, nor the young Narcissist seeking his reflection in the media. What had been noticed his entire career were his deeds, which he considered the basic duty of every devout Southern man. When he bragged, it was of his men, not of his brilliance or fame. When Stuart fell, finally, to a bullet, it was perhaps fitting it be from the “first proper raid of Federal cavalry Virginia had seen” (Davis 384). And maybe he saw it coming because it was with complete calm that he said shortly before the incident, “I go where they [the bullets] are because it’s my duty. I don’t expect to survive this war” (Davis 402). At any rate, when he faced his time at Yellow Tavern, fate had at last caught up to him, and Jeb too joined the ranks of his fallen comrades in the Valhalla of Southern memory, a loyal patriot to the last.
Works Cited

