

# THE BATTLE OF MIAMIVILLE

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When Starr Ford invited me to be your speaker today, he suggested that I might talk to you informally and briefly - I emphasize the word "briefly", just as he did - about the role of cavalry in the colonial wars in which you have a hereditary interest. Were I to follow his suggestion literally, you would have the pleasure of hearing the shortest talk ever given to your organization, for, to the best of my knowledge, cavalry was not a factor in the wars fought in America prior to the War of Independence, and if it was, I know nothing about it. Indeed, even in the Revolutionary War, cavalry played a very limited part. For about a year, in 1780, the British had a mixed force of dragoons and light infantry under Colonel Banastre Tarleton in South Carolina, and he and Light Horse Harry Lee, and the "Old Swamp Fox", Francis Marion, with his command of mounted guerillas, hunted and fought each other up and down the state. No doubt another speaker could tell you all sorts of fascinating stories about Tarleton, Lee and Marion and their operations, but I am a one - war man, and to avoid embarrassment to everyone concerned, I will get on to the Civil War as rapidly as possible.

When the Revolutionary War was over and the new government set up its military establishment, Congress authorized the raising of a squadron of dragoons, who proved to be a great help to Anthony Wayne in his victories over the Indians in 1794. Eight years later, in one of its spells of economy, Congress legislated this unit out of existence. The War of 1812 then brought about a more interesting development. Colonel Richard M. Johnson of Kentucky organized a regiment of mounted infantry which had a spectacular record under General William Henry Harrison. The uniform of the regiment was even more splendid than its martial accomplishments. The men wore hunting shirts fringed with red and round hats with long white plumes tipped with red. On a more sober plane, Johnson's regiment evolved a method of fighting which was to have, fifty years later, important consequences on the art of war.

Not until 1833 did the United States formally revive the cavalry arm. By then, the frontier had been pushed out into the Great Plains and it became apparent that mounted troops were needed to deal with the fast-moving Plains Indians. Accordingly, in that year Congress authorized the raising of two regiments of dragoons, and from then until the final replacement of the horse by the tank a few years ago, cavalry was always a part of our military establishment. But American cavalry became a very different kind of military force from the gaudy cavalry of European armies. In Europe, cavalry was used for scouting and picketing, for the protection of convoys and of the flanks and rear of the infantry. American doctrine followed the European up to this point. In battle, European cavalry was held in reserve to perform a dual function. When the enemy infantry was shaken by artillery or infantry fire, the cavalry was launched against it in a mounted charge. In an age when the infantry musket had a range of not more than 100 yards, a cavalry charge, delivered at a gallop by huge masses of yelling horsemen, slashing and stabbing with their heavy sabres, was a fearful experience for

even the best infantry to undergo. The other battle function of European cavalry was to try to intercept and break up the charge of enemy cavalry upon its own infantry.

In the years preceding our Civil War, there had come about a vitally important revolution in infantry firearms. The old smoothbore flintlock musket, firing a round bullet, so inaccurate that it required expert marksmanship to hit the side of a barn with it at 100 yards, was replaced by a percussion-cap fired, infantry rifle, firing an ingeniously-designed conical bullet. The new weapon was accurate and deadly at distances up to about 400 yards, and quite effective up to as much as 1,000 yards. During the same period, due to advances in metallurgy and design, the accuracy and range of artillery were also increased. Whereas the cannon used in the Napoleonic Wars was effective for distances from 600 to 800 yards, the range of even the smoothbore guns had gone up to 1,600 yards by 1861, and rifled cannon had a range of 1,850 yards or better, and could be fired by a well-trained gun crew at fifteen to twenty second intervals. The combination of these factors made the old cavalry charge hopelessly obsolete, but it required the experience of the early years of the Civil War to drive this rather obvious fact home to the extremely conservative-minded military profession. As a matter of fact, those of you who are familiar with the workings of the military mind will not be surprised to learn that as late as World War I, cavalry was still being used in the traditional way - and being slaughtered in the process - against infantry armed with the magazine rifle and the machine gun. The Germans, French, Austrians, Russians and English were all guilty of this murderous practice.

We knew better, and it was during the Civil War that we in our own pragmatic way developed a new method of using cavalry effectively even in the face of these advances in infantry and artillery firepower. What we did was to go back to the precept of Colonel Johnson and his Kentucky mounted rifles of the War of 1812. That is to say, we simply laid aside the traditional European ideas about cavalry, and proceeded to evolve a new kind of fighting force which had the mobility of cavalry and the fire and staying power of infantry. Oddly enough, it was the romantic South, full of ideas of medieval chivalry straight out of Sir Walter Scott, rather than the practical Yankees, which took the lead in this transformation, and this was particularly true in the West, or what was then the West, namely the area between the Alleghenies and the Mississippi River. John Morgan and Bedford Forrest armed their men with infantry rifles, and whenever possible, had them fight on foot. Eventually, the idea spread to the Northern armies. In time, and with typical Yankee adaptability, the North developed the idea further, primarily by equipping its cavalry with breech-loading carbines, and especially the Spencer, the first of the true automatic weapons, and thus giving the cavalry-man firepower previously undreamed-of.

Actually, the change we effected in cavalry tactics was only one phase of our contribution to the art of war in this area. The second was even more significant. Traditionally, raids into enemy territory, to burn bridges, attack supply-lines and create havoc generally behind the front, had been one of the normal functions of light cavalry. However, in the densely populated countries of Europe, with good all-weather roads to be found practically everywhere, these raids were short-range affairs. Since it was relatively easy to effect a quick concentration against the raiders, they had to be careful not to stray more than a few miles

from their base. From this concept of short-range, limited objective, hit-and-run raids, we developed mounted infantry into a striking force with a tremendous strategic potential. The great distances over which the armies operated, especially in the West, the great length of their lines of communication, the sparsity of population, the absence of good roads, and the vulnerability of the railroads which were then being used for the first time as the principal means of transporting supplies to the armies in the field, all had a part in bringing about this strategic revolution. More important than any of these, in my opinion, was a cultural factor one does not usually think of in connection with the evolution of military techniques. At the time of the Civil War, we were still to a great extent a frontier nation. The willingness to cast loose from civilization, to strike out into the wilderness with nothing more in the way of supplies than one could carry on one's back, was not only a part of the American tradition, but was, in 1860, an accepted form of everyday life. It was, therefore, entirely natural that cavalry raids, as conducted by Americans, should become far-ranging affairs, frequently covering distances of several hundred miles and lasting several weeks, during which time the raiders were completely out of touch with their supports and were thrown completely on their own resources. This too was a development in which the South took the lead, but once again, as in the case of the new cavalry tactics, the North, after taking over the idea from the South, developed it into an entirely new dimension.

During the last year of the war, it occurred to James Wilson, who had become a major-general at 27, only four years after graduating from West Point, and was one of the most intelligent officers in the Union army, that cavalry raids, as practiced by Stuart, Morgan, Forrest, Grierson and Sheridan, had one serious flaw: they could cause damage and disruption, but they could not hold territory; sooner or later, the raiders had to return to base. Wilson asked himself this question: if one could organize an all-cavalry army, multiply its firepower by equipping its entire personnel with Spencers, give it maximum mobility by having it carry nothing but ammunition, could not such an army cut the umbilical cord linking it to the slowing-moving infantry, so that it could then go wherever and as far as it pleased in enemy territory and stay there as long as there was a military advantage in doing so? Wilson answered his question in the affirmative, and in the early spring of 1865, proceeded to prove his theory in a campaign which carried him from the Tennessee River to Selma, Alabama, which he destroyed, then to Montgomery, and from there to Rome and Macon, Georgia, at which point the surrender of Lee and Johnston ended the war and brought Wilson's experiment to a close. What Wilson did in this little-known campaign was to plant the seed from which grew the World War II independent, self-sufficient tank army that first the Germans and then we used with such deadly effectiveness.

But in speaking of Wilson and his contribution to the art of war, I have gotten away from, and ahead of, the much less esoteric subject I really want to talk about. I mentioned a minute ago that the idea of the far-ranging cavalry raid originated in the South. John Hunt Morgan, of Lexington, Kentucky, is usually given credit for being one of the originators of this concept. I myself am of the opinion that the credit really belongs to Morgan's very intelligent second-in-command and brother-in-law, Basil Duke, but that is a highly controversial subject which we need not discuss today. It is a topic which generates a great deal of heat in some circles. What is beyond dispute is that Morgan was quick to seize upon

the idea and exploit it to the maximum, especially in terms of its potential for personal publicity. His great year was 1862. With Basil Duke and an English soldier of fortune, George St. Leger Grenfell, at his side to help him, he conducted a series of spectacularly successful raids into Tennessee and Kentucky. Unfortunately for him, no one was more impressed with the glamorous aspects of these raids than was Morgan himself, and the effect on his none-too-stable personality was disastrous. By the spring of 1863, he had become so enamored of raiding that he became quite incapable of working in harness with his military superiors, or of obeying orders, or of subordinating his activities to the overall strategic objectives of the Confederate Army of Tennessee to which he and his cavalry division were attached. Nor was he able any longer to face the fact that a raid, to be effective, had to have a worth-while military purpose.

In June, 1863, Morgan asked for, and received permission to make a raid from Middle Tennessee into Kentucky to break up the line of communications between the Union army at Murfreesboro and its base at Louisville. Morgan had in mind a much more ambitious operation, namely, to cross the Ohio River below Louisville, traverse southeastern Indiana and southern Ohio, doing all the damage possible and frightening the daylights out of the Union high command, and then either to recross the Ohio into Kentucky at some point east of Cincinnati, or to keep on going eastward across the mountains and join General Lee in Virginia. From a military standpoint, this was pure moonshine, and what made it even worse is that Morgan's decision to cross into Indiana was a direct and deliberate violation of his orders. I realize that in saying this, I am taking a positive stand on one side of a much debated question, but I do so with the conviction that those who, over the years, have tried to relieve Morgan of the odium of disobedience of orders have been guided more by hero-worship than by the evidence.

On July 2, Morgan started out with 2,400 men. I will not bore you with the itinerary and the details of the first eleven days of the raid. I will only mention that Morgan crossed the Ohio at Brandenburg on July 8, just four days after Lee began his retreat from Gettysburg and General Pemberton surrendered Vicksburg and 37,000 men to General Grant. Having said this much, I will imitate the Indiana militia, and make a fast but orderly retreat, with Morgan hot on my trail, to a prepared position at the Miami Boat Club, for you must know that just a little less than 99 years ago - on Tuesday, July 14, 1863, to be exact - this very area had its moment in history, and was the scene of much more excitement than we are likely to generate today.

On midafternoon of July 13, Morgan, who had already lost five hundred men from straggling, arrived in Harrison. His approach to Cincinnati had been well advertised, and the city was in the midst of what the British call a great flap. General Ambrose Burnside, whose previous career in the Union army was not one to inspire confidence in his ability to deal with the raiders, was in command in Cincinnati, but he had practically no troops. Martial law was declared and business was suspended while clerks and workmen reported for duty with the militia. Fortunately for Burnside, Morgan decided that it would not be safe to risk his command in the maze of streets in the city; accordingly, although his men had spent 21 of the past 24 hours in the saddle, he left Harrison after a brief rest and headed North, up the valley toward Venice. There he turned eastward, and by 2 a.m. on the 14th, the head of his column

reached Glendale. Morgan had kept his command going up to this point only by the constant replacement of his worn-out horses with fresh animals which his men picked up at every farm along the way. This system of keeping his men mounted, and the equally rough-and-ready method of getting forage for the animals and food for the men by simply taking what was needed, resulted, after the raid was over and Morgan and his officers were safely lodged in the state penitentiary in Columbus, in the Ohio Claims Commission having to deal with 4,375 claims for compensation, for loss and damage totaling nearly a half million dollars. I suppose that the majority of the claims were reasonably legitimate, although the Commission noted "a very general disposition to appreciate the prices of property." One claim was for the loss of a bowie knife valued at \$1.25, and another, filed by a gifted resident of Hamilton County named Stadtmiller, a sort of Billie Joe Estes born before his time, was for the value of his farmhouse, which he claimed had been burned by the raiders; there were only two flaws in his claim: his farm was located roughly ten miles from the nearest point reached by Morgan, and it burned down eight days after Morgan was safely out of Hamilton County.

By the time Morgan reached Glendale, the march had become torture for his men. It was a hot July night and pitch dark, and the plodding horses' hooves kicked up a choking cloud of dust. The men were groggy from lack of sleep and were nodding and drooping in their saddles, with the equally worn-out officers making perfunctory gestures to prod and pull them awake and to keep them moving. As the long night wore on, great gaps opened up in the marching column, and the units in the rear of the line had to find their way in the darkness by following the hovering streamers of dust that floated in the still night air above the roads the head of the column had taken.

From Glendale, where only a few horses were stolen, the raiders rode south toward Reading, and from there, by way of Montgomery, they crossed the ridge separating the Millcreek Valley from the valley of the Little Miami, and in the forenoon, they arrived at Miami, within a few yards of where we are sitting. And now, before describing the reception that awaited John Morgan in this very pleasant little community, we must look southward, toward Camp Dennison, which was located a short distance downstream of us. As I am sure you know, the camp had been established in the early days of the war as a training camp. By the end of 1862, it had become what would now be called a base hospital. There were no organized troops in the camp in July, 1863; there were, however, about 1,900 convalescents there, enough rifles to arm about 700 of them, and a little ammunition. Most important, however, was the fact that the camp commandant, Lieutenant-Colonel George W. Neff of the Second Kentucky Infantry, was an energetic and enterprising officer, with the gift of making the best of what he had. On Sunday afternoon, Neff had received word that Morgan was heading in the general direction of Cincinnati, and began at once to make preparations for his reception. He obtained horses for about twenty-five of his men and sent them out in small groups to picket all the main roads north, south and east of the camp. The next morning, he requisitioned a Little Miami Railroad locomotive and tender, loaded them with armed convalescents, and posted pickets at every bridge crossing the Little Miami as far up as Fort Ancient and Morrow. He also dispatched scouts in all directions, and ordered the unarmed militiamen who began arriving at Camp Dennison on the 13th, to dig rifle-pits to protect every cross-road near the camp. At 2 a.m. Monday night, a telegram from Cincinnati informed him

that the rebels had reached Glendale. This gave Colonel Neff the information he needed; knowing now that he could expect Morgan to approach Camp Dennison from the west or northwest, he sent out about 200 armed convalescents under Captain Procter of the 18th U.S. Regular Infantry to man the rifle pits in that direction, and as soon as it was daylight, sent forward a hundred militiamen with axes, and instruction to block the roads west of the camp and in front of Procter's positions, by felling trees across them.

In the middle of the morning on Tuesday, a train arrived at Camp Dennison from Cincinnati, carrying several hundred rifles and a few thousand rounds of ammunition. This well-timed wind-fall enabled Colonel Neff to arm more of his convalescents and some of the militiamen as well; this he proceeded to do with all possible speed, and within a matter of minutes, two companies of militia, full of fight and determination, and under the command of Lieutenant Smith of the 21st Ohio Field Artillery, were headed this way, with orders to protect the Milford Road bridge and the railroad bridge just below us at all hazards, and to prevent the enemy from crossing.

The axmen whom Colonel Neff had sent out earlier in the morning to block the roads leading down to the camp had just completed their tree-chopping assignment when Morgan's vanguard made its appearance on one of the roads leading down to the camp from the west. Finding the direct road to Camp Dennison blocked, the rebels turned North, with the intention of crossing the river on the bridges at Miamiville. And here, just across the river and a short distance downstream of where we are, they ran into Lieutenant Smith and his militiamen. Since I am speaking to the Society of Colonial Wars and not to the Loyal Legion, I can say with comparative safety that the rebels were not really looking for a fight. By this time, Morgan knew that a strong force of Federal cavalry - not militia - was hard on his heels. With his men worn out after twenty hours in the saddle, all he wanted was to cross the Little Miami with a minimum of trouble, and to put the river between himself and the pursuing Federals as quickly as possible. Therefore, finding that he could not cross at Miamiville, he directed his main body westward and effected an undisturbed crossing about two miles above us. The vanguard, meanwhile, skirmished with Lieutenant Smith's militia, opportunely reinforced by the arrival of Captain Procter at the head of his convalescents, whom, with the right soldierly instinct, he marched to the sound of the guns. It was a lively little fight while it lasted. The militiamen, like those at Lexington and Concord, held their ground, and for about an hour, until the rebels withdrew, they banged away at their opponents with a right good will. In terms of casualties, the honors were very nearly even. Captain Procter lost four men taken prisoner and one infantryman killed; the rebel loss was one lieutenant and four enlisted men captured by the Yankees.

And that is the story of the battle of Miamiville. It was not much of a fight as Civil War battles go. One man killed and nine taken prisoner were less than a trifle in comparison with the 48,000 casualties, dead, wounded, captured and missing, of the battle of Gettysburg two weeks before, or the 35,000 casualties -28% of all the troops engaged - of the battle of Chickamauga two months later. Nor can one call the fight at Miamiville one of the decisive battles of the Civil War. It was fought on a warm, sunny, summery day, just like today, and surrounded as we are by congenial company and the lovely scenery of the early summer,

perhaps it is well to recall the battle of Miami-ville, rather than one of the grimmer and bloodier events of the bloodiest war in our history.

Summer Court  
Society of Colonial Wars in the State of Ohio  
Miami Boat Club, Miami-ville, Ohio  
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#### EDITOR'S NOTE

As the date indicates, the preceding paper was read a long time ago by Steven Z. Starr, who recently completed his own trilogy: "The Union Cavalry in the Civil War", Louisiana State University Press. The first two volumes (1979 & 1981) are in print. The third is due for publication in the Spring of 1985. This paper was a particular favorite of Dick Thayer's. At every Summer Court at the Miami Boat Club he would stand on the open porch overlooking the Little Miami and swear he could still hear the thump of hooves and the jingle of harness and the distant shouts of Morgan's men across the river.

To round out Steve's story for those who are not familiar with Morgan's Raid: after being turned upriver by the Camp Dennison men, Morgan's troopers crossed the Little Miami farther north, and rode eastward across southern Ohio. Hotly pursued by Hobson's cavalry and by an ever-growing force of militia and regulars, Morgan and the remains of his command were rounded up at Salineville in Northeastern Ohio, on July 25, 1863, just 17 days after crossing into Indiana, and 11 days after the "Battle of Miami-ville ."

We regret to report that shortly after our correspondence with Steve about this paper; he died of a stroke on January 19, 1985, leaving the proof-reading of his third volume unfinished. Volume three will appear in due course.