

Many a Union cavalryman had cause to echo a dying trooper's last wish—'Take care of my horse.'

By Michael J. Martin

"A man may ride from Winchester to Petersburg, through rain and mud and cold, and get little to eat and sleep and yet not suffer in health very much," wrote Chaplain S.L. Gracey of the 6th Pennsylvania Cavalry. "But the horse that carries him on the trip is apt to reach his journey's end in pitiable plight. Hunger and cold have starved him, pitiless rain has pelted him, deepening mud has mired him and tired him. His back has been galled with pinching saddle or frozen blanket; he is leg weary and foot sore; decrepitude is in his gait and dejection in his eye; great scars are scalded on his weather-beaten front, and on his ribs and rump famine might hang her banner. Some indomitable wills bear up through it all, though, and these deserve to be rewarded of their country."

Gracey's heartfelt tribute to the horses that had carried Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan's troopers to glory in 1864 was touched with irony: Many of the horses that brought Sheridan his fame were, as the general himself reported, expediently sacrificed during the raids and forays of late spring 1864. "The first raid [Yellow Tavern]...occupied 16 days. We lost but few horses, considering their condition when we started..." Sheridan wrote. "The horses which failed were shot by the rearguard, as they could have been easily recuperated and made serviceable to the enemy. I think the actual number would not exceed 300."

Less than three weeks after Yellow Tavern, Confederate horsemen severely bloodied Sheridan's cavalry at Trevilian Station. "Sheridan's retreat," according to Confederate trooper Edward Wells, "was so precipitate that he could not wait for horses that showed signs of fatigue, but had them shot at once...Colonel Zimmerman Davis [of the 5th South Carolina Cavalry] counted over two thousand dead horses, with bullet holes in their heads, in the one hundred miles (averaging over 20 to the mile) from



A Federal 1st Sergeant and his mount take a break on a patrol through a Southern town, in a painting by Keith Rocco. An estimated 3.5 million horses and mules died while serving both sides during the war.

Trevilian to the White House on the Pamunkey [River]."

Sheridan was not the only cavalryman who sacrificed horses in order to deny the enemy their services. On November 24, 1864, near Milledgeville, Ga., Brig. Gen. Hugh J. Kilpatrick sent his troopers out into the countryside to collect all the horses they could find to use as replacements for their own jaded steeds. The following morning, Kilpatrick ordered his men to kill the surplus animals, a feat that was accomplished by "throwing a blanket over their heads, then bashing them between the ears with an ax." A similar bloodletting was authorized by Union Maj. Gen. James H. Wilson after the fall of Selma, Ala., on April 2, 1865. "After all swapping and exchanging was finished," recalled Wilson, "there was a surplus of 500 horses and many mules. Fearing that these might fall into the enemy's hands when we left, I ordered them shot and thrown into the Alabama River, which was done."

Such was the reward for the suffering and sacrifice of many of the Union Army's equine cavalry veterans. More than 54,000 horses, mules and other animals were attached to the

Army of the Potomac alone in November 1862. At the Battle of Gettysburg in the summer of 1863, 43,303 horses served the Union army. When combined with those attached to the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia, a total of 72,243 horses were at the battle.

As the war dragged on, it became increasingly difficult to procure the number of horses needed to sustain the Union Army. In his annual report of military operations for 1863, Maj. Gen. Henry W. Halleck lamented "the waste and destruction of cavalry horses in our service has proved an evil of such magnitude as to require some immediate and efficient remedy." Halleck estimated that maintenance of the cavalry's 223 regiments would require the procure-

ment of an additional 435,000 horses.

Battlefield losses contributed greatly to the severe attrition that plagued the Union Army's supply of horses. Of the 35,078 horses issued to the Army of the Potomac's cavalry between May and October 1863, 18,078—52 percent—were subsequently killed or otherwise lost in action before the year's end. Those horses that emerged unscathed from the battlefield gantlet of shot and shell still faced a more formidable foe: neglect. Numerous accounts indicate that the Union Army, through ignorance or by necessity, experienced great difficulty supplying its horses' basic needs. Major General George Stoneman, chief of the Cavalry Bureau from July 1863 to January 1864, blamed the horses' woes on three evils: disease of the foot and tongue, severity of duty and want of forage.

Some individual regiments took great pains to meet their horses' needs. The men of the 1st Maine Cavalry, many of whom had been lumberjacks or sailors before the war, learned much about the care of their equine companions from the regiment's first colonel, John Goddard. "Colonel Goddard

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THE DIVISION

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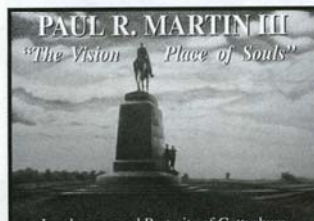
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ORDNANCE

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took an active interest in the care of the horses and succeeded in infusing this spirit into the officers of the regiment," recalled Company E's Edward Tobie. "Indeed it was a common remark that the horses were of more account than the men as they cost money and the men didn't."

Chronic exposure to damp conditions rendered many horses susceptible to a variety of ailments, the most notable being a dermatitis of the foot called "greasy heel," "greased heel" or "scratches." This malady was characterized by discharge of a gray, fetid fluid on the surface of the animals' feet just above their hooves. When left untreated, swelling and lameness often occurred in the diseased limb. A trooper in the 1st Maine Cavalry recalled the emergence of greased heel among the regiment's horses during the unit's stay at Rappahannock Station, Va., in November 1862: "While here a disease made its appearance among the horses called the 'greased heel.' It was doubtless caused by wet weather, hard usage, short rations of improper food, and, perhaps more generally, from want of good care. A large number of horses in the regiment were disabled with this disease, some of them permanently, and some had to be killed."

Of those evils cited in Stoneman's report, hard service and malnutrition were by far the greatest threat to the cavalry horses' general well-being. Long-distance mounted raids taxed the health of even the heartiest animals. On April 29, 1863, Stoneman, 4,329 men and 4,382 horses left Warrenton Junction, Va., on a raid aimed at severing General Robert E. Lee's line of communications with Richmond and its outlying railroads.

Stoneman's raid fell short of its goals, and damage done to the railroads was repaired in a few days. Just as bothersome to the Union high command, however, was the loss in horseflesh—1,000 animals or 21 percent of those that began the 10-day raid. The waste contributed to Stoneman's eventual dismissal as commander of the Army of the Potomac's cavalry corps.

Despite the occasional long raids, most Union cavalymen spent the majority of the war performing the more mundane duties of picketing, patrolling and screening for the various armies. These tasks took their toll on horses as well. A scouting foray from Centreville to Falmouth, Va., wore out many of the horses of the 1st, 5th and 6th Michigan Cavalry. Responsibility for the losses lay with the brigade's commander, Colonel Percy Wyndham. In his quest to catch Army of Northern Virginia cavalry commander J.E.B. Stuart's horsemen, the

young Englishman drove his charges at a merciless pace—at one point horses and men covered 96 miles in 30 hours—over roads in the worst possible condition.

"In consequence," reported the 6th Michigan's colonel, George Gray, "the brigade has sustained great loss. Not only were many men and horses compelled to be left behind, but also many horses were left dead by the way. It will be many days before large numbers of horses which reach camp can be used, and several, I fear, are rendered wholly unfit for future service."

Life was especially hard for the cavalry horses that participated in Maj. Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's 1864 Atlanta campaign. In addition to their mundane duties, the horse soldiers conducted at least five raids into the heart of Georgia. These sorties ranged from four to 17 days in length, with the men and horses marching an average of 30 to 35 miles per day. Raids of such magnitude quickly proved too much for many of the horses in the 8th Indiana Cavalry. During Maj. Gen. Lovell Rousseau's raid from Decatur, Ala., to Marietta, Ga., trooper Williamson Ward observed that the "horses and men were becoming very worn out." Horses simply collapsed, "could not be got up," and were abandoned.

When the cavalry wasn't raiding, it was covering the wings of Sherman's various armies. As a portion of the right flank of Maj. Gen. James McPherson's Army of the Tennessee during its fight at Dallas, Ga., dismounted troopers of the 7th Pennsylvania Cavalry lay in line of battle behind their breastworks for four days without a grain of feed for their horses. Sergeant Thomas Dornblazer witnessed the starving horses "peel the bark from the trees. They ate dry leaves. They chewed at the bridle reins and the picket lines. Over 50 horses dropped from exhaustion in the Seventh alone, and some of the other regiments lost still more."

Hunger was by far the cavalry horse's greatest foe. Months of consuming small amounts of poor-quality forage during the winter of 1863-64 greatly weakened Sherman's horses prior to his army's move on Atlanta. Toilsome service in central Georgia, a poorly cultivated country destitute of nutritious vegetation, sealed many of the horses' fates. The 7th Pennsylvania Cavalry's Major William Jennings grimly chronicled the gradual effects of starvation upon his regiment's horses. "From the 16th of May to the 19th horses were without feed, except the leaves and short grass to be found on the hills around Adairsville, Ga.," he wrote. "During this time we traveled thirty-five miles; the last five was traveled at a gallop causing the horses to give out by the dozens. That night we received the first forage the horses had for three days. Out of seventy-two hours the horses were under saddle for sixty hours. On the morning of May 22 the



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commanding officers of the companies reported a loss of 76 horses, which had died of starvation and [were] abandoned."

From April 30 to September 13, the 7th Pennsylvania traveled 902 miles. Its horses were without feed for 26 days and received only scant feed for another 27 days. Of the 919 horses that the regiment started with, 230 literally starved to death.

Shortages of grain and forage were not confined to Sherman's cavalry. Prior to the Battle of Pea Ridge, Ark., in March 1862, the typical grain allotment for the 2nd Iowa Cavalry's horses was a paltry two ears of corn per day. During a trip down the Ohio River to Columbus, Ky., the horses of the 19th Pennsylvania Cavalry became so famished that they devoured each other's tails. When the animals disembarked and made their appearance upon the levee, the 4th Missouri Cavalry's W. Burns recalled that they "certainly did present the most unique picture of the war."

The 15th Pennsylvania's horses were first exposed to hunger during the winter of 1862 near Bowling Green, Ky. Camp had been established in a muddy swale, and a hard rain fell all night. Shivering trooper John A.B. Williams recorded his thoughts in a diary while sitting upon a saddle, the water running in streams over his feet. "There was nothing to eat that was not soaked or sodden," he wrote. "There was also but little food and less comfort for the horses, who pawed impatiently, often neighing piteously, all through the cold drenching night, immersed half way to their knees in water."

Devoted friendships between cavalrymen and their horses were commonplace and fondly recalled in personal memoirs and regimental histories. "The Indian may love his faithful dog," admitted New York Captain William Glazer, "but his attachments cannot surpass the cavalryman's for his horse. They have learned to love one another in the most trying vicissitudes of life, and the animal manifests its affection and confidence quite as evidently as a human being could." Glazer's own horse, a "beautiful black mare...full of life and fiery metal," succumbed on March 1, 1863. "With a grief akin to that which is felt at the loss of a dear human friend," wrote Glazer, "I have performed the last rite of honor to the dead."

The 22nd Pennsylvania Cavalry's Aungier Dobbs called his mare "Joanne of Ark" and bragged to his mother that "she has never failed me yet she is as shure footed as a mountain goat and as Hardy as a mule." Joanne of Ark grew fat as a result of Dobbs' care and would follow after the cavalryman like a dog. "I have got to like her," he wrote. "I have divided a cracker with her." A querulous little Dutchman in the 6th U.S. Cavalry, Christian Draker was known throughout the regiment for his devotion

to his horse: "[He] would buy or fight for feed for the little animal he rode," one fellow cavalryman recalled. "Stable-call was of little moment to Draker; he was sure to be found in the stable at all times, cleaning his horse, if he was not on guard or other duty. The little animal thrived...in consequence of this liberal treatment and seemed to fully understand the language of his master. He's be mine freund, and I treats him right."

While attempting to deliver a dispatch, the 15th Pennsylvania Cavalry's John Williams and his gelding, Shiloh, were fired upon by a bushwacker. The young cavalryman escaped unscathed, but his horse was grievously wounded. That the two were the best of friends is readily evident in Williams' recollection of that fateful day: "My horse had not proceeded twenty yards before I perceived that his strength was failing. With heavy heart I dismounted and examined him. My fears proved too true.... I felt a perforation in his groin, from which the blood oozed slowly down his flanks. The brave beast finally succumbed, and with a deep drawn sigh staggered heavily to the ground. For awhile my own danger was forgotten in sympathy for the poor horse. He had borne me faithfully and well through a thousand perils and now he was giving up his life in my service. I am not ashamed to confess that the expiring breath of Shiloh as it ascended through those wild woods wrung from my eyes a tear of anguish and regret."

Of the horses and draft animals that went off to war for both sides, approximately 3.5 million—almost six times the number of Union and Confederate soldiers killed—never returned. Abandoned along roadsides, reduced to ashes in mass cremations or simply discarded, dead cavalry horses were an all-too-common sight during the war. A fitting tribute came during the Battle of Sabine Cross Roads, La., in April 1864 when a shell came hissing through the ranks of the 3rd Massachusetts Cavalry and mortally wounded trooper John F. Wild. With blood streaming down his right leg, which hung dangling by only the skin, Wild yelled to his commanding officer, Lieutenant Charles Stone, "I am shot!" Stone wheeled in his saddle, saw Wild's grave condition and ordered John Halpen, a friend of Wild's, to lead his horse to the rear and care for him as best he could.

Halpen helped Wild off his mount and noted that though the shell had torn the girth of the saddle and the feed bag to shreds, Wild's horse had somehow escaped uninjured. Wild was extremely weak due to the loss of blood and could scarcely speak, and Halpen helped him to the ground and gently propped him up against a tree. As the dying cavalryman gazed upon his horse, it came as no surprise to anyone that Wild's last words were, "Take care of my horse." □