

South's Horse Shortage Hobbles Cavalry Tactics Troopers Use Own Mounts

The history of the War Between the States is filled with chronicles of the incredible bravery and, indeed, recklessness of the Confederate army's mounted units. But readers of history should consider how much bolder these Rebel horsemen could have been – and why they sometimes hung back, behaved with caution and hesitated to charge into murderous fire – if not for the Confederate system that required that all cavalry horses be privately supplied – unlike the Union, where mounts were provided.

Both J.E.B. Stuart's mapmaker, Maj. W.W. Blackford, in his *War Years with Jeb Stuart*, and Maj. H.B. McClellan, Stuart's adjutant, in his *I Rode with Jeb Stuart*, wrote about this. They both believed that these brave soldiers, so heedless of death or injury to themselves, were often made more cautious by that system.

At Brandy Station, 10,000 Confederate cavalry clashed with 11,000 Yankees on June 9, 1863. Many fine horses were lost, and the problems of Confederate remount procurement were thrown into sharp relief.

Thus you had young men such as Thomas Taliaferro Hoskins of the 9th Virginia writing home of his big thoroughbred "Extra Billy", the prize horse of the renowned stud farm of a family that boasted of its prominence in raising thoroughbreds. Billy had not appeared scared at the Brandy Station fight, young Hoskins wrote his father, "only at times he was very excited" and "acted most nobly" entering into the spirit of the fight.

Capt. John T. Hoskins wrote back, "You must take care of him. He is a valuable horse." By that time, the Yankees had raided the Hoskins farm in Essex County and taken the other horses. In his next letter home a few days later, young Hoskins had to tell his father that the cavalry horses got so little to eat that he hoped Billy would last until winter.

Lucky troopers who could bring more than one steed from home – often with a black groom to wrangle the extras – might find a ready market for them. A good picture of how cavalry officers and men wrestled with the remount problems while encamped in Culpeper County just before the Battle of Brandy Station appears in the May 19, 1863, letter of J. Kent Langhorne of the 2nd Virginia, soon to be killed in the June 9 battle. Langhorne wrote home that several officers and men bid competitively on his extra horses, and he suggested sending more.

There was an egregious disgrace that followed losing one's steed, truly a subject of fear and loathing among the Southern cavalry. To these romantic young men of Victorian times, to be dismounted and relegated to the infantry was considered a fate worse than death.

The luckier horseless soldier was sent home "on horse detail" to procure another mount, which could easily take 30 days to 60 days if the wherewithal was there, with grievous impact on the army, especially if he were a Carolinian or Georgian – or Mississippian – from Hampton's Brigade serving on the battlefields of Virginia.

The less lucky were formed into certain useless units known as "Dismounted Camp" or "Company Q". The unluckiest of all would descend to the infantry when all hope was up.

Many of those who did get away on horse detail, especially those from Northern Virginia whose homes were now behind enemy lines, would join the partisan rangers – and sometimes even less respectable homeboy bands.

McClellan points out that a brave rider who lost his horse for want of a shoe, or through exhaustion by ill use, or by gunfire, or by abandoning in order to avoid capture, might impoverish himself and his family to buy another. "Nor should it be cause for wonder." He writes, "if this property question affected the courage of many a rider."

What of Hoskins, worried about winter and the dwindling food supply for thoroughbreds? It was Hoskins himself who did not last until winter. He was mortally wounded near Manassas, died at Catlett Station on Oct. 19, 1863, and was buried under a cherry tree in the yard of the Catlett House.

© Richard E. Crouch, SMHS member; originally appeared in *The Washington Times* on August 24, 2002.