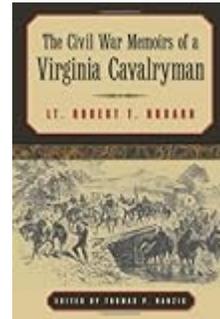




Robert T. Hubbard, Jr. *The Civil War Memoirs of a Virginia Cavalryman*. Nanzig. Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007. x + 302 pp. \$46.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8173-1530-6.



Reviewed by Clay Ouzts (Department of History, Gainesville State College)

Published on H-CivWar (October, 2007)

Memoirs of a Virginia Cavalryman

Americans love to remember their Civil War. Hollywood feeds this historical frenzy by churning out dozens of Civil War themed movies, *Cold Mountain* (2003) being the most recent example. Historians and writers follow suit, with numerous books published yearly on the subject. Even with this profusion of new information on screen and in print, it is still tempting to romanticize the life and experiences of both Civil War leaders and soldiers. The lure into romanticism is most tempting when one contemplates the gallant Virginia cavalryman in full military dress with unblemished gauntlets and a plumed hat, swinging a saber, brandishing dragoon pistols, and riding a valiant bay stallion into the heart of battle. This mental picture inevitably conjures up visions of bravery, heroism, and valor—the pre-eminent image of a genteel Virginia cavalier and gentleman. There was, however, a much bleaker side to the life of a Virginia cavalryman in Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia—a side which included privations, suffering, boredom, sorrow, desperation, calamity, uncertainty, and a general lack of discipline. These are the realities of life in J. E. B. Stuart’s cavalry, according to the wartime memoirs of Lt. Robert T. Hubbard Jr., a member of the 3rd Virginia Cavalry Reg-

iment in Fitz Lee’s Virginia Cavalry Brigade.

Thomas P. Nanzig, the editor of these fascinating memoirs, has done an excellent job of weaving Hubbard’s personal accounts into a wonderful and sweeping chronicle of the war from one participant’s perspective. Hubbard’s story, originally compiled from memory, personal documents, and letters sent home during the war, was pulled together shortly after the conclusion of the conflict. Until now, the manuscript was available only on microfilm. It seemed natural that Nanzig would undertake the task of making Hubbard’s account available to the wider public in book form. After all, he is considered to be a leading scholar on the Virginia Cavalry, having published many works on the subject, including a unit history in the Virginia Regimental History Series entitled the *3rd Virginia Cavalry* (1989).

A short preface to the narrative gives the reader a quick synopsis of Hubbard’s background and a brief summary of the events which are to follow. Hubbard was a twenty-two-year-old member of the Virginia aristocracy studying law at the University of Virginia when the war commenced. Shortly thereafter, he enlisted in the 3rd

Virginia Cavalry. For much of the next year, Hubard and his unit remained on the Yorktown Peninsula. In May 1862, after Lee's reorganization of the army, the 3rd Virginia Cavalry was attached to Stuart's command as part of Fitz Lee's Second Brigade. In this capacity, the unit saw much heavy fighting, especially as the war progressed into 1864 and 1865. Indeed, the 3rd Virginia Cavalry seemed to be on the periphery of epic battles, although they were often engaged in skirmishes, sometimes daily. For example, Hubard's regiment did not participate in Stuart's famous ride around George McClellan's Union army just before the Seven Day's Battles. Unlike many of his contemporaries, Hubard was critical of Stuart's foray around McClellan's flank. "This [Stuart's circuitous ride] was regarded as a great feat at the time," recalled the cavalryman, "But, was it really a great exploit? Riding around McClellan's army, burnt some wagons and stores, sunk a steamer, took some prisoners, and broke down his command on the eve of a great pitched battle that was to decide the fate of Richmond! A daring adventure which built up Stuart, broke down his horses, and did the country no great service is about all it deserves to be regarded" (p. 47). For the duration of the Peninsula Campaign, Hubard saw no heavy fighting. He missed Malvern Hill due to illness, after which he went home to recuperate until September. Consequently, he was also absent at both Second Manassas and Antietam. His unit guarded the Confederate flank at Fredericksburg on December 13 and saw little action.

The 3rd Virginia Cavalry played a prominent role in 1863, taking part in the battles of Chancellorsville and Second Aldie, where Hubbard claimed that his regiment made one of its most effective charges of the war. On the afternoon of July 3, his unit arrived at the Gettysburg battlefield shortly after Confederate General George Pickett's famous, but failed, charge into Union lines on Cemetery Hill. Hubard was an active participant in guarding the Army of Northern Virginia's retreat into Maryland after Gettysburg. For the rest of the year, Hubard's unit performed picket duty and was engaged in several small skirmishes.

By 1864, Hubard's morale was beginning to slip and he predicted impending disaster for the Confederacy, whose prospects, in his opinion, had become "very doubtful" (p. 131). He portrayed a government that was falling apart, since "our currency was in a hopeless condition of depreciation" while the southern congress was "weak-headed, weak-hearted, and weak-kneed" (p. 131). As the Confederacy crumbled, Hubard and his comrades continued to fight and die for the cause at places

like Todd's Tavern, Spotsylvania Court House, Yellow Tavern, Haw's Shop near Cold Harbor, Trevilian Station, Nance's Shop, and Reams's Station. By late summer, Hubard's cavalry set out into the Shenandoah Valley where they constantly engaged Union forces under Gen. Phil Sheridan at battles such as Front Royal, Winchester, Milford, and Mt. Jackson.

So it was, recalled Hubard, that by 1865 the Army of Northern Virginia had become "worn with labors and fatigues and campaigns more arduous, more terrible than mortal man had ever endured" and the soldiers "became moody, despondent, and sad" (p. 213). Nothing more could be sacrificed because the army had "reached that point beyond which human nature cannot go.... All that statesmanship could do, all that bravery could accomplish, all that patriotic, self-sacrificing manhood could endure, all that ever-faithful, patient, constant women could sacrifice and suffer had been done, endured, and sacrificed" (p. 214). By early April, when Union General Ulysses S. Grant broke through Lee's Petersburg defenses, the 3rd Virginia Cavalry made one last attempt to turn the inevitable tide of defeat at Dinwiddie Court House and Five Forks. During the latter battle, Hubard was wounded in the head and was taken to the rear. Hubard, like many others who left eyewitness accounts of this particular battle, criticized Pickett, who was in charge of the Five Points sector, for being "so drunk he knew not what to do" (p. 219).

In addition to being a first-rate regimental history, *The Civil War Memoirs of a Virginia Cavalryman* has much to offer both enthusiasts and scholars, which goes beyond detailed accounts of battles and campaigns. Interspersed within the narrative are letters Hubard wrote home to his family during the war. These letters, in combination with the narrative, are a wealth of information concerning life on the home front. Additionally, these pages offer glimpses into the daily life of a Civil War cavalryman and they sometimes contain pieces of information that are not widely known by many who are interested in the war's history. For example, Hubard pointed out that most of the men in the cavalry were responsible for their own horses and, if their horse died or became hobbled, they were usually given twenty days furlough to go home and procure them. This system, contends Hubard, was flawed because "men would purposely neglect their horses to break them down ... so that the indifferent soldiers and worthless men ... were nearly always home or on the road and the good men had all the fighting to do and all the hard drudgery of military life" (p. 67).

Throughout the book, Hubard registers a litany of opinions concerning his government, his leaders, and his fellow soldiers. Concerning the Confederacy's Conscription Act, he regarded it a "disgraceful piece of demagogism, that did more than all other things combined to bring about our final defeat" (p. 52). He had a very low opinion of Confederate General John B. Magruder, whom he deemed "incompetent" (p. 20), while Stuart was criticized for leading "foolish raids" and depleting the strength of the cavalry (p. 64). Stuart's death at Yellow Tavern in 1864 was due more to his "own heroic doing" (p. 144) than anything else, but he was still "a true patriot and as brave as Julius Caesar" (p. 146). As for Thomas J. "Stonewall" Jackson, Hubard regarded him as rash, strong-willed, and determined to win at the risk of everything. His death at Chancellorsville was a "blow greater than any other that could have been inflicted, not excepting the total defeat of the Army of Northern Virginia" (p. 90). James Longstreet, in Hubard's opinion, was "invincible" (p. 60).

Nanzig is to be commended for such an impressive job in editing this manuscript. The notes are excellent and they are indispensable in helping the reader understand the narrative. With a keen eye, Nanzig has identified statistical, numerical, and informational errors in the original manuscript and corrected these inconsistencies in a thoroughly researched commentary found within the notes. Likewise, Nanzig has included a plethora of crucial maps detailing the many battles and campaigns discussed in the book. There is also a large section of pictures, including some well-known photographs of the war's commanders, as well as several obscure images of soldiers in the 3rd Virginia Cavalry.

Overall, *The Civil War Memoirs of a Virginia Cavalryman* is an important addition to the ever-expanding list of the conflict's first-hand accounts. In publishing this work, Nanzig has discovered a valuable manuscript in rough form and has delivered to the public, in turn, a polished gem.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-civwar>

Citation: Clay Ouzts. Review of Hubard, Robert T., Jr., *The Civil War Memoirs of a Virginia Cavalryman*. H-CivWar, H-Net Reviews. October, 2007.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=13671>

Copyright © 2007 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.