

The Charge of the 8th Pennsylvania Cavalry at Chancellorsville

My great uncle, James Edward Carpenter, was born March 6, 1841 in Chesterfield Maryland, and moved to Philadelphia Pennsylvania with his family in 1843. At the onset of the Civil War he enlisted in the 8th Pennsylvania Cavalry in 1861 as a private, and was commissioned a second lieutenant in 1862, and promoted to first lieutenant, captain and then received a brevet promotion to major of volunteers for gallantry prior to the end of the war.

After the Civil War, he returned to Philadelphia, and spent the remainder of his life as a lawyer serving the community. He was a prolific writer, and wrote many articles about his experience in the Civil War. He died in 1901 at the age of 60, while visiting his daughter in Newburyport, Mass.

The 8th Pennsylvania Cavalry took part in one of the most bizarre and quite possibly the most influential actions in the Civil War. Late in the day of May 2nd of 1863, during the Battle of Chancellorsville, the 8th PA Cavalry was ordered to report to Gen. Oliver Howard of the 11th Corps whose position was located on the Plank Road, near the Old Wilderness Church. Unknown to Major Pennock Huey, the 8th PA Cavalry regimental commander, and almost everyone else, Gen. Howards Corps had been overrun by the famous flanking movement carried out by Gen. Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson against the right flank of the Union Army.

The 8th PA Cavalry proceeded down a narrow wooded road that went from Hazel Grove northward, and intersected with the Plank Road. Lieutenant Carpenter was at the head of the column that smacked into a large segment of Jackson's infantry when it got to the Plank Road. Carpenter, who had his horse shot out from under him during the action, was one of two officers of five at the head of the column that survived the charge. The 8th PA Cavalry lost thirty seven men dead and eighty horses killed in the action. The action was depicted by Don Troiani, the well-known Civil War artist in his painting of "The Charge".

The Charge by the 8th PA. Cavalry was not considered a major action of the Civil War or even of the Battle of Chancellorsville. But because of something that occurred later that same evening, the incident perhaps had major implications, quite possibly for the final outcome of the war itself.

Gen. Stonewall Jackson was wounded in an incident later that same night as he scouted the area between the Union and Confederate armies. His hope was to follow up on the successful flanking movement that virtually destroyed the 11th Corps, and possibly drive the Federal Army back to the Rappahannock River. As the Corps commander, he wanted to scout the area himself, along with some of his staff to see if his plan was possible. Unfortunately for the Confederate Army, some rebel soldiers from North Carolina mistook Jackson's party for an enemy patrol in the darkness, and an unidentified shot from one of his own men hit Jackson in the left arm, wounding him badly. As a result of the wound, Stonewall Jackson contracted pneumonia, and died a few days later on Sunday, May 10th.

Getting back to the charge of the 8th PA Cavalry; most of the Confederate soldiers that were in the vicinity, were completely surprised by the charge. Quite a few of them said later that they thought at the time that it might be part of a grand Napoleonic cavalry charge. Many of these soldiers commented on how nervous they were as a result of the charge, and it would not be difficult to imagine the reaction later that evening, when those same soldiers were confronted with a group of unidentified horsemen in the dark. Would it be a stretch to place the blame for Jackson's accidental shooting on the nervousness of the Confederate troops which could have been exacerbated by the effects of the charge of the 8th Pennsylvania Cavalry earlier that same day?

I am not a proponent of "what if" history, but arguably, the absence of Stonewall Jackson at Gettysburg some two months after his accidental shooting at Chancellorsville could have resulted in a much different outcome at Gettysburg and quite possibly the Civil War itself. It would therefore, not be difficult to debate the importance of the charge of the 8th Pennsylvania and my great uncle, James Edward Carpenter's participation in that action.

