

# Lessons from the Past



## The Battle of Monroe's Crossroads

CPT THOMAS DROWN

In sustainment operations, security is paramount. This is especially true as we consider the shift the Army is taking from counterinsurgency (COIN)-based operations back to unified land operations (ULO). In today's hybrid environment, linear warfare rear area threats can take the form of anything from enemy special operations forces elements to bypassed armored squadrons; none of which sustainment elements are traditionally prepared to defend against. As we look to modify doctrine, there are lessons that can be drawn from past conflicts.

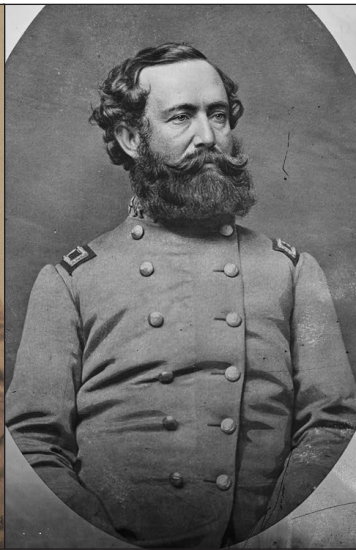
An excellent source of data on what a fluid ULO would look like would be the U.S. Civil War. Many of the battles fought were tactically linear but operationally and strategically based around the fact that the forward line of troops (FLOT) was not rigidly defined. Of particular interest in that regard would be the little known Battle of Monroe's Crossroads. Occurring on 10 March 1865 on what is now Fort Bragg, NC, the battle was an attempt by Confederate cavalry to exploit the fog of war and fluid unit boundaries to destroy the Federal cavalry division under Brevet Major General Hugh J. Kilpatrick. While not particularly sustainment intensive, it illustrates the importance of two of the principles of sustainment: improvisation and survivability.

### Background

After four long years of intense conflict, the American Civil War was finally coming to a close. In Northern Virginia, General Ulysses S. Grant had General Robert E. Lee's Army of Northern Virginia pinned at the Siege of Petersburg. In the South, General William T. Sherman's forces had just finished burning a fiery path across Georgia in Sherman's infamous March to the Sea. With the capture of the city of Savannah, Sherman received new orders. He and his army were to board vessels bound for Virginia in order to assist Grant in the final destruction of the Army of Northern Virginia. Sherman had other ideas, however, and requested that he be allowed to march



Union Brevet Major General  
Hugh J. Kilpatrick



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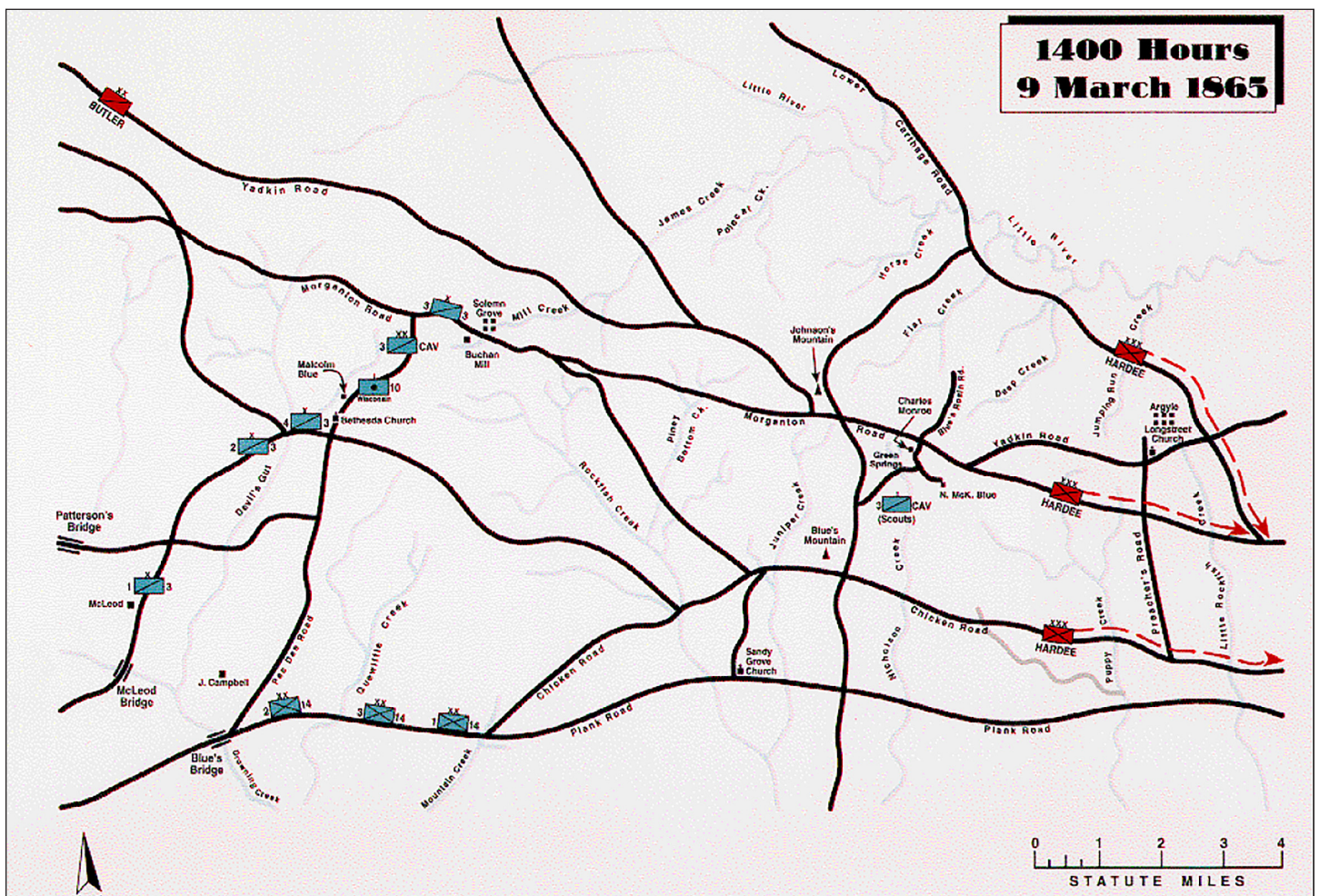
Confederate Lieutenant  
General Wade Hampton

north through the Carolinas, thereby punishing the hotbed of secession that had started the bloody conflict. Grant acquiesced to Sherman's request, and on 19 January 1865 Federal forces plunged into the Carolinas.

Sherman's plan for the invasion of North Carolina was centered on the capture of Fayetteville. Possession of the city would allow for the resupply of his army via the Cape Fear River as well as allow him to link up with any potential inland thrusts from Federal forces on the coast. To accomplish this, Sherman would first feint

towards Charlotte before turning the main body of his troops towards Fayetteville. If the bridge at Fayetteville could be captured quickly, the Federals could trap Confederate General Joseph E. Johnston's army on the western side of the river. All told, Johnston could muster only 30,000 troops to face Sherman. His only chance for success would be to concentrate as much force as possible and attempt to overwhelm one of Sherman's wings as they became disjointed on their advance. To that end Johnston ordered Lieutenant General Joseph Wheeler's cavalry to delay the Federals as much as possible so he could concentrate his spread out forces.

On 8 March 1865, Confederate Major General William J. Hardee's 6,000-man infantry force began to filter into Fayetteville. Also on that day, a Confederate Cavalry Command was established. Under Lieutenant General Wade Hampton, this command united Wheeler's forces and Major General Matthew Butler's division. On the Federal side, Kilpatrick seemed unconcerned by what was happening as he spent his time in the carriage of a female companion, Marie Boozer, while his division struggled through the rain and mud towards Fayetteville. Forced to use parallel routes in order to not overtax the poor road systems, the Federals became disjointed and separated — a target that could easily be exploited. The only thing that kept the Federal cavalry brigades in supporting distance of one another was their excellent scouts.



Maps from *Cavalry Clash in the Sandhills, The Battle of Monroe's Crossroads, North Carolina*

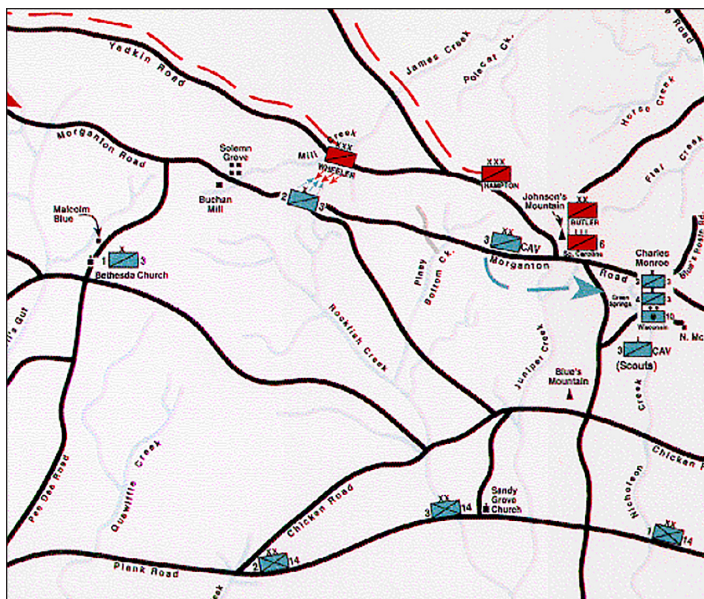
**Map 1 — Situation as of 1400 on 9 March 1865**

These same scouts, 8-10 miles in front of the majority of the division, reached the Monroe Crossroads at 1100 on 9 March. Behind Kilpatrick's scouts, the 3rd Brigade under Colonel George Spencer arrived at the village of Solemn Grove at around 1400. Spencer's men were exhausted. With the rest of the division considerably further behind them, Spencer decided to halt, rest, and set up defensive positions. His scouts that had been moving north and east along Morganton Road reported that a large body of infantry had recently passed through on its way to Fayetteville. They also reported that Confederate cavalry troops were riding as fast as possible westward in order to catch up. Kilpatrick's cavalry division was now between Hardee's infantry in Fayetteville and the Confederate cavalry under Hampton.

Kilpatrick was now at a decision point. He could continue to advance, a risky proposition with the Confederate cavalry in the area and his division strung out, or he could halt, divide his division to cover the three main roads, and attempt to prevent Hampton's cavalry from linking up with the Confederate infantry in Fayetteville. Kilpatrick chose the latter as he could select the ground on which he could fight the Confederates, thereby negating some of the risk of dividing his forces. The 1st Brigade under Brigadier General Thomas Jordan, the furthest back in

the column, was ordered to divert to cover Chicken Road. The 3rd and 4th Brigades with attached artillery would continue down Morganton Road beyond the junction with Yadkin Road and establish camp, thereby blocking Yadkin. The 2nd Brigade would follow and block Morganton Road.

The 3rd and 4th Brigades arrived at the bivouac site at the Monroe farmhouse around 2100 and began setting up camp. The 3rd Brigade turned parallel off of Morganton Road into the sloped open field surrounding the farmhouse while the 4th Brigade camped on the area across from the farmhouse opposite 3rd Brigade. The field was just barely large enough to squeeze all three of 3rd Brigade's regiments; the 1st Alabama Cavalry continued south and encamped on a small hillock overlooking the wooded swamp on the western side and the rest of the field where the 5th Ohio and 5th Kentucky Regiments were camped. Finally, the two cannons from the 10th Wisconsin were set up about 50 yards south of the farmhouse. The rain once again became torrential as soldiers set up shelters and unloaded wagons. The Monroe house was designated as division headquarters and was speedily occupied by the division staff that had not stayed with Kilpatrick. This included Boozer and her mother, who were allocated their own quarters within the house. Spencer, 3rd Brigade's commander, instructed



Map 2 — Situation as of 2100 on 9 March 1865

pickets to be put out towards Fayetteville, but in the torrential rain he was confused and pushed them a half mile south of Morganton Road.

Wheeler's Corps was moving parallel to Union Brigadier General Smith Atkins' 2nd Brigade on Morganton Road. The rain and darkness hindered visibility to such an extent that the two forces were often within a mile of each other, but neither was aware of the other. Moving southeast along Yadkin Road, Butler's advance guard struck Morganton Road and halted. Suddenly, they heard voices and saw riders on horseback. Butler ordered the riders to identify themselves and discovered they were Federal cavalry troopers from the 5th Kentucky Regiment. Quickly drawing his revolver, Butler demanded the Federals' surrender. As they were laying down their arms, a second group of riders appeared; upon seeing the situation, they scattered into the woods before the Confederates could capture them. It was not until much later that Butler would learn that he had almost captured Kilpatrick. In the interim, Butler sent his scouts to follow their tracks and that he would follow shortly with the division.

At around the same time Hampton was giving instructions for the attack, Kilpatrick finally stumbled into his camp at the Monroe farmhouse. Exhausted from his near capture, the general and his mistress turned in for the night, safe under the assumption that the 1st or 2nd Brigades would make first contact with any Confederate cavalry and thus alert the division headquarters at his location. He could not have been more wrong.

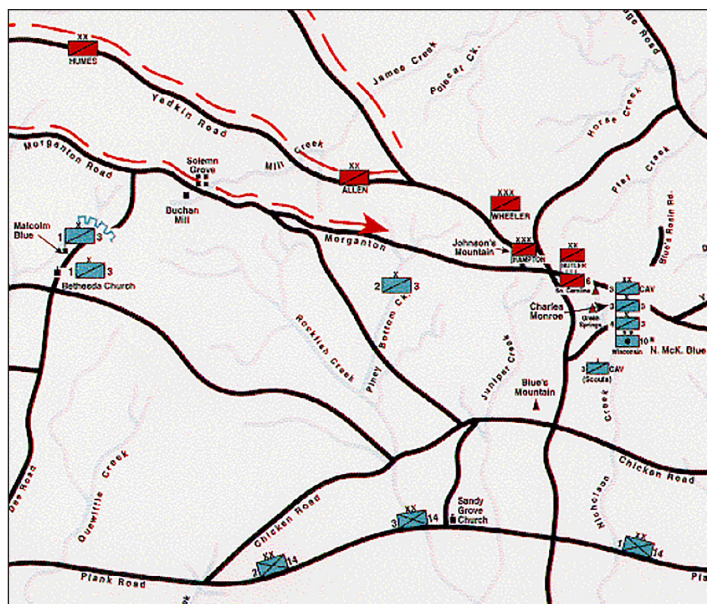
As the night continued, 2nd Brigade (under Atkins) continued to push towards Morganton Road. They had been rather roughly handled by Wheeler's flank guards earlier and so they advanced slowly with a skirmish line out in front. It was these skirmishers who reported seeing Confederate cavalrymen in ponchos encamped along the road. These were Butler's men who had no idea of the size of the Federal force to their rear as they were entirely fixated on the camp at the Monroe

Crossroads. At this critical juncture, a quick violent assault on Butler's unsuspecting command would seem an obvious choice for Atkins. However, with no idea of the size of the enemy force and realizing he was cut off from the rest of the division, Atkins ordered his brigade to countermarch. The road ahead was blocked, but he confident his men would find a way around to the southeast. He ordered them off the road so as to avoid any Confederates coming from the west. Moving off road in the pitch dark was about as appealing as it sounds, and 2nd Brigade promptly fell into a swamp. Horses and men foundered while wagons and cannons were mired to their axles in the deep mud. With Atkins' men busy trying to extract themselves, the first part of Kilpatrick's hazy security plan fell apart.

At this time, 1st Brigade was busy fortifying itself at Bethesda Church about five miles southwest of Solemn Grove. Scouts reported enemy activity to the north, and Jordan was taking no chances on being surprised. Into the early morning of the 10th, he desperately attempted to contact Kilpatrick, Atkins, or even Spencer with the 4th Brigade. All of his runners returned with reports that the roads were blocked by Confederate troops passing eastward. Worried that the enemy forces reported in the north would strike southward, Jordan continued to fortify his position and brought his artillery forward to cover the road. He would wait until daylight and then reassess the situation. The timidity of 1st and 2nd Brigades had now set the stage for a potential failure of colossal scale.

On the Confederate side, events were moving far more aggressively. Butler personally reconnoitered the federal camp, and after conferring with Hampton and Wheeler, built a plan of attack. Butler would move out when Wheeler's troops reached his rear area and then position himself to fall on the Federal camp from the northwest while Wheeler's strung out divisions would strike the rear of the camp from the west. In effect, the Federal 3rd Brigade, 4th Brigade, divisional headquarters, and Kilpatrick would be caught in a pincer movement by Hampton's cavalrymen. Confident in their complete surprise and

Map 3 — Situation as of 0100 on 10 March 1865



superiority, Confederate leaders from company commanders to Hampton himself turned to planning how to take the real prize — Kilpatrick himself.

Satisfied with the reconnaissance, Wheeler returned down Morganton Road to his camp and ordered units into position. The Texas Brigade, the right wing under Brigadier General William Humes, would shift into the woods behind a low ridge. As they moved into position, stumbling through the darkness, they promptly ran into the swamp at the base of the ridge and began to shift right to get onto higher and drier ground. Unbeknownst to them, 200 yards of flooded swamp now stood between Humes' Texans and the Federal camp. More of Wheeler's units began arriving and shifting into positions so that by 0530 as much of Wheeler's command as possible was in position.

By that time, the rain that had incessantly battered both Federals and Confederates subsided and was replaced with a heavy fog that hung low over the swamp. The Confederate forces were finally in position. Wheeler with Brigadier General William Allen's division and Captain A.M. Shannon's scouts held positions along the ridge just south of Morganton Road, directly west of the camp. On his right, the aforementioned Texans under Humes held the far southern portion of the ridge. To the northwest, Butler's division held position on the opposite side of Morganton Road, having shifted parallel to the Federal camp during the night. At 0600, Wheeler gave the command "Forward!" and the Confederates began their attack.

At 0600, the Federals at Monroe Crossroads were just beginning to wake from their slumber. Men could be seen making coffee and reveille was minutes away. Still dressed in

his long white nightshirt, Kirkpatrick stepped outside to check on some horses. At that moment, Wheeler and his men burst from the wood line at full gallop with sabers drawn and guns blazing. The aforementioned Confederate prisoners were abandoned by their guards, and several were killed by their fellow Confederates in the pandemonium. Dumbstruck at the site of Wheeler's men running wild through the camp, Kilpatrick muttered, "Here is four years hard fighting for a major general's commission gone up with a surprise."

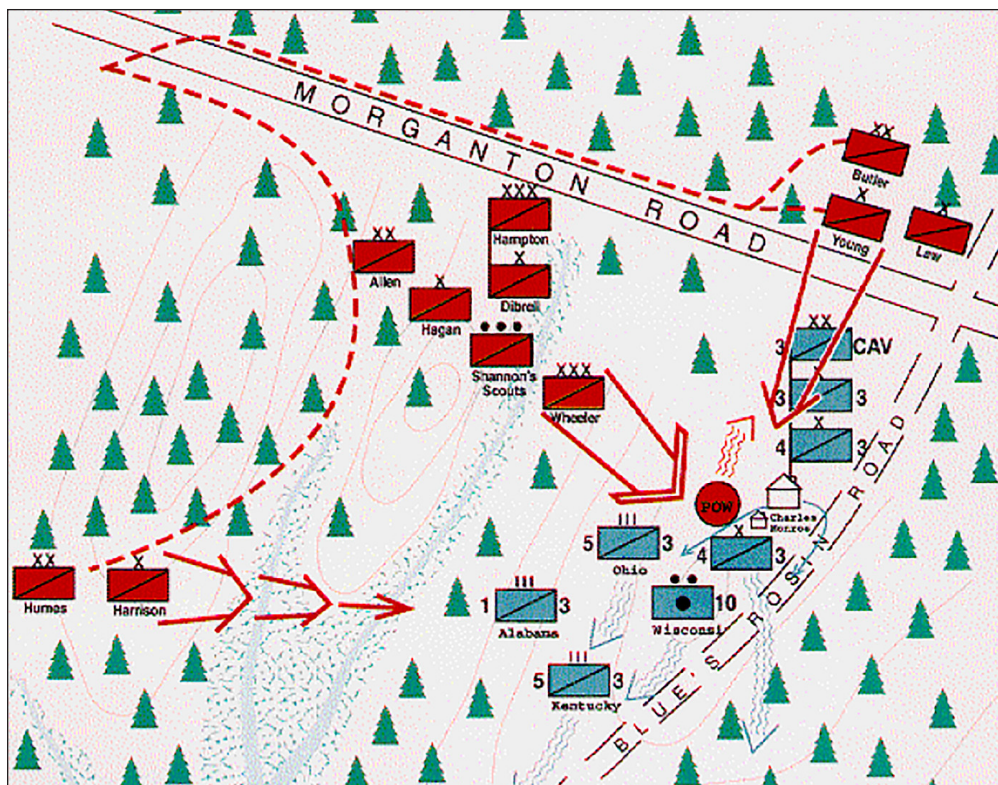
As if to reinforce that point, a young Confederate captain reined his horse and shouted, "Where is General Kilpatrick?" Kilpatrick, realizing he was unrecognizable in his night clothes, immediately pointed to one of his officers (who was attempting to mount up) and shouted, "There he goes on that horse!" The Federal officer lashed his mount into a gallop; thinking his quarry was escaping, the Confederate captain followed hot on his trail. Hiking up his night shirt, Kilpatrick leapt onto the ground and took off to the woods to follow his men and hopefully salvage the situation.

Being pushed from the north and east, the Federals who could get away fled south towards the swamp. Meanwhile, some of the Federal units attempted to form some kind of resistance to the inexorable grey tide. Protected from the initial onslaught by the Monroe house, 4th Brigade attempted to form into a firing line along the wood line. The machine-like precision of fixing bayonets drew the Confederates' attention, and murderous short-range fire rained down on 4th Brigade troops, swiftly cutting short their attempt to make a stand. Broken and joining in with their fleeing comrades, their one positive contribution was that their rifled muskets tricked the Confederates into thinking they were an infantry column. That sobering image caused the Confederates' front rank to rein itself in, throwing the follow-on ranks into confusion.

On the Confederate right, things were not going well. When the bugle had sounded charge at 0600, the Texans had immediately launched themselves into the fog only to immediately slam into an impenetrable swamp. Men cursed as the follow-on regiments kept pushing, driving some of Texans neck deep into the muck and mire. After much confusion, the supporting regiments called a halt. Hume's Texans, however, were already committed, and so many of them continued to try and find a way across the swamp.

The Union's 1st Alabama Cavalry, which was immediately across from Hume's men, was already under duress, having been assaulted

Map 4 — Dawn Attack





Martin Pate painting, *Cavalry Clash in the Sandhills, The Battle of Monroe's Crossroads, North Carolina*<sup>2</sup>

**The Confederate cavalry charge unleashed chaos in the startled Union camp that was just beginning to stir awake.**

during the initial Confederate sweep. The soldiers were not routed as they had sited their camp on a small hill further down the slope which overlooked the swamp. The Alabama troops now did a 90-degree shift and began blasting Hume's Texans with their breech-loading Burnside carbines, driving the Texans back into the neck-deep swamp.

As for the rest of the Federal Army, things were far less successful. The Confederates had driven most of the men who had been trapped in (or under) the Monroe farmhouse into the woods to the south. Those men, having finally been stopped by an impenetrable swamp, held on for the inevitable Confederate follow through. Most had grabbed their weapons when they fled and so now were determined to sell their lives dearly. As they continued to wait, officers began to bring order to the masses, and after minor discussion they decided to retake the camp. The Confederate ranks, on the other hand, had descended into chaos as they began to loot the Union camp. Wheeler attempted to bring order and ordered his men to limber up the Federal cannon and wagons for onward movement. At that moment, they heard gunfire coming from the swamp. The Federals had begun their counterattack.

As the Confederates dropped their loot and tried to find cover, a muddy, wet firing line advanced from the wood line. The 5th Ohio's rapid firing Spencer carbines generated a hailstorm of fire that drove the Confederates from the southern part of the camp. They were victims of their own success as the earlier charge was so swift and so successful that unit integrity had been utterly lost. The Confederates rapidly fell back to the north end of the camp and sporadically returned fire while

attempting to reform. Wheeler, hearing of the Texans' lack of success on his right, ordered them to reform and come to the fight from the north end of the camp. No longer pressured, the 1st Alabama troops swiftly fell back and joined their comrades advancing from the swamp.

Meanwhile, the Confederate reserve could not be located; thus, the only means of salvaging the day would be if Hume's Texans made it in time. The Federals, however, were not letting up; their concave firing line retook the southern portion of the camp and continued to put immense pressure on Wheeler's men. Crossing Nicholson Creek and

the Blue Rosin's Road ford, Captain T.F. Northrop's mounted scouts had found and then collected the 3rd and 4th Brigades, adding them to his 200 Soldiers. This mounted element launched a charge up the hill to retake the Monroe house; it was quickly halted, however, when it ran right into the reforming Confederate cavalry. The rest of the Federal force, encouraged by the reinforcements, surged up the hill and collided with the mounted Confederates.

In the ensuing confusion, First Lieutenant Ebenezer Stetson, who commanded a Union artillery section, retook one of his cannons, unlimbering it and placing a friction primer in the touch hole. With a swift jerk, the cannon fired, stunning everyone in the vicinity. Both sides turned their focus to the cannon. Stetson quickly assessed the situation and began reloading the gun while more of his crews appeared from hiding to assist him. The rebels, having recovered from their initial shock, attempted to take out the new hazard. Hume's Texans, having made the long journey around the swamp, were first into action against Stetson's guns. They, along with jumbled elements from the other Confederate cavalry brigades, attempted to charge the guns but were swiftly scythed down by canister fire. Realizing storming the guns was an expensive course of action, the Confederates focused accurate rifle fire that successfully eliminated the gun crews.

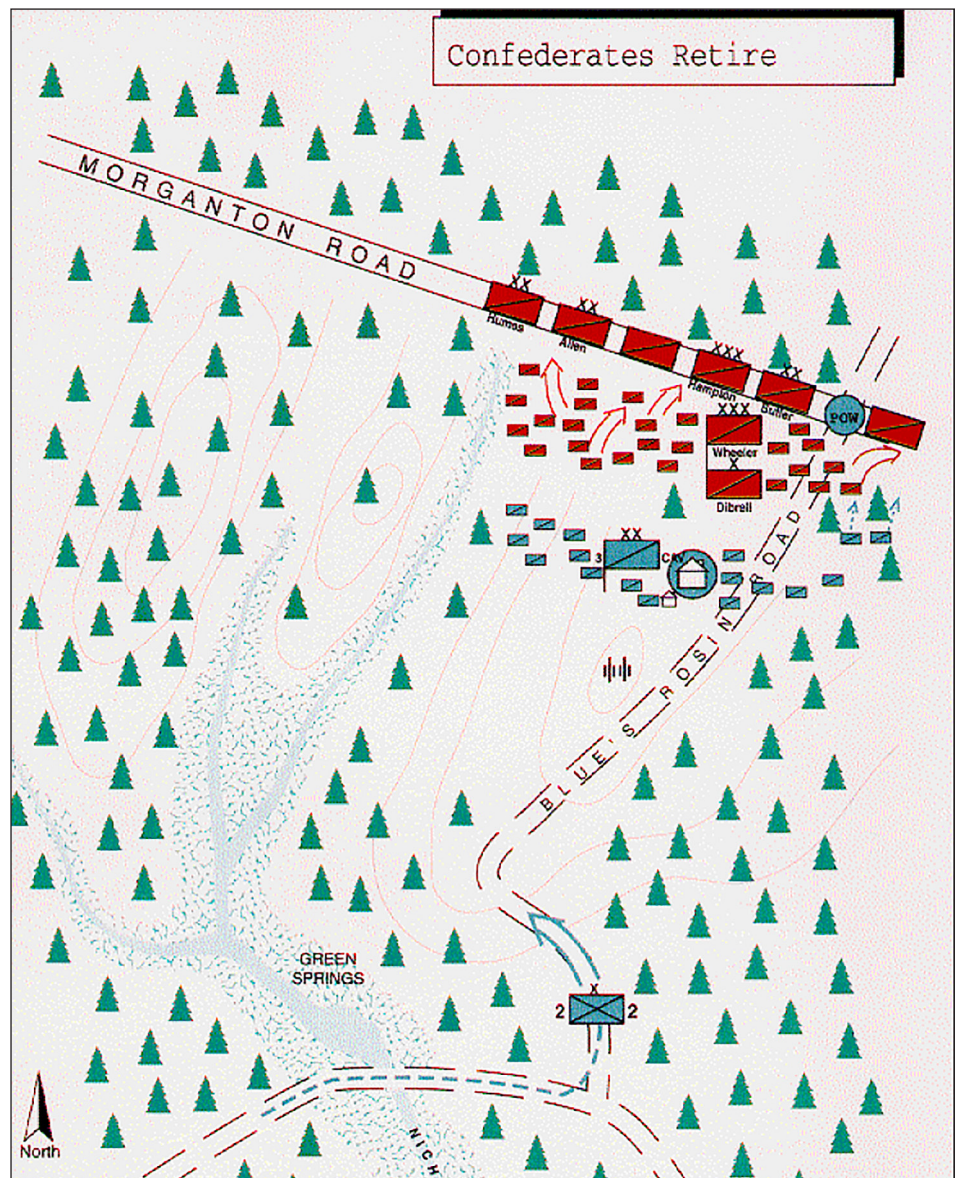
With the guns eliminated, Wheeler realized this was the last opportunity to retake the camp and defeat the Federals. He gathered up men and sounded the charge. The Federals were incensed at this audacious attempt to cheat them of their hard-won comeback and devastated the Confederate

cavalry with a hail of lead from their Spencer carbines. However, the physical force of the charge could not be denied, and many of the dismounted Federals were forced to seek the shelter of the trees as the Confederates resorted to the saber to drive them back. Twice the Confederates were repulsed by the heavy fire, and twice they reformed and charged the Federal firing line. After the second and final repulse, with many Confederate officers dead or wounded and casualties mounting by the second, Wheeler realized that retreat was the only option.

At 0930, Wheeler passed the order to Hampton to retreat, and the Confederates sullenly conducted an orderly withdrawal to the road. They formed up, wagons and prisoners to the front, and set off for Fayetteville. The Federals were dazed by the sudden Confederate disappearance but were glad to have their camp back. They began feverish work to police the dead and wounded, gather salvageable equipment, and move on. Kilpatrick feared the Confederates would return with infantry and finish off his shattered command. Thus, with Wheeler's tired command safely in Fayetteville and Kilpatrick's hasty displacement from the Monroe Crossroads, the battle came to an end.

Both sides would claim victory in the fight; the Confederates, though driven from the field, had met their strategic goal of linking up with Hardee's infantry in Fayetteville. However, they had lost many men and gained little in the extended fight with Kilpatrick's cavalry. Kilpatrick, incredibly, claimed it as a victory because his force was not destroyed and they were able to regain their camp. They unfortunately failed their strategic objective to stop Wheeler from linking up in Fayetteville. Ultimately, the battle was a tactical Federal victory but a strategic victory for the Confederates.

In conclusion, from start to finish this battle was hindered by the fog of war. In the initial phases, thanks to the weather and darkness, Kilpatrick missed the chance to defeat Wheeler's strung out force in detail. Also, the lack of communications, thanks to the intermixed Confederate and Federal units, prevented Federal commanders from warning Kilpatrick about the Confederates to their rear. For the Confederates, confusion and the breakdown of discipline cost them the field as their forces failed to take and hold the camp. In addition, since reconnaissance didn't identify the poor terrain (thanks to the weather), the failure of Hume's brigade cost



Map 6 — Confederates Retire

the Confederates a Cannae-like total victory and the capture of Kilpatrick.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Belew, with an introduction by Kenneth Belew and Douglas D. Scott, *Cavalry Clash in the Sandhills, The Battle of Monroe's Crossroads, North Carolina*, a battle staff ride study prepared for the U.S. Army, XVIII Airborne Corps and Fort Bragg, NC, by the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service, Midwest Archeological Center, Lincoln, NE, and the Southeast Archeological Center, Tallahassee, FL (1997).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

**CPT Thomas Drown** currently serves as the 3rd Expeditionary Sustainment Command's G3 battle captain at Fort Bragg, NC. He received a bachelor's degree in history from the Virginia Military Institute and was commissioned as an Ordnance second lieutenant in May of 2013. He is a graduate of the Ordnance Basic Officer Leader Course and the Logistics Captains Career Course.