

# AMBUSH

## at Ewell's Church

CAPTAIN MARK W. JOHNSON

An infantryman studying the operations of the United States' Civil War will find few examples of small-unit actions that resemble today's light infantry combat. The infantry tactics of that era—massed small arms fire and the maneuvering of troops at regiment and brigade levels—did not result in any great need for independent infantry operations at company level. While countless small skirmishes did take place, few were considered important enough to receive more than brief mention in official reports.

An exception to this rule is an operation on 22 June 1863 near the town of Aldie, Virginia, where a team consisting of 100 Regulars of the 14th U.S. Infantry and 30 troopers of the 17th Pennsylvania Cavalry ambushed a detachment of the

43d Battalion, Virginia Cavalry—better known as Mosby's Rangers.

Although the ambush was not successful (from a Union point of view, at least), it offers several lessons for the modern infantryman, including the importance of two of the Army's principles of training: the need to train soldiers as a team, and the need to train them as they will fight.

The story of the 14th Infantry's encounter with the 43d Virginia begins 19 days earlier. On 3 June 1863, the Confederate Army of Virginia, commanded by General Robert E. Lee, left its lines on the Rappahannock River and began moving westward. It was soon moving northward through the Shenandoah Valley (Map 1). The Confederate cavalry

under Major General "Jeb" Stuart screened the movement by occupying the passes of the Blue Ridge Mountains. Lee's second invasion of the North had begun.

The effectiveness of Stuart's screening operation prevented Major General Joe Hooker, commander of the Union's Army of the Potomac, from learning Lee's whereabouts. On 13 June, fearing that Lee might cut his line of supply with Washington, Hooker ordered his army to move from its position near Fredericksburg and concentrate around Centerville, Virginia.

As the Federal Cavalry Corps attempted to penetrate Stuart's screen on the Blue Ridge, the Union infantry moved northward. Late in the evening of 18 June, the V Corps arrived at the small town of Aldie, nestled in a gap of the Bull Run Mountains. Here, the corps waited for the cavalry to the west to report and for Hooker to decide what to do next.

The 2d Division of the V Corps was one of the most famous of the war—named "Sykes' Regulars" for its commander, Major General George H. Sykes. It contained all of the Regular Army infantry regiments serving with the Army of the Potomac. The division had earned a well-deserved reputation for "superiority in discipline and efficiency."

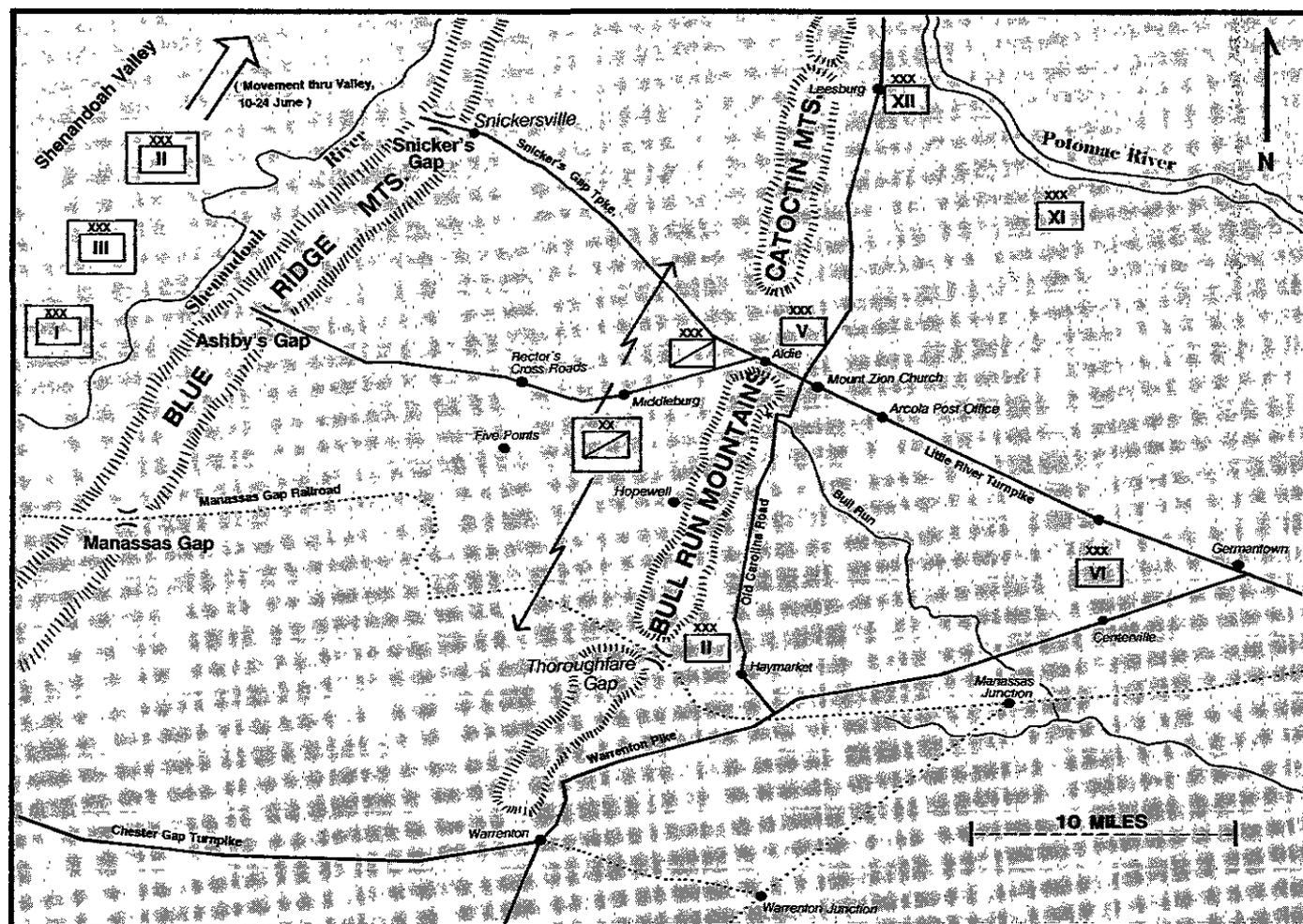
As the V Corps settled into its camp near Aldie, it found itself in the midst of a region known as "Mosby's Confeder-

acy." This was the area of northern Virginia patrolled by Major John S. Mosby and his Rangers. Mosby had begun guerrilla operations in the region in January 1863 with nine other men, and on 10 June organized 70 Rangers into Company A, 43d Battalion, Virginia Cavalry.

Mosby's operations quickly became a thorn in the side of the Federal high command. His elusive Rangers conducted a classic guerrilla campaign against the Union control of northern Virginia, gathering intelligence and raiding Union outposts at every opportunity. Any chance to kill or capture Mosby would not be overlooked.

V Corps got a chance to do just that on the afternoon of 24 June when information obtained from a former slave arrived at corps headquarters. Major General George G. Meade, the corps commander, was informed that the man had been at Ewell's Church, four miles south of Aldie, earlier that day and had overheard a conversation between Mosby and one of his intelligence contacts, Dr. Jesse Ewell. Mosby, after receiving Ewell's report, had said that he would be back the next morning. (At the time, Mosby and his command were scouting for Stuart's Cavalry Division.)

Dr. Ewell, cousin of Confederate Lieutenant General Robert S. Ewell, owned a small farm called "Dunblane" along the Old Carolina Road south of Aldie. A church was also located on his property, as was a little-used trail that ran up



Map 1. North-central Virginia, 1863. The asterisk indicates the location of Ewell's Church. Unit Locations are approximate.

and over the summit of Bull Run Mountain. Ewell's property had suddenly become crucial to Mosby because of the recent movements of Union infantry. With the V Corps in Aldie Gap to the north and with Major General Winfield Scott Hancock's II Corps occupying Thoroughfare and Hopewell Gaps to the south, this was the only route open to him.

Here, then, was a grand opportunity to ambush Mosby and finally put an end to his mischief. To execute such an important mission, Meade turned to the best troops he had—George Sykes and his Regulars.

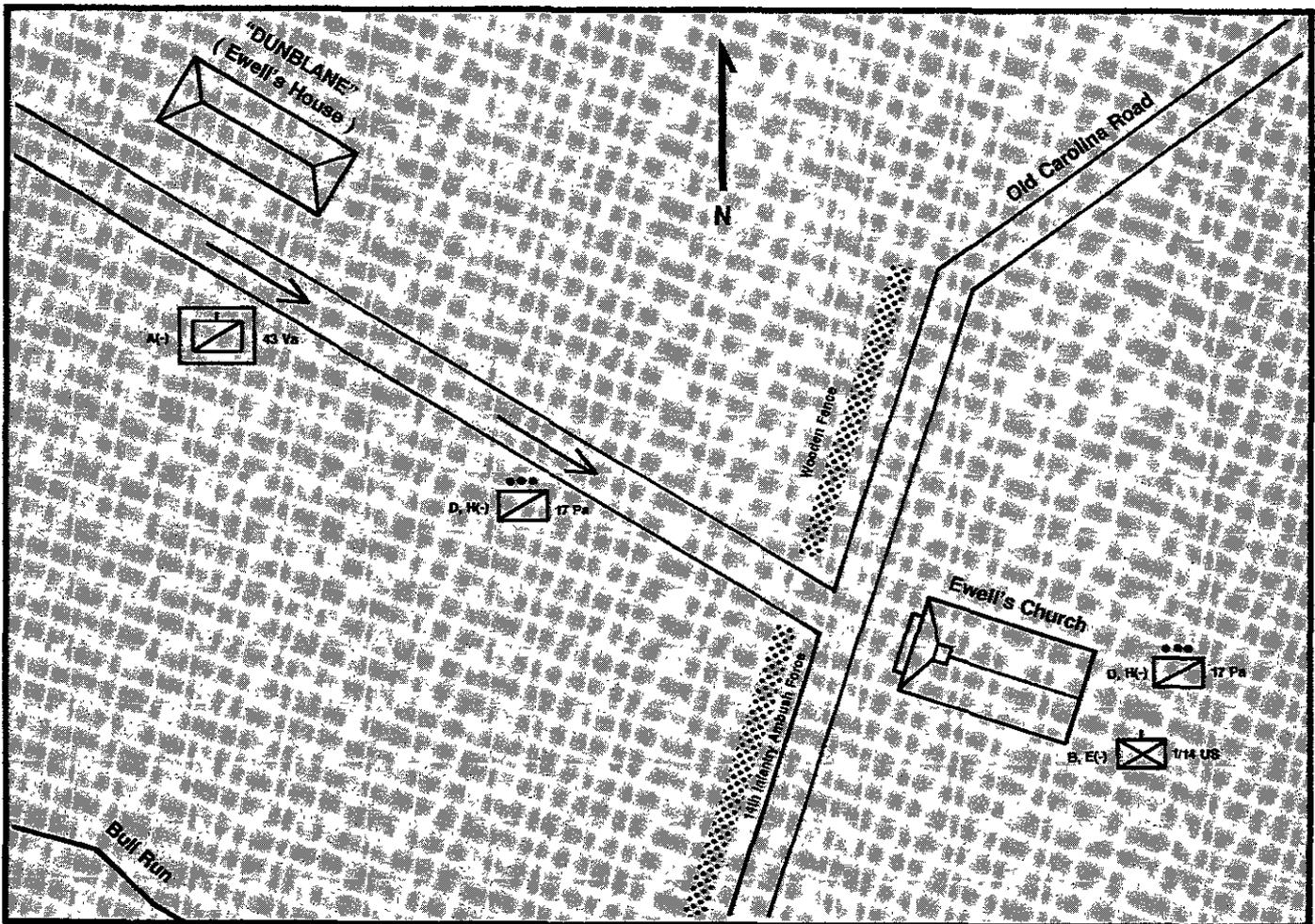
Meade also assigned Union cavalry to the mission. It was common to use horsemen as bait to lure enemy cavalry into an ambush. With the Cavalry Corps busy trying to penetrate Stuart's screen of the Blue Ridge, the only cavalry immediately available were the 40 troopers of the V Corps Headquarters Escort. This was a squadron of the 17th Pennsylvania, Companies D and H under Captain William Thompson.

Along with 30 of his men and two other officers, Captain Thompson reported to the 2d Division Headquarters on the evening of 21 June. There, he learned that Sykes had tasked the 14th Infantry with the mission, a decision that probably had something to do with the size of the regiment and the availability of a commander.

The 14th Infantry was one of the nine infantry regiments added to the Regular Army on 3 May 1861. All of these "new" regiments were organized French-style with three battalions of eight infantry companies each. The existing regiments, the 1st through the 10th Infantry, retained the British-style organization with ten companies in a single battalion. This meant that the 14th Infantry (along with the other new regiments in the division) had a much higher present-for-duty strength than Sykes's "old" regiments) and would be better able to handle the tasking.

Because of the realities of Civil War recruiting, however, all of the Regular regiments were badly understrength. (The Regular recruiters simply could not compete for manpower with their counterparts from volunteer organizations.) None of Sykes's new regiments ever placed more than two battalions in the field. As a result, Sykes's division had undergone a major reorganization in March 1863. Out of the 95 companies the regiment had taken into the Battle of Fredericksburg the previous December, the Regulars had been consolidated into just 59 companies. By June there would be 57.

All of the new regiments lost their multi-battalion organization. This meant that Captain William Harvey Brown, commander of the 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry, was temporarily out



Map 2. Vicinity of Ewell's Church, Virginia. Situation at daybreak 22 June 1863. (Map is not to scale.)

of a job. (Brown had moved up from his command of Company C to command of the battalion in the middle of the Second Battle of Bull Run when his battalion commander, Captain John D. "Paddy" O'Connell, was wounded.)

With the reorganization, the 14th Infantry had been distilled into a single-battalion regiment consisting of six companies of the 1st Battalion and two companies of the 2d. The ranking officer of the regiment in the field, Major Grotius R. Giddings, had assumed command on 3 May 1863, and Brown had become the regiment's "Acting Field Officer," a supernumerary position. Thus, the 14th Infantry now contained a battle-experienced battalion commander waiting for a job. On the afternoon of 21 June, he got one.

Brown received the order to capture Mosby's guerrilla party, and he determined that a force of 100 infantrymen, along with Thompson's cavalry, would be enough to accomplish this mission. For the infantry contingent, Brown chose officers and men who had served under him in the now-disbanded 1st Battalion.

Most of the forces consisted of the regiment's Company E, commanded by Captain Guido Ilges, who had led the company since its first combat at Gaines Mill in July 1862. This Prussian-born officer was one of the most battle-hardened company commanders in the Regular Army. A detachment of Company B rounded out the force. Leading the way on the mission was the company's First Lieutenant, the Virginian in Army Blue, George M. Downey.

Finally, Brown took along Irish-born First Lieutenant Patrick Collins, who had been his First Lieutenant in the now-disbanded Company C and who had moved up to command the company when Brown took over the battalion. He had also served six years with the 2d Cavalry in Texas before the war, rising to the rank of sergeant. Brown no doubt thought that Collins's Indian fighting and cavalry experience would be useful in the attempt to ambush Mosby.

Brown's plan was to travel the four miles to the ambush site and get his men into position well before first light, when Mosby was expected to arrive. He set a departure time of 0100 hours, 22 June. At that time, Thompson's Pennsylvania Cavalrymen moved out southward down the Old Carolina Road, and the infantrymen of the 14th trudged alongside.

The group immediately encountered difficulties. The pickets and sentries stationed around the Union camps had not been forewarned of the movement of Brown's men and, being a favorite target for attack by Mosby's Rangers, did not want to take any chances with any small group of infantry and cavalry traveling at night. The repeated challenges from the sentries cost the force much valuable time.

Adding to Brown's troubles, it had been raining off and on for the past week. Combined with the movement of the thousands of troops through the area, this rain had made the Old Carolina Road a muddy mess. It began raining again shortly after Brown's men set out, and conditions grew steadily worse.

The end result of these delays was that they did not arrive at the ambush site until after daylight. Given that sunrise at that time of year would have been around 0500, it had taken

Brown's force about four hours to move four miles.

Knowing that Mosby could appear at any moment, Brown quickly emplaced his men (Map 2). He put about half of his cavalry and a portion of his infantry in the rear of the church and at the head of a lane leading to Dr. Ewell's house, where Mosby was expected to pass. He left the rest on the left side of the lane facing toward the house. Brown had Captain Thompson place the rest of his horsemen a short distance down the lane leading to the house, with the mission of luring the Rangers into the ambush. Finally, an infantryman was placed in a tree near Brown's position to give early warning of the enemy's approach. They would not have long to wait.

As Mosby's men ascended the rugged path in single file through the rainstorm, a Ranger in the middle of the column lost his hat. As being hatless was a serious blow to a Civil War cavalryman's prestige, he immediately stopped to look for it. The front half of the column, not realizing there had been a break in contact, continued upward; the rear half of the formation, unaware of what was causing the delay, patiently waited. By the time the headgear was retrieved, they had lost all hope of catching up with Mosby and the leading Rangers in the dark and the rain. Then they dispersed to their bivouacs in the area.

Mosby and his remaining force of about 25 Rangers halted near the summit of Bull Run Mountain and made camp. After getting a few hours of rest, the soggy column moved out at first light and made its way down the mountain's eastern slope to Dunblane.

As the Rangers approached Ewell's house, they noticed the small group of blue-clad horsemen in the lane, and Mosby ordered his men to charge. When they did, the Pennsylvanians in the lane spurred their mounts to the rear and the waiting ambush. Brown's lookout in the tree reported their approach; Brown allowed the Virginians to advance "within pistol-shot" and then began firing.

The retreating Pennsylvanians, however, were still in the lane and partially blocked the infantrymen's aim. And much to Captain Brown's horror, only about half of their rifles responded to their trigger pulls. The rain the previous night had dampened the barrels, and the infantrymen had not had time to dry them before loading them.

The Rangers immediately returned fire, wheeled about, and retraced their path. Mosby said, "We fell back to the woods at the foot of the mountain. . . . Not one of my men or horses was killed; three were wounded." Indeed, his losses were light. Charlie Hall, First Sergeant of Company A, took a round in the shoulder; Richard Montjoy, later a company commander in the battalion, had a finger shot off; Ranger John Ballard lost a leg. One account of the ambush claims that Mosby, Hall, and Montjoy were riding side-by-side down the lane, and Mosby must have considered himself lucky.

For Brown and his men, there was nothing to do but return to camp. Pursuing the Rangers in the rugged terrain would have been futile. Their own losses numbered one—Sergeant Martin Aumiller, Company D, 17th Pennsylvania, was killed in the melee.

General Meade wrote in a letter that day, "And thus the prettiest chance in the world to dispose of Mr. Mosby was lost." General Sykes, never one to beat around the bush, wrote the following indorsement to Brown's report of the ambush: "Captain Brown should have had the foresight to see that his infantry were efficient and their arms in firing condition before leaving camp, especially as the rain of the evening might have led him to expect the result he experienced."

Brown blamed the cavalry, "I regret to state that the efficiency of the cavalry did not in all respects answer my expectations." In response, Captain Thompson requested a court of inquiry to investigate the incident. But the immense Battle of Gettysburg occurred less than two weeks later, and the entire affair was soon forgotten.

Nevertheless, the operation points out two lessons that are still valid today. The first is the need to train as a team. As FM 25-100, Training the Force, states, "When committed to battle, each unit must be prepared to execute combined arms and services operations without additional training or lengthy adjustment periods. Combined arms proficiency develops when teams train together."

This concept of combined arms, so commonplace today, was virtually unknown to Civil War commanders below the rank of major general. Small all-arms formations, usually called "legions," were tried early in the war but were soon discarded as impractical. As a result of the combination of tactics and technology in the Civil War, the combat arms branches of the Army were employed separately for maximum effect and ease of maneuver—infantry in corps, cavalry in divisions, and artillery in separate brigades. In addition, the company and field grade officers on both sides, most of whom had so recently been civilians, had a hard enough time becoming proficient in maneuvering their own regiment, battery, or squadron. For most of them, becoming skilled in the employment of a combined arms organization was simply out of the question.

As a result, Captain Brown had never before commanded a company or team of infantry and cavalry. His force was not prepared "to execute combined arms operations without additional training." Some of the confusion during the execution of the ambush was the result. It could be argued that his positioning of the cavalrymen was faulty. Since his intelligence concerning Mosby's route was fairly specific, he probably did not need a force to lure the enemy into the kill zone. And placing the rest of the cavalrymen behind the church did not help the ambush at all.

The second—and perhaps the greatest—lesson to be learned from this small firefight is the need for a unit to train as it will fight. The Army's system of battle-focused training ensures that the tasks a unit will be expected to perform in combat (its mission essential task list, or METL) are the ones it trains on before being committed to battle: "The METL is based on the wartime mission: the unit must train as it plans to fight." While this system ensures that a unit will accomplish its METL tasks well in combat without additional training, it also means that a unit will not be able to do as well a task that is not on its METL. That is what happened to the 14th Infantry in June 1863.

Timothy J. Reese, in his outstanding history of Civil War Regulars, *Sykes' Regular Infantry Division 1861-1864* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, Inc., 1900), says, "In many respects, the 14th U.S. Infantry can justifiably claim the title of most proficient of all the New Army Regiments. Its record on every field in which the Regulars were engaged has few parallels, although its disproportionate losses [when compared with other Regular Regiments] tell the darker tale of distinction."

In every knock-down, drag-out battle the 14th Infantry fought in the Civil War, and there were many of those, it stood in line-of-battle and exchanged volley after volley of devastating rifle fire with the best the Confederates had to offer. On one rainy night in Virginia, however, the men of the regiment did not execute a basic infantry task—keeping their weapons in firing condition. As they struggled through the mud the previous night, they had probably thought that they would have plenty of time to execute pre-combat checks before going into line of battle.

This problem resulted because the 14th Infantry was asked to perform a battle task for which it had not trained or prepared. The task organization, the night passage of lines, and the mission to kill or capture an elusive partisan were all new to the Regulars. They had been pulled from their normal duties and thrust into the very different world of counter-guerrilla warfare. At Gaines Mill or Gettysburg, a failure to perform a routine pre-combat check may have had little effect on the 14th Infantry's fine performance. But at Ewell's Church, it contributed to the regiment's failure to capture or kill an important Confederate leader.

---

**Captain Mark W. Johnson** commands a company in the 3d Battalion, 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division. He previously served with the 2d Battalion, 15th Infantry, 3d Infantry Division. He is a 1986 graduate of the United States Military Academy.

---

