

The Battle of Kelly's Ford

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During the first two years of the war in the eastern theater, Confederate cavalry had consistently outperformed its Union counterparts. Major General Joseph Hooker, the newly-appointed commander of the Army of the Potomac demanded more aggressive actions from his mounted troops, and as such in mid-March he ordered a division of his cavalry under Brigadier General William W. Averell to “attack and rout or destroy ‘the cavalry forces of the enemy reported to be in the vicinity of Culpepper Court House.’” Averell knew that the Confederate cavalry in the area was commanded by his friend and former West Point classmate General Fitzhugh Lee. Lee had previously sent Averell several notes belittling the abilities of the northern cavalry. After a recent Confederate raid that had once again embarrassed the Federals Lee wrote: “I wish you would put up your sword, leave my state, and go home. You ride a good horse, I ride better. If you won’t go home, return my visit, and bring me a sack of coffee.”

Stung by those words and anxious to demonstrate the ability of the Yankee cavalry, Averell, after leaving about 900 men at Catlett Station to protect his right flank, moved on the morning of March 17 with his remaining 2,100 troopers towards the Kelly's Ford crossing of the Rappahannock River. Lee had learned of the Federal approach, and had erected defenses at the ford and obstructed the crossing. He had left only a small force there, with the bulk of his troopers remaining at Culpepper until he knew which of the several fords over the river Averell would use.

At about 8:00 a.m., the Federals launched the first of four charges across the river. They were stopped three times by Confederate fire, until a small group succeeded in fording the stream and capturing the position. Averell delayed in moving the remainder of his force across the

Rappahannock, giving Lee time to move towards the ford from his position at Culpepper. The two sides then clashed about one-half mile south of the ford. The first Confederate attack was repulsed, but one of Averell's subordinates led an unauthorized charge that forced Lee to withdraw some distance before establishing a new position. The desperate Lee ordered a counterattack, but it failed and the Confederates were in danger of being driven from the field. Averell, however, failed to administer a final assault. Instead, fearing that the Confederates were being reinforced and that he would be cut off on the south side of the river, he ordered a retreat back across the Rappahannock.

In what has been referred to as "the first cavalry brigade versus cavalry brigade combat in the east during the Civil War," the Federals had suffered 78 casualties and the Confederate 133. One of the southern dead, however, had been the young artilleryman, John Pelham, who had demonstrated so much courage on a number of battlefields that Robert E. Lee had referred to him simply as "The Gallant Pelham." He was not commanding his artillery at Kelly's Ford, but was there simply as an observer. He joined in with the initial Confederate charge and was mortally wounded when a shell exploded near him and a splinter entered his head. His body lay in state in Richmond and the grief-stricken Confederate commander Jeb Stuart wrote to Pelham's mother: "I loved him as a brother, he was . . . so chivalrous, so pure in heart, so beloved."

While William Averell had failed in his effort to destroy the Confederate force under Fitzhugh Lee, the Union cavalry had generally performed well at Kelly's Ford, and over the next two years it proved to be more than a match for the increasingly outnumbered Confederate horsemen. Before he withdrew, the still amiable Averell would leave behind a supply of coffee for Fitzhugh Lee, along with his own message: "Dear Fitz, Here's your coffee. Here's your visit. How do you like it?"