

## **Episode 182: Phil Sheridan**

**<http://civilwar150.longwood.edu>**

On April 5, 1864, a new leader took command of the cavalry corps of the Union Army of the Potomac. The man was Major General Philip Sheridan, a successful veteran of action in the war's western theatre. Sheridan, who graduated from West Point in 1853, was a short and stocky man with a quick temper. He had been suspended from the military academy for a year for making a death threat toward another cadet whom he felt had insulted him.

During the 1850's, Sheridan was assigned to duty in the western territories, mainly in the Pacific Northwest. By the start of the Civil War, he had been promoted to the rank of captain in the standing army. With the outbreak of war, he was assigned to the 13<sup>th</sup> U.S. Infantry and spent the first year of the war engaged mainly in quartermaster and financial duties. During this time he did impress an influential officer, Major General Henry Halleck, who would later head all U.S. forces.

Sheridan saw his first Civil War combat on July 1, 1862 during the Battle of Boonesville, Mississippi. He had been assigned as Colonel of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Michigan cavalry and his leadership that day so impressed his superiors that he was immediately promoted to brigadier general. He also performed well at the Battle of Perryville, Kentucky in September of 1862 and his work at the Battle of Stones River in December 1862 was so outstanding that he was promoted to major general. Sheridan was clearly one of the Union army's rising stars.

In April 1864, Grant summoned Sheridan to lead his cavalry against Robert E. Lee in Virginia. The mounted arm of the Army of the Potomac did not have an illustrious history. During the early years of the war, Confederate cavalry under J.E.B. Stuart constantly embarrassed and literally rode circles around their Union counterparts. Things had improved

somewhat during 1863, especially at the Battle of Brandy Station in June when Union cavalry surprised the Confederates with their stubborn resistance. Now, as Grant got ready to move against Lee, things were about to change again for the better with Sheridan taking the reins.

During the spring and summer of 1864, Sheridan and his men played a significant role in Grant's push toward Richmond and Petersburg. In the Battle of Yellow Tavern in May, Sheridan's men would mortally wound J.E.B. Stuart, striking a huge psychological blow to the Confederacy. After Grant's progress stalled in the summer, he sent Sheridan to the Shenandoah Valley where he won a significant victory at Cedar Creek in October.

In the spring of 1865, Sheridan rejoined Grant and took part in the Appomattox Campaign, defeating Lee soundly at Sailor's Creek and then forcing his surrender at Appomattox Court House on April 9, 1865. As the war ended, Sheridan was the fourth highest ranking general in the Union army behind Grant, William Sherman and George Meade.

After the war, Sheridan continued his aggressive ways in controversial appointments during Reconstruction and during the Indian wars. He was also instrumental in leading efforts to prevent the development of what would later become Yellowstone National Park. He was also the ninth president of the National Rifle Association. Sheridan would die of a heart attack at age 57 on August 5, 1888.