

J.E.B Stuart Rides Around George McClellan

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As Robert E. Lee began to survey his new command defending Richmond in early June, he contemplated how his Army of Northern Virginia could go on the offensive against George McClellan's imposing Army of the Potomac. In particular, he was curious about the position and condition of McClellan's far right flank. This right wing of the Army of the Potomac had presumably been placed north of the Chikahominy River in order to protect the Union supply line that ran from White House on the Pamunkey River. In its current position, these troops would also be able to link up with the expected reinforcements under Irvin McDowell, heading toward Richmond from the Manassas area.

Lee desired to know in detail about the Union position before planning his attack. To do the necessary reconnaissance, he called upon a promising young cavalry officer. James Ewell Brown Stuart, known as J.E.B., was a Confederate brigadier general and destined to become one of the South's most beloved heroes. Stuart had been a captain in the U.S. Army before the war and had fighting experience in the far west and in the Kansas uprisings. He was an energetic, competent and aggressive commander.

Stuart met with Lee on June 10 and Lee instructed him to ascertain the position of the Union right flank. He approved Stuart's taking a force of 1,200 men on the expedition, including Lee's own son, Rooney Lee, and his nephew, Fitzhugh Lee. Also accompanying the force would be the imposing Heros von Borcke, a Prussian officer attached to the Confederate army as an observer.

Early on the morning of June 12, Stuart's cavalry began to move westward toward Louisa Court House, as if headed to the Shenandoah Valley. After camping overnight, on the next

morning the expedition headed back eastward, to the delight of the soldiers. Stuart had in mind more than a mere look at McClellan's right flank. He intended to circumvent McClellan's entire army!

Early on the morning of the 13th, Stuart encountered some light Union resistance near Haw's Shop, but pressed on. At Totopotomy Creek, Stuart flushed out another small Union force and determined that this was the far end of the Union flank, the very information that Lee had requested. Instead of turning back, he continued on. As his force continued to attract more Union attention, Stuart's men plowed on around McClellan's army, brushing back their attackers in a series of skirmishes. As they approached the Chickahominy River, they faced the same problem the Union troops had faced two weeks earlier during the Battle of Seven Pines. The river was still engorged by the spring rains.

With Union forces gathering in pursuit, Stuart's men tore down a nearby barn and used the wood to fortify a decrepit bridge across the river. As the last man crossed, they set fire to the structure to prevent Union forces from crossing. After crossing, they were finally in relative safety. Stuart left Fitz Lee in charge of the expedition and rode back to Richmond alone to report to Robert E. Lee. Fitz Lee brought the entire expedition back safely the following day. The three-day trip covered more than 150 miles and not only provided Robert E. Lee with much needed information but also almost 200 captured Union soldiers and a great quantity of captured supplies. The bold expedition ensured Stuart's lasting fame in the South and was a great boost to popular morale.

