



Appointment With Destiny

James H. Hillestad recounts the Civil War's crucial clash between two of American history's greatest cavalry commanders at Gettysburg

Text and Photos: James H. Hillestad

W. Britain figure of Custer.



On the third day of the Battle of Gettysburg, July 3, 1863, two of the most formidable cavalry commanders in American history met in a field three miles east of the village in Pennsylvania.

The outcome of that meeting was to decide the Civil War.

It is ironic that these illustrious commanders are relatively unknown for the critical roles they played at Gettysburg. One of them saved the Union and the other failed in his effort to win a vital victory for the Confederacy.

in his personal habits.

In 1862, the Rebel officer was promoted to major general. Gen. Robert E. Lee referred to Stuart as the "eyes and ears of my army."

A fearless horseman, Stuart was the best commander of cavalry in the Confederate States Army.

JEB STUART

James Ewell Brown "Jeb" Stuart was born in Virginia on Feb. 6, 1833. He was graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1854, ranking 13th in his class.

The Virginia Cavalier was deeply religious like his friend Thomas "Stonewall" Jackson. Stuart was also sober

GEORGE A. CUSTER

George Armstrong Custer was born in Ohio Dec. 5, 1839. Unlike Stuart, his years at West Point were marked by mischievous behavior that almost resulted in his expulsion on a number of occasions. Custer was graduated in 1861. He ranked last in his class.

During his time at the academy, the rambunctious Custer contracted a venereal disease while on furlough in New York City. The effects remained with him for the rest of his life. Lesson learned, he changed his personal habits and, in addition, became a convert to temperance.

In June 1863, just three days before



TOP: Collectors Showcase figures of the Michigan Wolverines led by Custer wearing his signature red neckerchief.

LEFT: Painted kit figures of Custer (left) and Stuart from Imrie/Risley Miniatures.



ABOVE: "Come on, you Wolverines!" AeroArt St. Petersburg Collection figures of Custer and a standard-bearer ride into history at Gettysburg.

Gettysburg, Custer was promoted from captain to brigadier general -- an unheard of leap in rank. He was, at the age of 23, the youngest general in the Union Army.

ROBERT E. LEE

The third essential player on this stage was Robert E. Lee. Born in Virginia on Jan. 19, 1807, he was the son of Revolutionary War hero "Light Horse Harry" Henry Lee.

Robert E. Lee was graduated from West Point in 1829, second in his class. He distinguished himself in the Mexican-American War of 1846-1848 as a dynamic and resourceful captain of engineers under Gen. Winfield Scott.

In 1859, Col. Lee and his assistant, Lt. Jeb Stuart, oversaw the capture of radical abolitionist John Brown at Harpers Ferry, Va.

After Virginia seceded from the Union, Lee resigned his U.S. Army commission to serve his home state. He later took command of the Army of Northern Virginia, the Confederacy's premier fighting force.

In 1863, Lee convinced Confederate President Jefferson Davis to support his bold initiative to strike north into Pennsylvania. The South was facing major shortages of equipment and manpower. It was also eager to demonstrate its vitality and viability to Great Britain in hopes of receiving formal recognition.

A decisive victory in Pennsylvania would be a morale boost for the South, provide much needed provisions for the Confederate army, and strengthen the case



W. Britain figure of Lee.



W. Britain figure of Stuart.

of those in the North who were seeking a negotiated peace.

And so it was that a small town in Pennsylvania became the scene of the Civil War's pivotal battle: Gettysburg, where the forces of the Confederacy and the Union were to meet and determine the outcome of the war.

did you know?

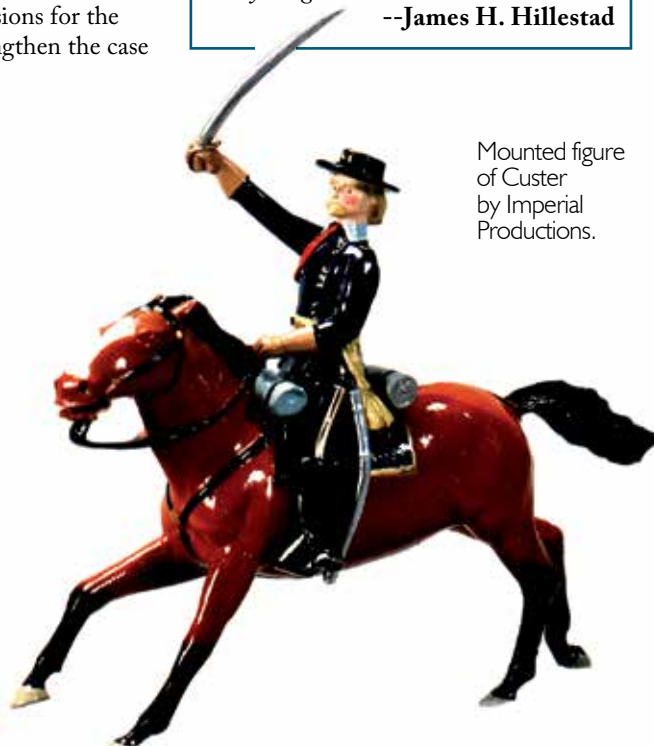
Did you know that Confederate Gen. Robert E. Lee had been ill for two days with a troublesome stomach disorder at the Battle of Gettysburg; and that Union President Abraham Lincoln was suffering from smallpox when he delivered the Gettysburg Address Nov. 19, 1863?

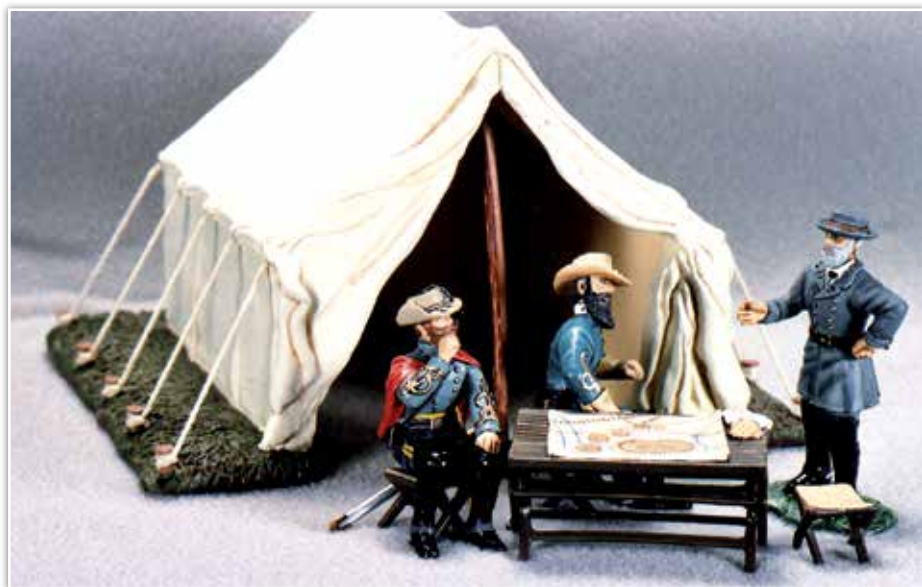
--James H. Hillestad

Portrait of a Virginia Cavalier: Stuart by The AeroArt St. Petersburg Collection.



Mounted figure of Custer by Imperial Productions.





ABOVE: Stuart, Lt. Gen. James Longstreet and Lee (from left) by Frontline Figures.

DISTRACTING & ENVELOPING

It is a maxim of war that attackers, to be successful, should outnumber defenders by at least three to one. However, the Confederates fielded a force of just 78,000 men to attack Union Maj. Gen. George G. Meade's 94,000 soldiers in defensive positions at Gettysburg.

Given this weakness in numbers, Lee, a brilliant tactician, sought to overcome the imbalance by distracting and enveloping maneuvers. His intention was to draw the

Union Army's attention to a frontal attack on Maj. Gen. Winfield S. Hancock's blue-clad forces on Cemetery Ridge.

Lt. Gen. James Longstreet was in overall command of this Rebel assault on the Union center, which has gone down in history as Pickett's Charge. After a massive artillery barrage, about 12,500 foot soldiers from three divisions led by Maj. Gens. George Pickett, J. Johnston Pettigrew and Isaac R. Trimble would make the uphill attack.

Simultaneously, Lt. Gen. Richard S. Ewell, who commanded the 2nd Corps, including the immortal Stonewall Brigade, would advance against the Union right wing on Culp's Hill and "roll them up."

custeR's appomattox souvenir

George A. Custer was present at Gen. Robert E. Lee's surrender of the Confederate Army of Northern Virginia to the Union's Ulysses S. Grant at Appomattox Court House, Va., on April 9, 1865.

The small, oval-shaped pine table upon which the surrender document was signed was purchased for \$20 by Union Gen. Philip Sheridan. The next day he handed the table to Custer as a gift to Custer's wife, Libbie, with a note that read:

"My dear Madam, I respectfully present to you the small writing table on which the conditions for the surrender of the Army of Northern Virginia were written by Lt. Gen. Grant -- and permit me to say, Madam, that there is scarcely an individual in our service who has contributed more to bring about this desirable result than your gallant husband."

The table is now part of the Smithsonian Institution collection in Washington, D.C.

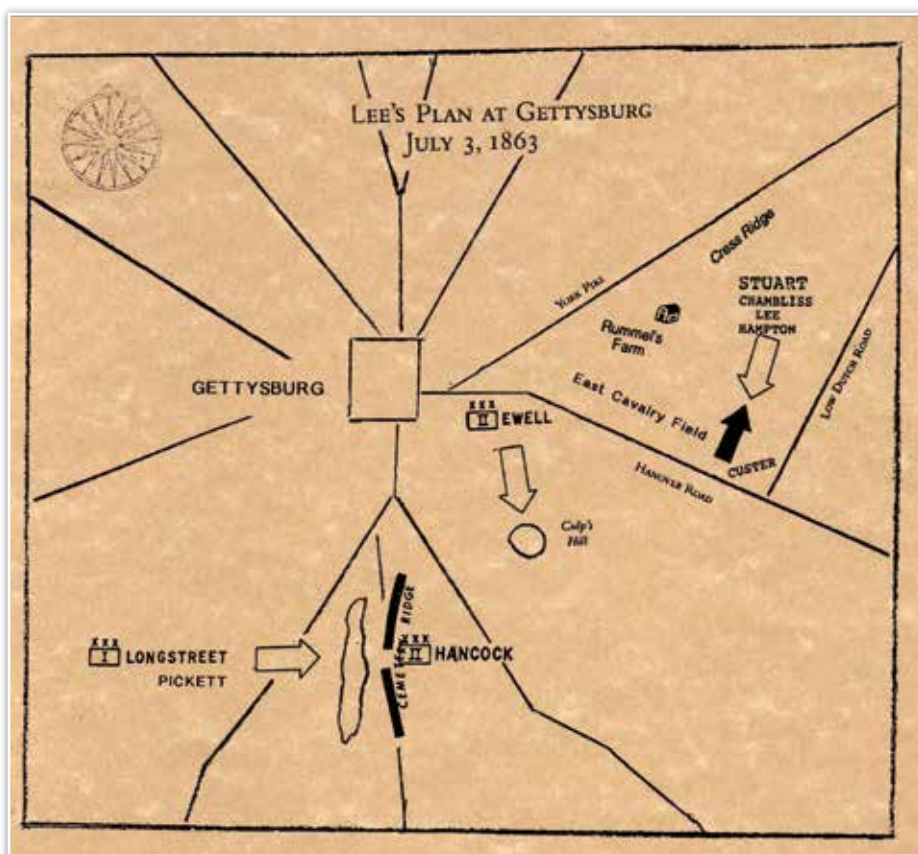
--James H. Hillestad

The coup de grâce would be delivered by Stuart's 6,000-strong cavalry -- the legendary "Invincibles." They would maneuver behind the Union center on Cemetery Ridge and attack from the rear, thrusting a massive and powerful gray fist into the blue back of the Union line.



ABOVE: Close-up of the Custer figure from The AeroArt St. Petersburg Collection.

RIGHT: Despite being outnumbered at Gettysburg, Lee went on the attack. As shown by this map, his plan called for Pickett's Charge to distract the Yankees while Ewell's infantry rolled up the enemy's right wing and Stuart's cavalry attacked the Union center on Cemetery Ridge from the rear. However, Union cavalry spearheaded by Custer and his Wolverines stood in the way of the enveloping maneuver.



(Map by James H. Hillestad)



ABOVE: Historic East Cavalry Field as viewed from the Michigan Cavalry Brigade Monument. This is where Hampton's brigade charged and was met by the Wolverines.

RIGHT: The Michigan Cavalry Brigade Monument on East Cavalry Field stands on the spot where Union and Confederate troopers collided.

WOLVERINES SAVE THE DAY

Stuart's cavalry formed up on the high ground of Cress Ridge in an area now known as East Cavalry Field. When his troops were in place, he ordered the Maryland Battery to fire four cannon shots. This was a prearranged signal to Lee that Stuart was in position to attack. And attack he did.

Eight Rebel regiments from Wade Hampton's and Fitzhugh Lee's brigades advanced in close columns of squadrons with sabers drawn. They started at a trot, picked up speed to a canter, and then broke into a gallop.

Standing in their way were Union mounted men, including troopers of the Michigan Cavalry Brigade under the command of Custer.

Outnumbered four to one, Custer bellowed out, "Come on, you Wolverines!"

With Custer personally leading the charge, the blue column of the 1st Michigan Cavalry galloped headlong into the Confederates. A witness to the engagement likened it to the "falling of timber," with horses falling and riders crushed beneath them.

Remnants of the 5th and 7th Michigan, as well as troopers of the 1st New Jersey, attacked the Rebel column from the flanks using seven-shot Spencer repeating carbines.

The combined assaults proved to be too much and the Rebels gave ground. Three miles away, Pickett's Charge faltered and suffered 50 percent casualties, as no support was forthcoming from either Ewell or Stuart.

The battle of Gettysburg was over. As a footnote, Custer again faced Stuart on May 11, 1864, at the Battle of Yellow Tavern in Virginia, leading his brigade in the charge that fatally wounded Stuart.

Many toy soldier and model figure makers have produced 1:32-scale figures inspired by the Civil War. Just a sampling illustrates this article, including items from The AeroArt St. Petersburg Collection, W. Britain, Frontline Figures, Imperial Productions, Imrie/Risley Miniatures, Tradition of London Ltd. and The Collectors Showcase. ■



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further reading

For further reading, writer James H. Hillestad suggests "Clashes of Cavalry" by Thom Hatch, "Custer and His Wolverines" by Edward Longacre and "The Civil War: Strange and Fascinating Facts" by Burke Davis.

about the writer

James H. Hillestad is the proprietor of The Toy Soldier Museum and shop in Cresco, Pa., USA.

A Confederate standard-bearer and an artillery officer flank figures of Stuart (left) and Lee produced by Tradition of London Ltd.

